



11th ASIAN Conference on Environment-Behaviour Studies

Primula Beach Hotel, Kuala Terengganu, Malaysia, 14-16 Jul 2023

Chinese EFL Students' Learning Needs for Speaking Performance: A case study

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Abstract

Despite the importance of speaking skills, most Chinese graduates leave universities unable to communicate effectively in English. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the differences between EFL students' perceived and actual speaking performance and to understand their learning needs better. The study involved 45 EFL learners and utilized a mixed-methods research design. Data were collected via a questionnaire, a speaking test, and semi-structured interviews. The findings revealed that EFL students overestimated their speaking performance, implying they were unaware of their limitations. Hence EFL instructors need to provide better guidance to enhance their speaking skills.

Keywords: EFL students; perceived and actual performance; speaking performance; Chinese teaching environment

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21834/e-bpj.v8i25.4854>*

1.0 Introduction

Nowadays, education aims to meet people's needs to become citizens of the world. English has become the language of choice for worldwide communication in today's globalized world and has contributed significantly to China's economic and social development. Today, the English Language is viewed as crucial in fostering and sustaining the knowledge, skills, and values essential for enabling learners to interact successfully with speakers of various languages and cultures. As an essential part of the internationalization process of higher education, English language teaching in colleges and universities has been given high priority. Likewise, the teaching of English as a foreign language (EFL) has been embraced by almost all Chinese educational institutions at all levels ranging from elementary to middle schools and tertiary institutions.

1.1 Background Study

Speaking is considered one of the four essential language skills that must be mastered the best when learning a new language. To successfully master speaking a language, one must be able to converse in that language. A learner needs to be able to speak the language to grasp it effectively. Speaking skills reflect the learner's proficiency with the target language (Safari & Fitriati, 2017).

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However, under these circumstances, speaking English as a foreign language is difficult compared to the other three skills, including writing, listening, and reading (Amoah & Yeboah, 2021). For EFL learners, learning to speak a foreign language is difficult. Most EFL learners view speaking as the most challenging skill since communicating effectively in the target language takes great preparation (Safari & Fitriati, 2017). Achieving speaking fluency is challenging. EFL learners must know how to use grammar correctly, have excellent pronunciation and adequate vocabulary, and know how to utilize the language (Fitriani et al., 2015). After all, for EFL learners, speaking skill means the ability of learners to express their ideas, thoughts, feelings, or emotions through oral communication.

1.2 Purpose of Study

Despite the significance of speaking skills, most Chinese college graduates lack the ability to communicate effectively in English, and many leave university with rather limited speaking proficiency. Amoah and Yeboah (2021) stated that speaking difficulties are common among Chinese EFL learners who deal with various problems that negatively affect mastering English skills. Moreover, Zhang (2009) explained that speaking remains the most challenging skill to acquire for the majority of EFL learners, and they still need to communicate orally in English. Despite the increasing demand for enhancing EFL learners' speaking performance, few studies have explored the learning needs of these EFL students indicating a crucial need to address this gap. This, without a doubt, calls for an investigation into EFL students' actual learning needs in a bid to enhance their speaking performance.

Thus, the main objective of this paper is to examine the differences between the EFL students' perceived and actual speaking performance in Chinese EFL classrooms. It is hoped that the study will provide insights into their learning needs with respect to their speaking performance.

Henceforth, the study was guided by the following research questions:

- Research Question One: What is the EFL students' self-perceived performance in speaking skills regarding pronunciation, grammar, and fluency?
- Research Question Two: What is the EFL students' actual performance in speaking skills regarding pronunciation, grammar, and fluency?
- Research Question Three: Is there any significant difference between the EFL students' self-perceived and actual performance in speaking skills regarding pronunciation, grammar, and fluency?
- Research Question Four: What are the EFL students' learning needs for speaking regarding pronunciation, grammar, and fluency?

2.0 Literature Review

The ability to speak the target language is one of the language abilities that every EFL learner needs to develop to acquire a second language. People want to master this component as quickly as they can. When individuals encounter second or foreign-language learners, they initially evaluate whether the EFL learner can talk.

