

Oral English Learning in Mainland China

By Momo Fan & Hanbing Tong

In recent years, spoken English teaching in China has generated much debate. Under the traditional Chinese education system, students pay relatively little attention to spoken English even though it is becoming increasingly important in today's globalized world. In the National College Entrance Examination, commonly known as the Gaokao, students from some provinces do not need to sit the English speaking test element, while for others the exam is a mere formality. Meanwhile, the speaking test in the national College English Test Band Four (CET-4) concentrates on students' ability to use complex sentences and an extended vocabulary, but this bears little relation to real-world speech. Because of this, students focus on memorizing sentences rather than speaking naturally. This article assesses the current status of oral English learning in three provinces in China and articulates the problems involved in learning English for sustained periods of time.

Introduction

The Chinese government has introduced many foreign-funded enterprises since the process of *改革开放* or 'opening up and reform' began in 1978 and relations between China and other countries are much closer than ever before. Because of this, the need for qualified personnel with a strong grasp of English is becoming increasingly urgent. Many English teaching programmes are valued by parents and students for their traditional approaches to English oral studies. For example, the New Oriental Language School, first established in Beijing in 1993, provides programmes, services and products exclusively aimed at increasing Gaokao scores. However, it is widely accepted that in its current form the Chinese education system, which should have established a clear baseline for learning English, cannot help students fulfil the growing employment gap in academic, private, and professional spheres (Sun and Henrichsen, 2011). Although there is a clear need for people who can speak fluent English in China, attempts at educational reform remain superficial. This research study aims to investigate the efficacy of the speaking tests in Gaokao and CET-4 national standardized test in oral English studies, and the reasons why Chinese students often struggle to speak fluent English.

The National College Entrance Examination, also known as the Gaokao, is a system that purports to offer standardized testing throughout mainland China. However, we would argue that this is not a truly meritocratic system because of regional variations, which ironically, are intended to create a level playing field between students from different areas. Foreign language learning is compulsory for all students in mainland China; students from minority nationalities may study their own ethnic languages, and some students will choose languages such as Japanese or Russian. Because of regional variations in the Gaokao, the forms and requirements of the English-speaking test also vary tremendously and this has resulted in different teaching methods in high schools.

Methodology

During this investigation three instances of regional variation in the English-speaking test were explored, and a survey of teaching methods used in high schools was conducted. A series of semi-structured interviews was carried out, both in person and online, with 48 students and five teachers from three different provinces. They were asked to provide information about the Gaokao system, teaching practices, and the English speaking

test in their province. Shanghai and Xinjiang were selected because they offer an extreme contrast in Gaokao variation between eastern and western China. Jiangsu was chosen as a more typical example. It is widely regarded as a province where people pay a great deal of attention to education. In 2010, enrolment on undergraduate and specialized courses in Jiangsu stood at more than 1.6 million, the largest in all the regions (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2010).

In theory, the English-speaking test in Shanghai only applies to students who will go on to take up a foreign language major at university. However, in practice the vast majority of students sit this examination. The five parts below comprise the procedure of the speaking test in Shanghai. Since this test is usually only available to Chinese nationals, we have provided an English translation below. The Chinese original can be found in the appendix.¹

Part One: Reading

A short article in English is shown on the screen. The candidate is given one minute to prepare and thirty seconds to read it aloud. (Note: The candidate is not expected to read the whole article. The candidate should speak at a normal rate.)

Part Two: Rapid response

The candidate should answer questions based on the content they hear within a set time period. The candidate listens to five questions through headphones (only the name of the interlocutor is shown on the screen) and gives appropriate answers to each question.

Part Three: Situational questions

The candidate is given two scenarios and must ask two questions about each scene. The questions must include at least one 'wh-' question (Note: The candidate does not need to answer the questions).

Part Four: Individual Talk

The candidate is asked to talk about a particular topic, which usually relates to society, family, school, environment, morality, the Internet, etc. These topics are derived from popular culture and often relate to daily life.

The candidate is given one minute to prepare the topic shown on the screen and will then talk for one minute. The candidate should say at least six sentences based on the given topic.

Part Five: Describing

A series of pictures accompanied by a one-line description are shown on the screen. The candidate is given one minute to prepare and has one minute to describe the pictures. The candidate should say at least six sentences (not including the given description).

