

Beyond “My English is Poor”: Unpacking The Speaking Challenges of Chinese EFL Learners in China

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To identify key factors influencing EFL speaking proficiency and propose effective interventions. **Methods:** A mixed-method approach was employed, combining quantitative data from a survey of 736 students and qualitative insights from interviews with 20 students and 10 teachers, along with classroom observations. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. **Results:** The findings reveal significant obstacles, including limited practice opportunities, high levels of anxiety, insufficient vocabulary and grammar knowledge, cultural influences, and suboptimal teacher-student interactions. These factors contribute to students' reliance on rote learning and translation methods, hampering conversational skills. **Novelty:** This study contributes to the literature by highlighting the impact of cultural and pedagogical factors specific to the Chinese educational context on EFL speaking proficiency. Recommendations include adopting flipped classrooms to reduce anxiety and enhance interactive learning, supporting a shift towards dynamic and student-centered EFL instruction. Future research should expand sample diversity and explore longitudinal impacts of these interventions on speaking proficiency. This study informs educators and policymakers on strategies to improve English-speaking outcomes for Chinese EFL learners.

INTRODUCTION

English proficiency is paramount in today's interconnected world, with all educational levels in China valuing it. Non-majors must pass the College English Test (CET) to graduate, while majors must pass the Test for English Major (TEM). English is included in both college entrance examinations and university standard tests, making it a requirement for admission to reputable universities. This has led to increased focus and study for the English exam. However, concerns arise as most students receive good grades on exams but still struggle with fluency due to the tests only assessing writing, reading, and listening skills. Chinese students' mastery of oral English proficiency may be due to their disregard for speaking during exams. And various empirical studies emphasize that many Chinese struggle with effectively using English in social and academic contexts, highlighting issues that need to be addressed as China aims to develop a larger pool of proficient English speakers for globalization participation. Therefore, the study aims to identify the challenges faced by EFL students in oral English language acquisition in China, propose solutions to help them become proficient speakers, explore the role of teachers in enhancing speaking skills, and discuss potential strategies for boosting English speaking proficiency. In order to close the gap, this study will address oral English proficiency difficulties using survey, interviewing, and classroom observation methods. It will evaluate teaching exercises and identify common student themes. The goal is to provide insights for educational authorities, instructors,

and students to improve language learning outcomes and speaking abilities, enabling the creation of effective interventions.

Literature Reviews

Speaking Skills in Language Learning

English is being pushed as a global language as a result of globalization, and speaking, reading, writing, and listening comprehension are essential parts of learning a language. As reading and writing skills form a strong relationship for achieving an effective written communication, and speaking and listening skills are highly related and work simultaneously in real-life situations to foster effective oral communication, these skills help students gradually develop their communicative competence. Speaking is a fundamental skill in language learning because people acquire language primarily for communication purposes. Without it, the goal of communication cannot be achieved. In a world that is becoming more interconnected, having effective speaking abilities is crucial for both professional and academic success. Studies show that students with strong English communication skills are better equipped for internationalization or real-world interactions. Students need to have adequate background knowledge and non-linguistic information in addition to language proficiency in order to communicate effectively. Effective communication in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) also requires students to engage in various speaking activities. This engagement overcomes current obstacles such as poor grammar and vocabulary, anxiety, and lack of practice opportunities. The literature on oral English proficiency issues will be discussed in the following section, highlighting the importance of participation in various speaking activities for students to improve their English language skills.

Challenges Faced by Students

Numerous studies have identified common challenges faced by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in developing speaking skills. Anxiety and lack of confidence are the primary barriers to speaking in class [1], as students feel uncomfortable speaking up and experience anxiety due to pronunciation and intonation concerns. Chinese students also face difficulties practicing speaking English due to language incompetence and topic unfamiliarity [2], leading to mental barriers.

Limited practice opportunities are another issue, as Chinese classrooms prioritize rote learning and grammar over interactive speaking [3]. Speaking abilities are often disregarded in English examinations, such as the College Entrance Examination (GAOKAO), the CET, and the TEM tests in China [4]. This results in many students struggling to practice their language skills.

Vocabulary and grammar limitations are also significant, as a rich vocabulary fosters expressiveness and confidence, while a solid command of grammar facilitates clear and effective communication. Chinese EFL students often struggle with vocabulary and grammatical usage, highlighting the unique challenges they face and the need to address in order to improve their English [5].

Cultural Influences on Language Learning

Education has a long history in China, dating back at least to the 16th century B.C. later Shang Dynasty (1523-1027 B.C). Throughout that period, Confucius is one of the important delegates who laid the foundation for education in China, and still influence today's China education. He is widely known as "China's first teacher", and his philosophy was still taught in today's school (Dinh & Van Dung, 2024). Ancient Chinese people have been used to deciding their fate by examination, since then the purpose of

studying is to pass exams in China [6]. This culture factors play a significant role in today's education in China, as traditional educational practices often emphasize rote memorization and exam preparation over communicative competence [7]. This education, namely exam-oriented education, was reformed and perfected following the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. It prioritizes exam results and admission rates while neglecting students' initiative, creativity, and personal development [8]. In doing so, there are many problems in learning English, such as rote memorization, whether they can write or read, and whether they can recognize or not, students' oral English are not conducive to their continuous learning of English [9]. This cultural context can create barriers to spontaneous speaking and critical thinking in language use.