2.1 Speaking Skill

Speaking here refers to more than just mouthing words. In linguistics, many researchers have defined the term "speaking" in various ways. Nunan (1991) stated that speaking is the delivery of language through the mouth, conveying information, or expressing one's feelings in speech. While Florez, M.C. (1999) explained that speaking is an interactive process of constructing meaning in both its form and meaning depending on the context, the participants, their experiences, the environment, and the purpose of speaking. Among the four sub-skills of the language, listening and reading are passive skills as the learners receive information passively. In contrast, speaking and writing are active skills for learners to produce information independently. Therefore, for language learners, speaking is a communication tool to express themselves orally.

Speaking is the most important skill for acquiring a foreign or second language learning. People want to master this component as quickly as they can. When individuals encounter second or foreign-language learners, their initial evaluation is whether the EFL learner can communicate. Speaking is an essential skill in learning a foreign or second language among the four essential language skills. Shen & Song (2022) claimed that the ultimate degree of language is the ability to fully perform the communication purpose of language, not the mastery of language forms. To achieve this goal, EFL learners must acquire the necessary skills to become good speakers: fluency, vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation (Adickalam & Yunus, 2022).

2.2 Importance of Speaking Skills

According to Dewi et al. (2016), learners must communicate since English is the most widely acknowledged language globally. In addition, mastering speaking skills can enhance learners' knowledge and abilities and provide them with more possibilities for finding a good job. Moreover, according to Nur and Riadil (2019), speaking helps us develop a vital ability to contribute to our society or country.

For EFL learners, mastering speaking skills means building confidence levels, participating in debates or group work, giving oral presentations or public speeches, and getting better job opportunities in the future. In the present world, good communication skills equal a passport to better employment opportunities after graduation.

2.3 Problems in Speaking Performance

According to Hayriye (2006), speaking involves choosing the right words and phrases based on the proper social context, audience, circumstance, and topic matter. Being a fluent speaker, however, necessitates an extensive understanding of the language being learned and how it will be used in actual communication. Language problems, according to Doris and Jessica (2007), are one of the major

causes of subpar academic achievement and are obstacles to speaking proficiency improvement for EFL learners. The reasons behind these are poor grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. Meanwhile, Ratnasari (2020) stated four challenges in learning to speak in English, namely lack of vocabulary, nervousness, unsupported environment, and lack of knowledge in grammar.

Despite the importance of speaking skills, this skill needs to be addressed by EFL students in the classroom, and they do not get any chance either in the classroom or outside to speak English. Moreover, Musthafa (2001) pointed out that many teachers in Asia prefer teaching grammatical items and knowledge of syntax. Meanwhile, many researchers have pointed out that both the EFL instructors and learners focus too much on reading and writing skills with little emphasis on speaking ability (Wang et al., 2023). As for EFL learners, they have to develop their ability to use English as a means of communication rather than a subject in which they are struggling.

3.0 Methodology

This study was conducted at a public university located in Hebei Province, China. A random sample of 45 non-English majoring first-year students was selected for this study. According to Lamprecht and Guetterman (2019), compared with using a single research method, mixed-method research provides better answers to the research questions by intentionally collecting and combining qualitative and quantitative data. This study adopted a mixed-methods research design to collect the data via a questionnaire, a speaking test, and semi-structured interviews.

The questionnaire was utilized because it was a widely used and effective tool for gathering survey data, offered organized, frequently numerical data, was administered without the researcher present, and was very simple to analyze (Cohen et al., 2018). In this study, the researcher adapted the questionnaire, which aimed to examine the EFL students' self-perceived ability in speaking skills regarding pronunciation, grammar and fluency. The questionnaire comprised two main sections. Section A was the demographic profile of respondents, such as gender, English language achievement score in Gaokao (College Entrance Examination), and whether they have ever attended English Language speaking training programs. Section B examined students' self-perceived speaking skills and they were required to respond to the items based on a 10-point Likert scale ranging from 0 to 10. Here a score of 0 represented very limited / poor speaking skills while a score of 10 represented outstanding ability. Section B aimed to explore EFL learner's self-perceived speaking skills with regard to pronunciation, grammar, and fluency. A panel of two experts were consulted to establish the content validity of the questionnaire in terms of item relevance and accuracy in evaluating the intended outcomes. The Cronbach Alpha score was recorded based on the pilot test conducted to determine the reliability of the questionnaire. A value of 0.80 was observed, which is considered high (Tavakol, 2011).