Discussion and analysis

The test purports to prepare students to speak in English in any given situation. However, students talk to a computer rather than a real person and, as such, this cannot test students' ability to speak English in everyday situations. The speaking test in Shanghai stands in stark contrast to the one in Xinjiang. In Xinjiang, students do not need to take either the speaking or the listening test because these do not affect the final score. As a consequence, teachers do not focus on students' oral English in class. One student from Urumqi Bayi High School stated: “我们平时不练口语因为我们不用参加考试。而且我们很少在课堂上和老师对话，她只会让我们做考试卷然后讲题” or “We did not practice spoken English because we do not need to sit for the test. Besides, we seldom talked with our teacher in class; she just let us practice examination papers and then answered some questions we may have.”² To a large extent, the contrast between Shanghai and Xinjiang is a result of differences in teaching allocation between the eastern and western parts of China. In 2012, educational investment in Shanghai was over 700 billion RMB (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2012) while it was only 472 billion RMB in Xinjiang (Government of Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region of China, 2013). Shanghai is one of the largest cities in China and is markedly more cosmopolitan than most. The economy is rapidly developing and top graduates from Normal Universities usually aspire to work there. By contrast, one of the teachers in our survey claimed that educators do not usually want to work in Xinjiang since

¹For appendices, please refer to the online version of this article at etic.xjtlu.edu.cn.

²Translation by authors.

salaries and the standard of living there are relatively low. This makes it difficult for students to access high quality education and reach the national standard of spoken English.

Jiangsu Provincial Education Examination Authority (JSEEA) requires all students in Jiangsu to take the English-speaking test before the Gaokao. Every year it provides every student with a booklet that contains all of the possible questions complete with sample answers. The test questions are then taken from this booklet. Students begin to memorize the booklet two months before the test. In the English-speaking test, students merely need to recite what they have memorized. According to one student from *南京师范大学附属中学* or 'The High School Affiliated to Nanjing Normal University' her teacher told her to “这个口语小册子你们不要以为你考完口语就没用了，以后写作文还是要用的” or “Use this booklet to pass the speaking test but remember that it will mainly provide useful sentences for your English writing test.”³ This is because the writing test counts for 25 marks, which is nearly one-fifth of the total marks, while the speaking test is not included in the final scores at all. JSEEA likes to emphasize the importance of the English-speaking test but in reality, it does not affect the final grade.

According to the students interviewed at *江苏省张家港市暨阳高级中学* or Zhangjiagang Jiyang High School, Jiangsu, students are more concerned with how to increase their test grades rather than with actually learning English. This is because the English certificate is widely regarded as a passport to a more successful career. A large number of Chinese universities require students to pass the College English Test Band Four (CET-4) as part of their undergraduate degree and companies often ask for this certification when graduates apply for jobs (see also Greatrex and Shu, this issue). It is for this reason that English is a compulsory course in most Chinese universities (Woodward, 2008). In his history of English learning in China, Woodward argues that the ability to speak English as a second language already had a high market value in China as early as 1880 and that people who could speak English often obtained lucrative opportunities

for employment. In an interview for *武汉晚报* or *Wuhan Evening News*, Zhang Jun, Head of the Department of Journalism at Hubei University of Economics, stated that in his university, College Chinese accounts for three credits while College English covers at least twelve credits. He felt that the proportion of English-language teaching was too high, but people had no choice but to adapt to the changing social climate (Wen, 2013). English courses such as these are predominantly designed to help students pass the CET-4. According to CET (n.d) the CET-4 speaking test assesses students speaking ability in six key areas, namely accuracy, complexity of vocabulary and grammar, participation in discussion, coherence, flexibility, and relevance. Only those students who pass the written examination are permitted to take the speaking test. Higher marks are typically awarded for reciting overly complex sentences using a rich vocabulary, even though this would not normally occur in real life. Consequently the 'conversation' becomes a matter of mechanically transferring overly elaborate sentences from written English into speech. Compared with the speaking test in the Gaokao, CET-4 seemingly requires a higher level of English but it still cannot be used as an accurate measure of spoken English in the real world.