English Teaching and Learning in China

In China, the prevailing teaching methodology predominantly adheres to a teacher-centred approach. In this context, explained that educators primarily deliver knowledge through didactic lectures, focusing on textbook content, and placing substantial emphasis on rote memorization as a means of knowledge retention [10]. Students are typically expected to assume the role of passive recipients, tasked with absorbing information and demonstrating their comprehension through rigorous examinations. Furthermore, Explores the pressures imposed by exam-oriented systems, highlighting the possible harm to student-teacher relationships and the standard of education as a whole [11]. Because of this, Chinese students have adopted a teacher-centered learning approach that emphasizes memorization and a learning style focused only on passing exams, disregarding their own initiative, creativity, and critical thinking [12]. Teacher-centered approach has been given priority by Chinese teachers, who place more emphasis on exam preparation than on comprehensive language acquisition. This has resulted in low proficiency and disengagement among students [13]. As a result, teaching and learning English in China are centered around the teacher, who traditionally plays the role of an authoritative figure in charge of passing along knowledge. But this way of teaching might unintentionally limit their capacity to encourage students' independent thought and creativity [14].

Strategies for Improving Speaking Proficiency

In their book "Approaches and methods in Language Teaching," published by Cambridge University Press, offer a number of techniques for improving EFL learners' speaking skills [15]. These include:

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT): Since its inception in the late 1970s, it has undergone significant changes, with discussions on its applicability and efficacy continuing. The learner-centered, meaning-based approach prioritizes fluency over accuracy [16].

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) consists of three main approaches: Task-Referenced, Task-Based, and Task-Supported Language Teaching, which focus on cognitive elements like task complexity and working memory, and emphasizes the context in which language is used in form negotiation [17].

Peer Interaction and Collaboration: Collaborative learning environments, in which students work together and give feedback to one another, have been shown to enhance speaking abilities and lower anxiety [18].

Flipped Classroom Approach: The flipped classroom model is an innovative educational approach that allows students to learn at their own pace and take more

responsibility for their education, resulting in improved learning outcomes, particularly beneficial for low achievers [19].

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Questions

The present study was designed to address the following questions:

1. What factors influence the English-speaking performance of Chinese EFL learners?
2. In what ways can be recommended to enhance the English-speaking proficiency of Chinese EFL learners?

Research Design

This study employs a four-step process: 1) Identifying research objectives to connect with existing literature; 2) Collecting quantitative and qualitative data through surveys, interviews, and classroom observations; 3) Analyzing data using descriptive statistics and content and thematic analysis; and 4) Reporting results based on both data and existing literature from the evaluation framework development section.



Figure 1. A Sequential Explanatory Research Design.

Participants

A survey of 736 Chinese EFL students was conducted to assess vocabulary, grammar, practice opportunities, confidence and anxiety, cultural influence, and teacher-student interactions. The majority (72.6%) were female, aged 17 to 26 ($M = 20.264$, $SD = 1.89$), and were learning English as a foreign language at university level. Semi-interviews were held with 20 students and 10 teachers. All teachers had Ph.D degrees in various majors, with 50% majoring in English literature. The combined teaching experience ranged from 1 to 30 years ($M = 23.75$, $SD = 12.4$). Informed consent was obtained from all participants. The demographic data of survey respondents and teachers is displayed in Table 1 and Table 2.

Table 1. Demographic information of the survey participants.

Items	Categories	N	Percent (%)
Gender	Male	202	27.4%
	Female	534	72.6%
Years of study	1 st	225	30.6%
	2 nd	209	28.4%
	3 rd	189	25.7%
	4 th	113	15.4%
Major	English	287	39.0%
	Engineer	51	6.9%
	International Trade	135	18.4%

Accountant	34	4.6%
Finance	67	9.1%
Business Management	167	22.7%
Others	35	4.8%

Table 2. Demographic information of the interview teachers.

Items	Categories	N	Percent (%)
Gender	Male	3	30%
	Female	7	70%
Years of experience	1 - 10	2	20%
	11 - 20	5	50%
	21 - 30	3	30%
Major	Linguistics	1	10%
	English Literature	5	50%
	English Teaching	2	20%
	English Translation	2	20%

Data Collection Methods

The study used five online electronic Likert scales to assess students' English as a Foreign Language (EFL) skills. The scales included Grammar & Vocabulary, Practice Opportunities, Confidence and Anxiety, Culture Influence, and Teacher-Student Interaction. Interviews were conducted with students and teachers, using open-ended questions. The study also conducted in-class observations in various EFL classes to evaluate the speaking activities implemented by teachers. The focus was on student participation, engagement levels, teacher-student interactions, feedback, group discussions, and presentations. The results will be used to inform future teaching strategies.

Data Analysis

The study investigates the challenges Chinese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students face, particularly in speaking. It employs a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data was gathered from a survey of 736 Chinese students, analyzed using descriptive statistics and SPSS version 27. The qualitative data was gathered from interviews with 10 teachers and 20 EFL students, and classroom observations were conducted to collect data on speaking practices and student engagement.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

Quantitative Results

The research examined five major factors in this section: grammar and vocabulary, practice opportunities, confidence and anxiety, culture influence, and teacher-student interaction. Proposes that the meaning of a construct quantified by the summated score is collectively defined, described, and named by the content of individual items (statements) on a Likert scale [20]. Thus, by dividing each person's summated score by the total number of items in the scale, the mean-item summated score for this study was determined. As a result, a mean-item score is produced for each item that falls between the response continuum options' range of values. When determining a mean-item score

or a summated score, all items in a scale are taken to have the same weight. In order to ascertain the degree of agreement, the study employed the mean values of 1.00–2.33 for low, 2.34–3.66 for medium, and 3.67–5.00 for high when analyzing the data.