The second research instrument employed was a speaking test aimed to examine the actual speaking performance of the EFL learners and an existing IELTS (International English Language Testing System) test utilized. The third instrument used was semi-structured interviews which aimed to gain insight into respondents' perceptions of their actual speaking needs (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). The interview protocol consisted of two main sections. Section A comprised warm-up questions whilst Section B investigated EFL students' learning needs in enhancing their speaking performance. All the interviews were recorded and then transcribed verbatim. Then member-checking was adopted to establish the validity of the interviews.

4.0 Findings

The following section provides the main findings. It begins with the demographic profile of the respondents and is followed by the findings of the four research questions that guided the study.

4.1 Demographic Profile of Respondents

In this study, 45 students responded to the questionnaire, and their demographic profile is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 5.1 Demographic Profile of Students (n=45)

Items	Number	Percentage
Gender		
Male	19	42
Female	26	58
Total	45	100
English score in Gaokao (College Entrance Examination)		
120-150	12	27
93-119	26	58
92 and below	7	15
Total	45	100
Have you ever attended any English-speaking training program?		
Yes	11	24
No	34	76
Total	45	100
Self-perceived English speaking skill.		

Very basic	20	44
Beginner	9	20
Intermediate	11	24
Advanced	3	7
Excellent	2	5
Total	45	100
Statements best describe your English-speaking ability		
Very confident	6	13
Moderately confident	12	27
Not confident enough	20	44
Not confident at all	7	16
Total	45	100

From the findings above, out of 50 respondents in this study, 19 respondents were male, while the remaining 26 were female. In terms of the English score in Gaokao (College Entrance Exam), there were three groups which were 120-150 (total score), 93-119, and 92 and below. Among these respondents, 12 students (27%) achieved a score of 120-150, 26 students (58%) achieved a score of 93-119, and the rest seven students (15%) achieved a score of 92 and below. Only 11 students (24%) have ever attended English speaking training program before. The majority of the students (76%) have never attended English speaking training program. As for the self-perceived English-speaking skill, there were five scales for students to choose from in the questionnaire. Among these respondents, 20 students (44%) considered themselves as very basic users, nine students (20%) viewed themselves as beginners, 11 students (24%) believed themselves as intermediate language users, three students (7%) claimed they were advanced users, while only two students (5%) thought they were excellent in English speaking.

4.2 Respondents' Self-perceived Speaking Performance

In this study, the first research questions aimed to explore the EFL learners' self-perceived speaking abilities with regard to pronunciation, grammar, and fluency. Section B of the questionnaire consisted of three parts where the respondents evaluated their self-perceived performance in terms of pronunciation, grammar and fluency. To facilitate the comparison of the questionnaire result with the speaking test, the questionnaire was scored on a 10-point scale whereby a score of 0 represents poor language user whilst a score of 9 means outstanding skills. The findings are presented in Table 2 below.

Item	Mean	SD
Pronunciation	6.273	2.028
Grammar	6.013	1.851
Fluency	6.122	2.044
Overall Speaking Performance	6.136	1.676

Scale:0=poor, 1=very weak, 2=weak, 3=below average, 4=average, 5=above average, 6=good, 7=very good, 8=excellent, 9=outstanding

Based on the results illustrated above in Table 2, it can be viewed that the EFL students rated their overall speaking performance as good ($M=6.136 > 6$, $SD=1.676$). Among these three sub-skills, they rated their pronunciation as the best skill ($M=6.273$, $SD=2.028$). In comparison, the grammar ($M=6.013$, $SD=1.851$) and fluency ($M=6.122$, $SD=2.044$) were slightly lower than the pronunciation.

