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Teaching oral English in higher education: challenges to EFL teachers

This paper investigates difficulties that teachers encounter in teaching oral English in higher education in the English as a foreign language (EFL) context. Open-ended question surveys and semi-structured interview were used to elicit data. There were 331 EFL teachers from 44 universities in 22 cities across China that responded to the survey questions. 30 teachers were interviewed. The findings showed that apart from external constraints such as large class sizes and a lack of teaching resources, EFL teachers are frustrated by their low self-efficacy with regard to oral English proficiency and inadequate pedagogical knowledge. Most teachers expressed eagerness to receive training in how to design and implement effective tasks to motivate students' engagement in oral English activities. The implications of these concerns for teacher education are highlighted in the call for training programmes that strengthen teachers' knowledge base for effective oral English instruction in the EFL context.

Keywords: teacher belief; self-efficacy; oral English instruction; English as a foreign language; teacher education

Introduction

Teacher beliefs and self-efficacy

Research in the last three decades has recognized the impact of teachers' beliefs on their teaching practices (see reviews by Borg 2003; Clark and Peterson 1986; Pajares 1992). How teachers think and understand teaching is assumed to shape their classroom behaviour and guide the goal setting. More recently, findings have been generated to identify teachers' self-efficacy beliefs as a powerful aspect of teachers' beliefs (e.g., Bandura 1997; Knoblauch & Hoy 2008; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy 2007; Dellinger et al. 2008). In the literature of educational research, the terms 'teachers'

self-efficacy' and 'teacher efficacy' have been used synonymously. In this study, we use 'teachers' self-efficacy' to refer to teachers' individual beliefs about their own abilities to perform specific teaching tasks and achieve specific results (Dellinger et al. 2008; Pajares 1996). According to Tschannen-Moran & Hoy (2001, 783), teachers' self-efficacy "affects the effort they invest in teaching, the goals they set, and their level of aspiration". Teachers with a higher sense of self-efficacy tend to show more willingness to conduct spontaneous class discussions based on students' questions (Borg 2001), have greater commitment to teaching (Coladarci 1992), and exhibit more humanistic classroom control and management orientations than those with lower self-efficacy (Woolfolk, Rosoff, and Hoy 1990). Therefore, for an overall understanding of teaching, it is well worth the effort to uncover what teachers believe about teaching and how they perceive their own competency as well.

Although increasing efforts have been made to understand teachers' beliefs in the teaching of reading, writing and grammar, research in listening and speaking instruction has attracted far less attention (Borg 2006). The limited body of work of in this area has resulted in a noticeable gap in our understanding of English language teaching (ELT). The present study attempts to fill this research gap if only in part by exploring teachers' perceptions of the difficulties they encounter in teaching speaking. We believe that it is important for teachers to be aware of the difficulties so that they can further develop their repertoire of teaching techniques thereby improving their professional practice. For teacher educators, a better understanding of the challenges that teachers face is essential for designing effective teacher preparation and professional development programs that can help teachers overcome some of the barriers and teach more successfully.

English language teaching (ELT) in China

Over the last three decades, English has gained unprecedented importance in China. As China's significant role in world affairs gains recognition internationally, the demand for English proficiency has also increased tremendously. English is widely perceived in China as 'a bridge to the future' both for the country and for the people (Jin and Cortazzi 2002). Because of the perceived value of the English language, English language education has attracted unprecedented attention and huge amounts of investment from all stakeholders – the government, teachers, students, parents and the Chinese public at large (Hu 2003).

The massive expansion of ELT began from the time China opened its doors to the outside world in 1978. The Ministry of Education (MOE) made English the primary foreign language in the national curriculum and made it a compulsory subject in the national college entrance examination in the early 1980s. English is a core subject offered during the six-year secondary schooling. At the university level, College English is taught to non-English majors for the first two years as a compulsory course and an elective course for the third- and fourth- year students. In recent years, English continues to grow in importance as a school subject and the MOE stipulated that formal English instruction in school should start in Primary 3. Based on the latest statistics released by MOE (2009), there are more than 200 million primary and secondary students and 29 million full-time college students who are learning English as a foreign language (EFL) across the nation.

In spite of the years of formal language instruction, Chinese university students' English proficiency particularly in listening and speaking is far from satisfactory (Liu and Dai 2003; Wen 1999). In response to a call for reform in College English teaching, MOE has promulgated a series of educational policies renewing the

curricula, syllabuses, and teaching methods throughout the country (Hu 2003; Zheng and Davison 2008). Communicative competence is highlighted as a chief goal for English teaching and learning in China (Zhu 2003). The National College English Testing Committee (2006, 1) clearly stated that '[t]he objective of College English is to develop students' ability to use English in a well-rounded way, especially in listening and speaking'. New textbooks are produced and new teaching methods such as communicative language teaching is being widely promoted (Hu 2002; Liao 2004; Yu 2001; Zheng and Davison 2008). Language tests, which have a critical role in English education in China are redesigned to place increased attention to listening and speaking (Wu 2001; Zheng and Cheng 2008). In 1999, the College English Test-Spoken English Test (CET-SET) was introduced into the national testing system, albeit as an optional test. In 2006, the new CET syllabus increased the score value distributed to listening comprehension in CET-4 and CET-6 from 20% to 35%. These changes in the testing syllabus are supposed to promote the teaching of listening and speaking skills. In practice, however, it proved to be extremely challenging because. EFL teachers have to cope with many difficulties in their respective teaching situations.