Table 3 displays the descriptive statistics pertaining to the vocabulary and grammar section of the questionnaire responses. The mean scores for 5 questions ranged from 1.24 to 2.19 for parts of speech, singular and plural forms, statement/negative sentence formation, and verb "to be, to do, and to have" of use, showing that most students had a low difficulty on these constructs. The mean scores for 4 questions ranged from 2.39 to 3.65 for question sentence formation, word inflections, passive forms, and verb tenses, indicating that the majority of students experienced a medium difficulty on these constructs. The mean scores for the last 7 questions ranged from 4.02 to 4.66, indicating that most respondents witnessed a high level of difficulty in using slang words, a broad vocabulary, formal and informal English, and a wide range of explanations while speaking. Hence, the most significant reason Chinese EFL students cannot speak English fluently (89.5%), even though they are conversant in grammar and vocabulary, is that they must translate from Chinese to English before starting a conversation (76.2%).

Table 4 presents the descriptive statistics on behalf of the practice opportunities section of the questionnaire responses. The mean scores obtained by the students across all 14 questions varied from 1.29 to 2.37, indicating that students experienced a low level of English practice opportunities. This suggests that students might not have many opportunities to discuss with English native speakers, classmates and friends, and language exchange partners, and to discuss in group discussions, presentations, clubs, online platforms, workshops, and real-life settings such as shopping and travel in English. In addition to the fact that such a learning environment does not offer satisfying opportunities for students to practice their English, students are also hesitant to generate opportunities for themselves, as they rarely find enjoyment in engaging in English language conversation (64.3%). Furthermore, 40.4% of students report that they never discuss to friends or other people in English after watching English-language films or television shows. Most of students never read English books or articles aloud to practice their speaking skills (62%) and rarely seek feedback on their English speaking from teachers or peers (78.9%).

Table 5 delineates the descriptive statistics for the confidence and anxiety section of the questionnaire responses. The students' mean scores on 3 questions varied from 3.78 to 3.99, showing that students witnessed a high level of anxiety when speaking English in general. This anxiety stems from their strong belief that their English proficiency is insufficient, which causes them to lose confidence (42.5%) when speaking in front of large groups of people (35.5%) and worry that they will make mistakes (50.3%). As we moved on to the confidence topic in class, students demonstrated a medium level of confidence in speaking English, as evidenced by the mean scores, which ranged from 2.34 to 3.62. This indicates that students were split evenly between agreeing and disagreeing that they feel comfortable speaking in front of their peers in English (52%) or asking questions (33.8%). The reason for this uncertainty is likely due to their unknown about whether their English pronunciation is clear and understandable (41.6%), and they frequently compare themselves to others (51.8%), who are probably more proficient than them. As a result, they are unsure of whether they should practice speaking English in class when they are not entirely confident in their skills (41.6%). Furthermore, the majority of students do not think that practice makes them more experienced and proficient in

speaking English, which lowers their anxiety (68.2%) and increases their confidence (42.7%). Therefore, based on the mean scores of four questions, which ranged from 1.52 to 2.23, students had a low level of confidence and started to lose it in group discussions (2.23%). The majority of students (63.5%) no longer look for opportunities to practice their English because they believe their abilities are insufficient for speaking the language; for instance, they hardly ever express their ideas and thoughts in English (57.2%).

Table 6 elucidates the descriptive statistics for the questionnaire responses' section on the influence of culture on English learning. Based on the responses provided by the students to the final three questions, the study suggests that English speaking skills in the classroom have been neglected by Chinese educational systems (50.4%). And students are eager for more opportunities to practice their English in culturally diverse settings (71.1%), as they feel pressured to communicate in a way that conforms to Western speaking styles (47.1%). The mean scores of the first eight questions ranged from 2.93 to 3.50, indicating that Chinese students had a medium understanding of how culture can truly influence their learning due to a lack of opportunities to connect with the outside world. This shows that students' perceptions of whether or not different cultures make it harder for them to express themselves in English were neutral (41%). For instance, knowing Western culture can improve one's English (34.2%), and knowing the background of different cultures can make it easier to communicate in a conversation (42%). In addition, 51.2% of them feel misunderstood because of cultural differences when speaking English; they find it difficult to understand native English idioms (40.6%) and to express Chinese idioms in English (40.1%). Therefore, Chinese students agreed that cultural expectations limit their skill to speak English (36.7%).

Table 7 illustrates the descriptive statistics for the teacher-student interaction section of the questionnaire responses. The mean scores obtained ranged from 2.67 to 3.17, suggesting a medium level of interaction between the teacher and students in the classroom. According to the students' responses, teachers provide an ineffective learning environment (30.7%) to support students; English practice because they think their teachers may not fully understand the difficulties they are having with speaking (29.1%), which makes them uncomfortable to ask for help (25.3%). As a result, a variety of strategies to help students improve their speaking skills (35.5%) and the speaking activities (32.2%) that the teachers assign and provide seem to be of no use at all. In students' perceptions, teachers' suggestions may not be helpful (36.7%) in helping them improve their speaking skills because they do not provide constructive feedback to them on a regular basis (42.1%) or promptly (40.5%). Because of this, there is very little interaction between teachers and students, which means that encouraging them to speak English does not increase students' motivation (39.4%).

Ultimately, following the collection of survey data, the study has a rudimentary understanding of the difficulties faced by EFL students when speaking English in China. That being said, more research is necessary to fully understand the reasons behind these issues and potential solutions, which will be covered in the section that follows.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of Grammar and Vocabulary Questions.