4.3 Respondents' Actual Speaking Performance

In this study, the second research question examined the EFL students' actual speaking performance. All respondents were asked to sit for the speaking test, and the test results were scored based on the band descriptor with regard to fluency and coherence, lexical resource, grammatical range and accuracy, and pronunciation. This study only focuses on pronunciation, grammar, and fluency. According to the band descriptors of the IELTS speaking test, a score of 0 represents the respondent who did not attempt the test, while a score of 9 refers to expert language users. The findings are illustrated in Table 3 below.

Item	Mean	SD
Pronunciation	6.035	2.205
Grammar	5.538	2.041
Fluency	5.695	1.753
Overall Speaking Performance	5.756	1.755

Scale:0=poor, 1=very weak, 2=weak, 3=below average, 4=average, 5=above average, 6=good, 7=very good, 8=excellent, 9=outstanding

From the findings above, the EFL students' overall actual speaking performance is above average (M=5.756, SD=1.755). Based on the results, the students scored highest in pronunciation (M=6.035, SD=2.205), which is higher than the overall score. At the same time, they scored above average in grammar (M=5.538, SD=2.041) and fluency (M=5.695, SD=1.753), indicating moderate abilities in these two aspects.

4.4 Difference between Respondents' Self-perceived and Actual Speaking Performance

To explore whether there is a significant difference between the EFL students' self-perceived and actual speaking performance in speaking, the researcher adopted a paired sample t-test. The results of the t-test results are illustrated below in Table 4.

Table 4 T-test Results for EFL Students' Self-perceived and Actual Performance

Item	Self-perceived Performance	Actual Performance	Mean Difference	t	p
Pronunciation	6.273	6.035	0.238	3.132	0.000
Grammar	6.013	5.538	0.475	3.819	0.000
Fluency	6.122	5.695	0.427	4.256	0.000
Overall Speaking Performance	6.136	5.756	0.38	2.893	0.000

Scale:0=poor, 1=very weak, 2=weak, 3=below average, 4=average, 5=above average, 6=good, 7=very good, 8=excellent, 9=outstanding

Based on the findings above, it was shown that there is a significant difference ($p=0.000 < 0.01$) between the mean scores in the EFL students' self-perceived speaking performance (M=6.13) and actual speaking performance (M=5.756). Moreover, besides the overall speaking performance, there is a significant difference in all three sub-skills, namely pronunciation, grammar, and fluency. While the mean difference for grammar (M=0.475) is the highest, and the mean difference for pronunciation (M=0.238) is the lowest.

4.5 Respondents' Learning Needs

The third research question explored the EFL students' expectations of improving their speaking performance. Among the total 45 students in the sample, nine students were selected based on their English-speaking proficiency, which involved three students with high English proficiency, three with average English proficiency, and three with limited English proficiency. The interview data were analyzed via thematic analysis. The researcher transferred the qualitative data into a software program called Nvivo 12.0. The categories and themes of the qualitative data are summarized in Figure 1 below.

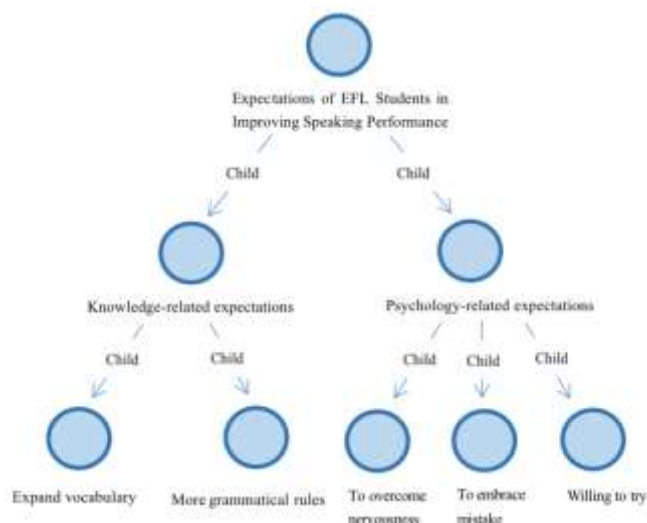


Figure 1 Categories and Themes of Qualitative Data

As shown in Figure 1, two major themes were identified: knowledge-related and psychology-related expectations. The knowledge-related expectations included expanding vocabulary and learning more grammatical rules, while the psychology-related expectations consisted of overcoming nervousness, embracing mistakes, and willingness to try.