As an attempt to address the issue in question, this paper investigates the challenges confronting Chinese university EFL teachers in oral English instruction. It is hoped that findings from this study will provide insights to teacher education programmes that aim to build teachers' knowledge-base for effective oral English instruction.

The study

The data we present in this paper were generated by a larger study about EFL teachers' cognition in oral English instruction which involved a total of 706 EFL university teachers. We employed questionnaire survey, semi-structured interviews and a multi-method case study to elicit both qualitative and quantitative data. This paper focuses on the data elicited from open-ended question responses and semi-structured interviews with regard to the following two questions:

- 1) What are the difficulties that university EFL teachers encounter when teaching oral English?
- 2) What kind of training programmes do EFL teachers think are needed to improve their knowledge of oral English instruction?

There were 331 EFL teachers from 44 universities in 22 cities across China that responded to the open-ended question that asked them to identify the difficulties they encountered in their oral English instruction and also the ways to improve the teaching of speaking. Of the respondents, 113 (34.1%) were novice teachers with no more than 5 years of EFL teaching experience, 123 were developing teachers who had taught English for 6 - 10 years; and the remaining 95 were experienced teachers who had been engaged in EFL teaching for over 10 years. 195 (58.9%) respondents came from major coastal cities, such as Beijing, Tianjin and Shanghai; the remaining 136 were from less-developed inland cities. Fewer than 40% of the respondents reported to have attended workshops or training programmes about teaching speaking. In order to deepen our understanding of data elicited through the questionnaire survey, volunteer questionnaire respondents were invited to participate in a semi-structured, face-to-face interview following the completion of the questionnaire. In the end, 30 teachers agreed to be interviewed. To help the teachers feel more at ease, the interviews were conducted by the first author in Putonghua, which was their common

mother tongue. The interviews were audio-taped with the consent of participants and later transcribed and translated by the first author. We also invited a doctorate degree holder who is effectively proficient in both Chinese and English to check a number of transcripts and translation. A 95% rate of agreement was achieved.

Data analysis

The coding and analysis of responses to open-ended questions and interview transcripts were conducted with the qualitative data analysis software package Nvivo 8. Initial categories for analysis of teachers' difficulties were derived from the literature which identified challenges such as limited instruction time, large class sizes, students' lack of motivation for developing communicative skills, resistance to oral participation, uneven English proficiency and various development needs, rising expectations from students and parents, a shortage of teaching resources and a lack of effective and efficient assessment instruments (Peng 2007; Wen 1999; Wu 2001; Yu 2001; Zheng and Davison 2008). Similar concerns were also reported in a study in South Korea by Li (1998) who examined 18 secondary school teachers' perceived difficulties in adopting communicative language teaching. Meanwhile, measures were taken to ensure that the coding categories were data-led rather than predetermined or constrained by previous research (Dörnyei 2007). We repeatedly read through the questionnaire responses and the interview transcripts and looked for patterns. Some of the initial categories fitted in well with the data and were therefore retained, for example, large class sizes. Some were dropped as they were not found in the data, such as a lack of effective and efficient assessment instruments. Some were subsumed under broader categories. Through iterative interaction with the data, we identified

and refined the categories. These categories were then re-examined in view of the research questions and our combined knowledge of the existing literature.

Findings

The open-ended questions in the survey invited teachers' opinion on the difficulties they encountered when teaching oral English. Several sources of difficulties were identified from the 331 responses, which included the teacher (difficulty in developing students' motivation, inadequate knowledge of planning and implementing effective oral activities, lack of strategies to balance students' needs, and low self-efficacy with respect to their own language proficiency), the students (inactive participation, and low English proficiency), and the context (lack of conducive environments, large class sizes, limited teaching resources, and insufficient teaching time). Analyses of the interviews yielded sources of difficulties that were largely consistent with those identified in the questionnaire responses. The difficulties reported by teachers in their questionnaire and interview responses are integrated and presented in Table 1. In order to obtain further insights into the question, views expressed during the interviews were drawn to interpret and discuss the findings from the questionnaire data.