Questions	Frequency and Percentage of Response (n=736)					Mean	SD
	1	2	3	4	5		

Categorizing parts of speech (noun, verb, adjective)	504 (68.5%)	138 (18.8%)	89 (12.1%)	5 (0.7%)	0 (0%)	1.45	.729
Differentiating singular and plural forms (e.g., boy/boys)	267 (36.3%)	332 (45.1%)	116 (15.8%)	17 (2.3%)	4 (0.5%)	1.86	.801
Using correct verb tenses (present, past, future)	26 (3.5%)	67 (9.1%)	159 (21.6%)	372 (50.5%)	112 (15.2%)	3.65	.963
Using verbs "to be," "to have," and "to do" correctly	341 (46.3%)	101 (13.7%)	156 (21.2%)	86 (11.7%)	52 (7.1%)	2.19	1.32
Applying word inflections (e.g., begin, began, begun)	127 (17.3%)	140 (19%)	174 (23.6%)	235 (31.9%)	60 (8.2%)	2.95	1.235
Constructing active and passive sentences	59 (8%)	88 (12%)	125 (17%)	328 (44.6%)	136 (18.5%)	3.54	1.158
Formulating statement sentences	584 (79.3%)	133 (18.1%)	17 (2.3%)	2 (0.3%)	0 (0%)	1.24	.493
Creating negative sentences	469 (63.7%)	192 (26.1%)	71 (9.6%)	4 (0.5%)	0 (0%)	1.47	.689
Formulating question sentences	255 (34.6%)	187 (25.4%)	96 (13%)	146 (19.8%)	52 (7.1%)	2.39	1.325
Choosing appropriate words when speaking with friends	23 (3.1%)	34 (4.6%)	13 (1.8%)	118 (16%)	548 (74.5%)	4.54	.968
Choosing appropriate words when speaking politely with teachers	14 (1.9%)	25 (3.4%)	56 (7.6%)	192 (26.1%)	449 (61%)	4.41	.909

Speaking appropriately with unlimited vocabulary	0 (0%)	5 (0.7%)	97 (13.2%)	247 (33.6%)	387 (52.6%)	4.38	.735
Finding alternative words when the listener doesn't understand	2 (0.3%)	34 (4.6%)	68 (9.2%)	475 (64.5%)	157 (21.3%)	4.02	.718
Using slang words appropriately	8 (1.1%)	29 (3.9%)	74 (10.1%)	267 (36.3%)	358 (48.6%)	4.27	.876
Speaking English without first translating from Chinese	0 (0%)	20 (2.7%)	38 (5.2%)	117 (15.9%)	561 (76.2%)	4.66	.702
Achieving fluent English communication	1 (0.1%)	6 (0.8%)	70 (9.5%)	274 (37.2%)	385 (52.3%)	4.41	.705

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics of Practice Opportunity Questions.

Questions	Frequency and Percentage of Response (n=736)					Mean	SD
	1	2	3	4	5		
I have opportunities to speak English with native speakers	166 (22.6%)	468 (63.6%)	65 (8.8%)	34 (4.6%)	3 (0.4%)	1.97	.731
I have participated in group discussions for practicing English speaking	124 (16.8%)	395 (53.7%)	109 (14.8%)	40 (5.4%)	68 (9.2%)	2.37	1.111
I have participated in English speaking clubs or activities	295 (40.1%)	198 (26.9%)	137 (18.6%)	73 (9.9%)	33 (4.5%)	2.12	1.173
I practice speaking	205 (27.9%)	247 (33.6%)	187 (25.4%)	56 (7.6%)	41 (5.6%)	2.29	1.119

English with classmates or friends								
I engage in English conversations on social media or online platforms	326 (44.3%)	152 (20.7%)	167 (22.7%)	66 (9%)	25 (3.4%)	2.07	1.154	
I practice speaking English with language exchange partners	431 (58.6%)	174 (23.6%)	101 (13.7%)	21 (2.9%)	9 (1.2%)	1.65	.907	
I participate in English-speaking events or workshops	478 (64.9%)	105 (14.3%)	96 (13%)	47 (6.4%)	10 (1.4%)	1.65	1.018	
I use English in real-life situations, such as shopping or traveling	496 (67.4%)	136 (18.5%)	104 (14.1%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1.47	.730	
I watch English movies or shows and discuss them with others	297 (40.4%)	203 (27.6%)	179 (24.3%)	52 (7.1%)	5 (0.7%)	2.00	.996	
I read English books or articles aloud to practice my speaking skills	456 (62%)	153 (20.8%)	118 (16%)	7 (1%)	2 (0.3%)	1.57	.810	
I give presentations or speeches in English	386 (52.4%)	199 (27%)	56 (7.6%)	83 (11.3%)	12 (1.6%)	1.83	1.082	

I actively seek out opportunities to practice speaking English	587 (79.8%)	103 (14%)	33 (4.5%)	7 (1%)	6 (0.8%)	1.29	.672
I enjoy engaging in conversations in English about various topics	164 (22.3%)	473 (64.3%)	38 (5.2%)	43 (5.8%)	18 (2.4%)	2.02	.854
I seek feedback on my English speaking from teachers or peers	120 (16.3%)	581 (78.9%)	6 (0.8%)	22 (3%)	7 (1%)	1.93	.610

Note: 1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Often, 4 = Usually, 5 = Always.

Table 5. Descriptive Statistics of Confidence and Anxiety Questions.