For knowledge-related expectations, five out of nine students claimed their expectation in expanding vocabulary due to their deficiency in vocabulary affects their ability to communicate effectively and fluently. For example, Respondent RC-AEP1, with average English performance, stated, "Sometimes, I have the willingness to speak and also have the opinion in my mind, I just don't know how to express my opinion or my feelings...then I have to stop talking. And most of the time, I feel embarrassed, and next time I will not open my mouth to speak." Meanwhile, five out of nine students highlighted their expectation of learning more grammatical rules since the misuse of grammar cause barriers in oral communication.

As for the psychology-related expectations, four out of nine students possessed that they hoped they could overcome the nervousness when asked to speak English. Three out of nine students claimed they expect no fear of making mistakes when required to speak English in front of others. Three out of nine students mentioned that stepping out of their comfort zone to open their mouths to speak English is their primary task to improve their speaking. As RC-HEP3 stated, "...we just get used to sticking with the old and traditional learning method, you know, just listen to the teacher, and take notes. We don't get used to participating in the learning activity...it does not necessarily mean we are not good at it. It just means we are not getting used to this way..." Based on the students' interview, it clearly shows that the psychology-related issues significantly affect their speaking performance.

5.0 Discussions

Based on the findings of the study, it can be revealed that the EFL students rated their self-perceived speaking performance as "good" with the highest score in pronunciation (M=6.273) and lowest score in grammar (M=6.013). It indicated that the EFL students positively believed in their self-perceived speaking performance, especially in pronunciation. However, compared with the speaking test result, the EFL students' actual speaking performance needed to improve. The overall actual speaking performance (M=5.756) scored as "above average" which is lower than their expectations, and the result also revealed there is a significant difference. This implied that the EFL students overestimated their actual speaking performance.

Moreover, based on the qualitative data collected by the semi-structured interview, the EFL students highlighted two major expectations in improving their speaking: knowledge-related and psychology-related expectations. These findings are similar to the findings of Ratnasari (2020). Her study showed four challenges the EFL students faced: lack of vocabulary, nervousness, unsupportive environment, and lack of grammar knowledge. Furthermore, these findings are similar to a study conducted by Adickalam and Yunus (2022). Their study explored the challenges and expectations of EFL students in the speaking classroom. The results revealed that learning strategies that engage students to walk out of their comfort zone and find their inner motivation should be adopted in teaching practice.

The findings imply that Chinese EFL students overestimate their speaking ability indicating that they do need to take stock of their current performance and take the necessary steps to improve their limitations. Though they perform better in pronunciation, their grammar and fluency need more attention. This has implications for the EFL teachers in the speaking classroom. This study also implies that the EFL teachers are responsible for creating a conducive environment that will help the students reduce their nervousness when speaking in English.

6.0 Conclusion & Recommendations

As mentioned above, the findings of this study reveal that there is a need for EFL instructors to adopt more innovative teaching techniques to stimulate students' interest and motivation in speaking based on their learning needs. Teachers have a significant role in making a difference in their students' lives. Hence, they should analyze students' knowledge background, and needs and consequently employ appropriate instructional strategies to enhance their students' speaking skills (Safari & Fitriati, 2017). Moreover, according to Amoah and Yeboah (2021), teachers should introduce more innovative teaching approaches into their classrooms to boost the EFL learner's speaking confidence which will help the students overcome the anxiety and fear of making mistakes or criticism from peers and teachers.

Finally, there is no denying that due to the small sample size, the findings of this study cannot be generalized to the total population of EFL learners in China. Hence future studies on EFL students' speaking skills need to involve a larger population size. Perhaps a new direction to this issue may require researchers to include other research methodologies, such as classroom observations and reflective journals, which will provide a more comprehensive understanding of EFL students' speaking ability in English. Despite these limitations, there is no denying that this study has shed light on EFL students learning needs with regard to their speaking ability in English.

Acknowledgement

None

Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This paper provides both theoretical and practical implications for the EFL speaking classroom environment.

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