Since the tests and teaching methods pay little attention to the oral English skills of students, it is a common situation in China for a university student to stammer when he or she needs to use English to communicate with others. This particular phenomenon is typically referred to as 'Mute English' (Niu & Wolff, 2010). When Chinese students learn English as a foreign language over the course of many years they may gain the ability to read and write with fluency, but often find that their spoken English is relatively poor. There are two main reasons for this phenomenon; one is the lack of opportunities to practice English with native speakers and the second is related to Chinese culture. Firstly, foreigners in Shanghai comprise approximately 0.7 percent of the population (Shanghai Municipal Statistics Bureau, 2009 and Shanghai Statistics, 2009) whilst foreigners accounted for 40 percent in

³Translation by authors.

London in 2012 (The Migration Observatory, 2013) and 35.7 percent in New York (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). Thus, even though Shanghai is the most cosmopolitan city in China, there are still relatively few foreigners. As a consequence, Chinese people rarely have the opportunity to communicate with native English speakers. Meanwhile, most teachers in schools and universities are Chinese. As a result, students prefer to think and talk in Chinese even during English classes. Artificial English-speaking environments often fail to encourage students to study oral English. Although some students are eager to speak English naturally and fluently, they are still used to translating their ideas from Chinese into English rather than thinking in English and this may hinder their expression. Secondly, some Chinese people find it embarrassing to talk in English with each other. Chinese people usually consider themselves to be reserved and shy; they are afraid of making mistakes and talking in a way in which they are unfamiliar. If they are not sure whether the sentence they are about to say is grammatically correct, they would rather not say it at all (Liu & Zhao, 2011). In addition, anecdotal evidence suggests that speaking English in public, especially with another Chinese person, may be seen as deliberately showing off. To some extent, people who speak English are regarded as superior to others and well-educated but this attitude is also symptomatic of China's generally uncritical embrace of Western culture. Therefore, students sometimes dare not speak English, even when they are able to.

In recent years, as China has come to occupy an increasingly important role on the world stage, corresponding levels of interest have been focused on English-language learning throughout the nation. However, the traditional Chinese education system is currently ill-equipped to help students gain

fluency in spoken English, even if they achieve proficiency in reading and writing. Attempts to reform the Gaokao and CET-4 are indicative of the authorities' increased focus on English-language teaching. However, to date, many of these changes remain superficial. In order to help students truly master the language, perhaps we should explore more organic, creative, and discussion-based approaches.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to acknowledge the assistance provided by several members of the Department of English, Culture and Communication: Dr. Graham Matthews, who devoted a great deal of time and energy supervising our research and editing this article; Dr. Penelope Thompson and Dr. Paul Cheung who, with Ms. Xin Jiang from XJTLU's library, introduced the authors to many valuable sources on this topic. Finally, we would like to thank the Learning, Teaching and Enhancement Office, who funded this Summer Undergraduate Research Fund (SURF) Project.

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Appendix

第一部分短文朗读

屏幕上显示一篇英语短文。考生有1分钟的时间准备，然后有30秒的时间朗读。（注意：不要求考生在30秒内将短文全部读完，考生应以正常的语速朗读。）

第二部分快速应答

要求考生针对所听到的情景在规定的时间内进行应答。考生将从耳机中听到5道题目的录音（屏幕显示对话者，但不显示题目），考生应根据各题的内容，给予适当的应答。每题的答题时间为4秒。

第三部分情景提问

这一部分将提供给考生两个情景，考生根据所给情景的要求，对每个情景分别提两个问题（第1-2题为一个情景，第3-4题为一个情景），所提的问题中至少要有一个特殊疑问句（注意：不必回答问题），每个小题的答题时间为10秒，每个情景的答题时间为20秒。

第四部分谈话

要求考生针对所给的话题讲述自己的观点。此类话题往往涉及到社会、家庭、学校、环保、道德、网络等方面。这些都是与日常生活密切相关的或比较热门的话题。考生根据屏幕上显示画面及话题，准备1分钟，然后答题，答题时间为1分钟。要求考生根据所给话题，至少讲出6句话。

第五部分看图说话

考生将在屏幕上看到一组图片和描述图片的第一句话。然后屏幕依次显示放大的每一副图片，最后再回到总画面。考生有1分钟时间准备，然后有1分钟时间对图片进行描述。要求考生至少讲6句话（不包括已给的句子）。

考试前建议考生强化朗读技能，高中和初中书后的单词表要按音标正确朗读。平时多积累词汇，在教师的指导下，挑选一些代表性的句子，经常操练。考生要克服羞涩心理，挑战错误，努力开口，利用一切可以练习英语的机会，只要你做个有心人，把握机遇，你一定会说一口流利的英语。

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