Questions	Frequency and Percentage of Response (n=736)					Mean	SD
	1	2	3	4	5		
I often feel anxious when speaking English	16 (2.2%)	64 (8.7%)	267 (36.3%)	225 (30.6%)	164 (22.3%)	3.62	.993
I'm comfortable speaking English in front of others	97 (13.2%)	108 (14.7%)	383 (52%)	127 (17.3%)	21 (2.9%)	2.82	.964
My English skills are adequate for everyday talks	196 (26.6%)	281 (38.2%)	175 (23.8%)	81 (11%)	3 (0.4%)	2.20	.970
I feel confident in English group discussions	204 (27.7%)	258 (35.1%)	187 (25.4%)	76 (10.3%)	11 (1.5%)	2.23	1.014
I worry about making mistakes when	8 (1.1%)	29 (3.9%)	131 (17.8%)	370 (50.3%)	198 (26.9%)	3.98	.838

speaking English							
My pronunciation is clear and understandable	144 (19.6%)	306 (41.6%)	182 (24.7%)	99 (13.5%)	5 (0.7%)	2.34	.963
I'm willing to speak English even if I'm not fully confident	177 (24%)	43 (5.8%)	306 (41.6%)	67 (9.1%)	143 (19.4%)	2.94	1.374
I feel anxious speaking English in front of large audiences	35 (4.8%)	66 (9%)	187 (25.4%)	187 (25.4%)	261 (35.5%)	3.78	1.161
Practice helps boost my confidence in speaking English	8 (1.1%)	113 (15.4%)	192 (26.1%)	314 (42.7%)	109 (14.8%)	3.55	.958
I'm comfortable asking questions in English during talk	217 (29.5%)	134 (18.2%)	249 (33.8%)	105 (14.3%)	31 (4.2%)	2.46	1.174
I seek chances to practice English speaking despite anxiety	467 (63.5%)	168 (22.8%)	94 (12.8%)	3 (0.4%)	4 (0.5%)	1.52	.772
My anxiety decreases with more speaking experience	9 (1.2%)	25 (3.4%)	502 (68.2%)	133 (18.1%)	67 (9.1%)	3.30	.732
I find it easy to express my thoughts in English	421 (57.2%)	166 (22.6%)	140 (19%)	7 (1%)	2 (0.3%)	1.65	.837
I compare my speaking skills to peers,	4 (0.5%)	101 (13.7%)	381 (51.8%)	152 (20.7%)	98 (13.3%)	3.32	.891

affecting my confidence.							
I often feel my English speaking isn't good enough, impacting my confidence	38 (5.2%)	53 (7.2%)	102 (13.9%)	230 (31.3%)	313 (42.5%)	3.99	1.148

Note: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree.

Table 6. Descriptive Statistics of Culture Influence Questions.

Questions	Frequency and Percentage of Response (n=736)					Mean	SD
	1	2	3	4	5		
Cultural differences hinder my ability to express ideas in English	13 (1.8%)	97 (13.2%)	302 (41%)	159 (21.6%)	165 (22.4%)	3.50	1.034
I find it challenging to understand idioms used by native speakers	59 (8%)	83 (11.3%)	165 (22.4%)	299 (40.6%)	130 (17.7%)	3.49	1.145
I struggle to accurately express Chinese idioms in English	71 (9.6%)	120 (16.3%)	153 (20.8%)	295 (40.1%)	97 (13.2%)	3.31	1.176
I often feel misunderstood due to cultural differences	51 (6.9%)	143 (19.4%)	377 (51.2%)	138 (18.8%)	27 (3.7%)	2.93	.895
My English practice is limited by cultural expectations	102 (13.9%)	163 (22.1%)	135 (18.3%)	270 (36.7%)	66 (9%)	3.05	1.225

Understanding Western culture enhances my English skills	99 (13.5%)	158 (21.5%)	120 (16.3%)	252 (34.2%)	107 (14.5%)	3.15	1.287
I find it hard to understand people from different cultural backgrounds	21 (2.9%)	172 (23.4%)	201 (27.3%)	230 (31.3%)	112 (15.2%)	3.33	1.079
I speak English more easily when familiar with the cultural context	52 (7.1%)	165 (22.4%)	309 (42%)	132 (17.9%)	78 (10.6%)	3.03	1.054
Schools don't focus enough on developing English speaking skills	13 (1.8%)	43 (5.8%)	114 (15.5%)	195 (26.5%)	371 (50.4%)	4.18	1.010
I feel pressure to conform to Western speaking styles	2 (0.3%)	39 (5.3%)	107 (14.5%)	241 (32.7%)	347 (47.1%)	4.21	.900
I want more opportunities to practice English in diverse settings	0 (0%)	6 (0.8%)	67 (9.1%)	140 (19%)	523 (71.1%)	4.60	.686

Note: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree.

Table 7. Descriptive Statistics of Teacher-Student Interaction Questions.

Questions	Frequency and Percentage of Response (n=736)					Mean	SD
	1	2	3	4	5		

I regularly receive constructive feedback from my teachers on my speaking skills	177 (24%)	310 (42.1%)	145 (19.7%)	89 (12.1%)	15 (2%)	2.26	1.019
Teachers provide valuable suggestions for improvement	190 (25.8%)	148 (20.1%)	270 (36.7%)	87 (11.8%)	41 (5.6%)	2.51	1.157
Their speaking skills positively influence my own proficiency	12 (1.6%)	56 (7.6%)	117 (15.9%)	270 (36.7%)	281 (38.2%)	4.02	.996
I feel comfortable asking for help with my speaking	186 (25.3%)	154 (20.9%)	205 (27.9%)	100 (13.6%)	91 (12.4%)	2.67	1.320
They create a supportive environment for practice	173 (23.5%)	226 (30.7%)	128 (17.4%)	102 (13.9%)	107 (14.5%)	2.65	1.360
I receive timely feedback on my performance	104 (14.1%)	298 (40.5%)	165 (22.4%)	91 (12.4%)	78 (10.6%)	2.65	1.181

They use various methods to enhance my speaking skills	95 (12.9%)	116 (15.8%)	261 (35.5%)	156 (21.2%)	108 (14.7%)	3.09	1.211
The assigned speaking activities are beneficial	79 (10.7%)	142 (19.3%)	237 (32.2%)	129 (17.5%)	149 (20.2%)	3.17	1.257
They understand my individual speaking challenges	115 (15.6%)	214 (29.1%)	192 (26.1%)	144 (19.6%)	71 (9.6%)	2.79	1.205
Their encouragement motivates me to improve	110 (14.9%)	159 (21.6%)	290 (39.4%)	111 (15.1%)	66 (9%)	2.82	1.136

Note: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree.

Qualitative Results

The study conducted interviews with 20 students and 10 teachers using TencentMeeting and WECHAT, respectively. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, and transcripts were reviewed for accuracy. Five observation sessions were held, recording students' behaviors, such as active participation, on-task behavior, and cooperation between peers and teachers. Field notes were also taken to note the students' responses to presentations, group discussions, and feedback during speaking assignments.

Semi-Interview Results for Students

The survey data on the five challenges faced by EFL students: grammar and vocabulary, practice opportunities, anxiety and confidence, cultural influence, and teacher-student interaction, is strengthened and supported by the interview data from 20 students. The study's participants acknowledged that having a broad understanding of grammar and vocabulary helped them comprehend English better because these two areas of knowledge are essential to learning English language skills like speaking, writing, listening, and reading (PS1, PS4, PS5, PS9, PS13, PS17). Since students must "recite at least 100 English words every day," PS2 emphasized that "grammar and vocabulary are not hard for them to learn.". To practice, students "bought English grammar textbook and exercise book" frequently (PS19). Nonetheless, PS6 believed that

students "learned English through the use of Chinese-version textbooks," which provide explanations in Chinese for learning English. Additionally, since our primary goal is to "pass written test," students "rarely learn spoken English" (PS7). For this reason, students "rarely learn to speak English" and used Chinese to explain everything most of the time" (PS3-PS20) in English classes, which appears to be the reason why students still struggle with the language.

PS8 detailed that:

"I don't need to speak English fluently in order to pass the test; all I need to do is learn how to complete the listening, reading, and translation sections of the test correctly. Additionally, I don't speak English in class because my teachers and fellow students communicate and learn English in Chinese. Since I consistently receive good grades in English class, I don't believe that grammar and vocabulary are particularly difficult. However, I find that I am completely incapable of speaking English when I try to have a conversation in it. I find it difficult to use proper tenses when speaking English, and I feel as though every word I've ever learned has simply vanished from my memory."

In China, practice opportunities appear to be either insignificant (PS2) or nearly unattainable (PS13). PS17 found that Chinese students "cannot use international app such as Google, Facebook, Youtube, or Twitter," which prevents them from connecting to the outside world. Even some of our learning materials have been "translated into Chinese version," or "the majority were published by China's university or other organization in China" (PS15). PS4 has since concluded that, in China, "English is not that really important" because "their jobs don't require much English." According to PS4, the only reason they continue to study the language is because they must pass exams like the CET4 and CET6 in order to graduate from college or meet the requirements of their jobs (PS1). PS3 described that:

"I don't think my English-speaking proficiency really affects my academic and professional achievement. I still think I can graduate and function well in the workforce if I can pass the CET or TEM exams and obtain the certificates. Furthermore, since China has closed itself off to the outside world, Chinese citizens are forced to make do with what our nation offers, and that is sufficient. It's okay if your spoken English isn't that great if all you want is just to work in China. We already have a full plate of classes and exams, making it difficult for us to manage our time. As a result, it is nearly impossible for us to actively create opportunities for English practice unless you voluntarily choose to."

Chinese EFL students agree that speaking in English makes them feel uneasy because they don't have many opportunities to do so (PS1-PS15). This brings up the topic of anxiety and confidence. Furthermore, they admit that they have accents (PS5, PS20), have unclear pronunciation (PS1, PS7, PS13), and have inadequate English speaking ability (PS1-PS20). As a result, they become nervous when speaking and begin to lose confidence in their ability to communicate. They typically refrain from using English both inside and outside of the classroom because of this.

PS14 opined that:

"I never feel comfortable speaking English with friends or foreigners because I don't speak it myself. I frequently find it difficult to articulate what I want to say and to pronounce it clearly enough for them to understand. I then stop speaking in English and carry on our conversation in Mandarin. My Chinese friends and I both struggle with English, so when we communicate, we both prefer to speak Chinese. When conversing

with foreign students, I still speak Chinese; if they don't speak it at all, I will speak 70% Chinese, 10% English, and 20% body language. However, since most foreign students are good at Chinese, we converse in that language."

Unexpectedly, students' answers to our question about how culture influences English speaking were unexpected, given that Chinese teaching and learning practices appear to have a major impact on students' acquisition of the language, especially when it comes to speaking. PS1-PS16 claimed that they are accustomed to learning in this manner since their educational experiences are primarily focused on memorization and exam-centered learning. Every participant acknowledged that they were already overburdened with daily study assignments, that they were tired, and that they had no energy left to think about honing their English speaking skills because passing exams is the main priority when it comes to English learning in China. Speaking skill is not included in English exams in China. Furthermore, PS7 said that there are additional issues because Chinese people feel under pressure to communicate with Westerners because the way the West explains things is illogical and culturally very different from how Chinese people speak.

PS17 expressed that:

"Since I was a young child, the English curriculum has required us to learn new vocabulary every day through recitation, grammar, reading, and translation. Our learning environment forces us to wake up at 5:30 a.m. culturally to commit English vocabulary to memory without understanding its application, then at 7 a.m. When classes start, there is no discussion, we just sit and listen to the teachers. Approximately 5:30 p.m. after class, we still have to remain in the classroom for independent study, which primarily consists of mock exams or other tests until 10:30 or 11:00 p.m. We used to not practice speaking English because we had too much work to do and were too tired to do so. Throughout the entire process, we primarily needed to be silent and focused. We are also not permitted to talk during class or during our own study time."

The quality of interactions between teachers and students in and out of the classroom appears to be low in China. Regarding PS6, "I usually don't talk to my teacher until they ask me to respond to questions during class." PS11 underlined, saying, "I always try to avoid answering questions in class because I'm nervous and don't want to talk in English. Additionally, I typically leave the classroom right away after class without talking to my teachers or fellow students." PS13 made a similar claim, saying, "Most of the time, I and my friends don't like English class because we are all not good at English. As a result, we typically stay out of the classroom and just sit, listen, and wait for the lesson to end."

When students conducted interviews, a variety of inactive and unproductive comments were also made. For instance, PS20 stated that "Even though I take English classes and must participate in group discussions or presentations, I still prefer to use Chinese, and to be honest, I speak Chinese in at least 60% of these situations." These remarks raise the possibility of unmotivated and ineffective learning, in which the teacher-student or student-student interactions were such an inert process that the learning style was ineffective in improving the students' ability to speak English.

Class Observation and Semi-Interview Results for Teachers

Five class observation sessions were held in first-year EFL classes with the aim of evaluating the activities that the teachers implemented and the participation of the students. The study was conducted in a first-year English major class during weeks 3 and

4 of An Integrated English Course 1, which consists of five 45-minute sessions total, three sessions in week 3 and two sessions in week 4. Students were asked to preview the lesson prior to class. The teacher started working on "Never Say Goodbye," the first reading text in Unit 1, during the first session. This class was taught using a lecture format, in which the teacher read aloud and explained the reading material in Mandarin. She then went on to define vocabulary and comprehension of article structure. She instructed students to discuss text questions with their partners in order to find the answers in the second session. Students raised their hands and answered in Chinese by saying which line of the paragraph have contained the answers of the questions then they read it aloud. Additionally, students must finish the translation and grammar exercises in the reading's exercise section on their own. Students were chosen at random by roll call to present their answers or by volunteering after finishing the exercises.

Dictation of sentences and vocabulary from the reading text was also done. The teacher allowed students to give a brief speech or presentation on the material covered in the reading text during the final class period of week 3. Students used Chinese to explain their reflections on their comprehension of the reading material. The teacher also assigned the students to prepare a 5-7 minute presentation at the end of the third week of class. The presentation material could be connected to the reading or other contexts. In week 4, the fourth session was led by student presentations; some students used only Chinese or English, while others used a combination of the two languages. During the last session, which was a feedback session, the teacher asked the students about their presentations, including how they felt about them, what they learned from them, and how they could have improved them. Subsequently, the instructor wrapped up the conversation regarding the presentations and provided feedback regarding their assignments.

As shown in the extracts above, the teacher (PT1) has organized activities for classroom assessment purposes, and the degree of student engagement was somewhat high. However, their resources were a little basic, and their question-and-answer sessions and free speech were brief. Despite the fact that the activities in the classroom actually happened and that student engagement was somewhat high, the majority of the interaction was in Chinese rather than English. Looking at the feedback session was also beneficial in helping students realize that they have limited speech capabilities and to rectify presentational data, but not in enhancing English speaking skills. Such a teaching and learning approach is ineffective at helping students improve their speaking abilities because it places more of an emphasis on social and cognitive skills than on language proficiency.

This course introduces English freshmen to major English-speaking countries, Britain, America, and Canada, and teaches them about language theories, development, thought, and politics, according to the teacher in charge of the class, who I spoke with. The objective is to foster critical thinking skills in students, enabling them to comprehend pertinent material and generate autonomous ideas regarding western cultures and linguistic theories. (PT1; Interview)

Following that, I attempted to contextualize the open-ended questions, which varied depending on the interview with ten different teachers. A few examples of the questions are given below:

1. What common speaking difficulties do you observe in your students?
2. How do you support students in overcoming speaking challenges?

Remarkably, they (PT1-PT7) stated that the majority of the speaking issues they saw in their class were caused by students' reluctance to speak. Even though they were instructed to speak in English, students continued to mix in Chinese (PT2, PT3, PT10) because they were having trouble coming up with the correct words to explain (PT1-PT5) or were uncomfortable speaking in front of their peers (PT9). Additionally, some stated that students preferred written English to spoken English (PT1) and that they were unfamiliar with speaking English because they thought they were pronouncing it incorrectly (PT9). Because of these issues, PT3 helped students by first allowing them to explain what they wanted to say in English. If they were unable to explain certain words in English, they could then explain in Chinese. Once the speech was completed, PT3 would assist them by giving them the appropriate English words. Additionally, PT7-PT10 stated that in order to give them more opportunities to speak English, they will either encourage it in class or evaluate it with a brief English presentation. PT1 stated that he will do his best to contribute as many feedbacks as he can, as there are some challenges such as large class sizes, inadequate teaching resources, and limited instruction time (PT2-PT9).

Discussion

The primary goal of this study is to look into the difficulties faced by Chinese EFL students and offer solutions to help them improve as speakers of English. The majority of participants, according to our data, had a negative opinion of these obstacles. Interestingly, the findings found that many respondents mentioned that grammar and vocabulary problems are among the biggest obstacles Chinese EFL students encounter when the translation process takes precedence over conversation. This feeling fits in nicely with the body of current literature. For instance, research by [21] study have underscored the main areas of concern for Chinese EFL students are pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar mistakes. This suggests that vocabulary and grammar are areas in which Chinese EFL students frequently struggle, especially when attempting to translate from Chinese to English prior to conversing. Additional obstacles to efficient communication may arise from this translation process, as students might find it difficult to find the appropriate words or phrases in English, which could cause hesitation and decreased fluency when speaking. Discussed about a number of particular difficulties in teaching oral English in Chinese higher education [22]. Study emphasizes the significance of vocabulary and grammar as linguistic components that have a major influence on students' ability to speak English [23]. Proficiency in grammar enables coherent and efficient communication, whereas an extensive lexicon amplifies self-expression and assurance. All of these components work together to improve students' overall capacity for meaningful English-language communication. According to the study, teachers should concentrate on helping students acquire these language skills in order to help them speak more fluently.

Furthermore, the participants identified another noteworthy challenge, which is the lack of opportunities for English practice. This particular quality aligns with the body of academic literature currently available in the spoken English domain. For example, [24] study makes it clear that rote learning and grammar are frequently prioritized over interactive speaking practice in many Chinese classrooms due to prevalent teaching methodologies. This may result in a situation where students are proficient in written English but do not have the chance to practice speaking in a group setting. There might

not be enough opportunities for students to have in-depth discussions in traditional classroom settings. Insufficient interactive exercises may impede students' ability to effectively hone their speaking abilities. As Yi mentioned, integrating social media platforms can help mitigate this problem by offering more interactive settings for practice outside of the classroom. However, as students pointed out in interviews, China appears to have blocked access to websites with foreign content (Great Firewall), including Facebook, Youtube, Twitter, Google, and so on [25]. Additionally, [26] highlights that students may place a higher value on grades than on communication, which could lead them to favor traditional teaching approaches that discourage active speaking and, as a result, lower students' willingness to communicate.

Moving the spotlight away from those in superior positions, a notable segment of our survey participants commended the presence of anxiety and a lack of confidence when it comes to speaking English. This peculiar trait necessitates a thorough examination, drawing upon the fundamental research conducted by [27], [28] on the elements contributing to students' English speaking anxiety. Their study delivers convincing evidence that proficiency in the English language plays a crucial role in bolstering speaking anxiety. This anxiety frequently originates from apprehensions of unfavorable judgement by peers and educators, which can diminish their eagerness to participate in classroom discussions. Their study also indicates that students who feel less proficient in areas such as vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation typically encounter heightened levels of speaking anxiety [29]. This perceived inadequacy can prompt them to avoid speaking engagements, thereby hampering their language learning progress.

Participants conformed that students' own traditional Chinese educational systems have the biggest cultural impact on their learning and cause them to struggle when speaking English. This particular idea aligns with broader themes in the Chinese history of education literature. Studies indicate one of the key figures who established the foundation for education was Confucius. And because ancient Chinese people were accustomed to their destiny being determined by examination, passing exams became the primary goal of education in China [30], [31]. Have also emphasized that this type of education—that is, exam-oriented education—was refined and changed after the People's Republic of China was founded in 1449. It places less emphasis on students' initiative, creativity, and personal growth in favor of test scores and admission rates [32]. Due in large part to cultural differences, exam preparation and rote memorization are prioritized over communicative competency in traditional Chinese educational practices. There are numerous issues with learning English, including rote memorization, writing, reading, and recognition skills. Students' oral English is also detrimental to their ongoing English language learning [33]. This cultural setting may erect obstacles to critical thinking and impromptu language use.

Notwithstanding these findings, teachers and students also discussed their interactions both inside and outside of the classroom. For example, teachers' challenges—such as large class sizes, insufficient teaching resources, and short instruction times—as well as students' reluctance or fear of interacting with them—lead to little interaction between teachers and students, which suggests that encouraging students to speak English does not boost their motivation. This conduct highlights the ongoing importance of academic and social interactions in the learning of English, which has been well-documented in educational literature. For example, emphasizes the strains placed on

student-teacher relationships and the quality of education overall by exam-oriented systems [34]. Emphasizes that teachers mostly impart knowledge through didactic lectures that concentrate on textbook material and heavily stress rote memorization as a strategy for knowledge retention [35]. Usually, students are supposed to play the part of passive recipients, whose only responsibility is to take in the material and pass demanding tests to show that they understood it. Chinese teachers, who prioritize exam preparation over thorough language acquisition, have given priority to this teacher-centered approach. Students' low proficiency and disengagement are the results of [36]. Because of this, Chinese students have embraced a teacher-centered learning style that prioritizes memorization over initiative, creativity, and critical thinking, with the sole goal of passing exams [37]. Because of this, the teacher – who traditionally assumes the role of an authoritative figure tasked with imparting knowledge – is at the center of both English language instruction and learning in China. However, this method of instruction may inadvertently restrict their ability to foster students' autonomy and inventiveness [38], particularly their drive to speak English.

CONCLUSION

Fundamental Findings : related to the factors impacting Chinese EFL students' speaking difficulties, which include vocabulary and grammar, practice opportunities, anxiety and confidence, cultural influence, and teacher-student interactions. **Implications** : suggest that implementing flipped classrooms, enhance speaking proficiency by promoting student autonomy, reducing anxiety, and encouraging active learning, areas often underdeveloped in traditional teaching methods. Nonetheless. **Limitations** of this study include a small sample size and limited applicability to wider contexts. **Future Research** : should address these limitations by incorporating larger, more diverse samples and longitudinal studies to refine understanding of effective strategies for improving speaking proficiency, as well as fostering a learning environment that prioritizes interactive exercises, communication, and practical language application over rote memorization.

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