Table 1. Difficulties in oral English instruction reported by university EFL teachers (*n* = 331)

Sources of difficulty	Difficulty	Number of respondents who reported the difficulty	Total
The teacher	Developing students' motivation	57	208
	Low self-efficacy	52	
	Planning oral activities	38	
	Implementing oral activities	33	
	Balancing students' needs	28	
The students	Inactive participation	163	203
	Low English proficiency	40	

The context	Lack of conducive environments	51	170
	Limited teaching resources	43	
	Large class sizes	41	
	Insufficient teaching time	35	

The teacher as a source of difficulty

Teachers are the most reported source of difficulty. As is shown in Table 1, 208 out of 331 respondents express that the difficulties originate in their deficient language competence and inadequate pedagogical knowledge to plan and implement effective oral activities, to motivate students' participation, and to balance diverse development needs. As non-native speakers of English, many teachers believe that their knowledge of English is inadequate and were concerned about their low self-efficacy:

I don't have good oral English proficiency. Sometimes I can't express exactly what I mean and I can't judge whether students express themselves in the proper way or not. (T1)

I don't have a sound knowledge base of teaching oral English in terms of the construct of oral English, theories underlying teaching, methods choice in oral English instruction, etc. I think I will still rely heavily on my learning experience as student. (T2)

During classroom teaching, teachers find it very challenging to motivate students to engage actively in oral English activities:

It's quite difficult to motivate students to speak. And even in class, when some students don't actively participate in group discussion, I am lacking in skills on how to offer enough motivation to them. (T3)

Some respondents reveal the difficulty in choosing appropriate topics or planning effective tasks that arouse students' interest and match their language proficiency levels:

I am puzzled with the planning of effective tasks and motivating the students. Some of the tasks are only interesting but not effective, which the students find childish. (T4)

Even if teachers have planned a task with great efforts, carrying it out can be very demanding. Large class sizes, limited teaching time and students' low proficiency are all obstacles to the successful implementation of oral English tasks:

I don't know how to organize students' activities within a class as large as 90 students. (T5)

As for me, I find it difficult to arrange more complicated oral tasks due to students' (freshmen) limited vocabulary and communicative abilities. Say, I want to make them watch a video clip, brainstorm and debate immediately, but they have trouble understanding the materials well. Suppose I spend half a lesson to focus on the input, I wonder it is an oral English practice or an intensive reading course. As a result, I have to give up my plan of debating in class. (T6)

Some teachers also remark that it is difficult to strike a balance between students of different proficiency levels and development needs. They point out that students from developed regions often have a better command of oral English than their peers from less developed regions. They also observe differences in students' personalities and learning habits; some are active and enjoy group learning while others are introverted and prefer self-learning.

I feel that students are on different levels in spoken English, which is quite difficult to balance the development needs for them all. I wonder how to encourage the students of poor English to get involved and make some solid progress, and at the same time, help the few students who have a good command of oral English make more progress. (T7)

Some students are too shy or diffident to voice their ideas in class while others might be too active. It's difficult to make every student have equal chance to take part in the activities. (T8)

The student as a source of difficulty

More than 60% of the respondents report that students' inactive participation and low English proficiency pose a challenge to the teaching of oral English.

Around half of the respondents think their students are reluctant to engage in speaking activities. Teachers feel that some students are too shy to voice their opinions in class. Some are unwilling to express themselves for fear of making mistakes. Besides, most students attach little importance to speaking because it is not required in the exams. They do not show much enthusiasm for speaking activities in class, let alone spend some time after class to promote their oral English proficiency.

Some students appear to be reluctant to open their mouth; they'd like to keep their ideas reserved. In my eye, they are shy, fear of making mistakes especially when they are not familiar with the topics. (T9)

One of the obstacles is students' motivation to speak because Chinese education is for the most part exam-oriented. Many students only focused on written exam without paying much attention to improving their oral English. (T10)

Some respondents believe students' low English proficiency is also a hindrance to the teaching and learning of oral English. Many students cannot express themselves in English due to their small vocabulary and poor grammar. Some even feel ashamed to speak because the strong accent in their pronunciation sometimes causes unintelligibility.

Many students have different problems on pronunciation, vocabulary or grammar which bother them a lot. (T11)

Students' limited vocabulary and poor grammatical knowledge lead to their inability to express themselves. (T12)

The context as a source of difficulty

More than half of the respondents think that some contextual constraints prevent them from conducting effective oral English instructions, including lack of conducive language learning and teaching environment, limited teaching resources, large class sizes and insufficient teaching time.

Many respondents complain about the lack of an authentic language environment in the Chinese EFL context. There is little need for using English in daily communication. In addition, oral English is not given adequate attention in the syllabus and the testing system and this gives rise to a negative backwash effect on oral English teaching.

Oral English attracts little attention in China. There is no English environment in China. English is not a second language, but a foreign language here. The major aim of learning English is to pass CET-4. Apart from in class, few students can get an opportunity to practise their oral English. And even in class, not all students could get a chance to speak. (T13)

Few students have experiences to speak English outside classrooms, for example, to communicate with native speakers, and in some medium-sized cities like ours people just can't see such a need to learn oral English. (T14)

No clear syllabus to follow. I was asked to concentrate on vocabulary teaching, grammar teaching, reading teaching, etc, but not speaking. (T15)

Lack of resources is identified as another barrier to teachers' attempts to carry out the teaching of oral English. Many teachers are not satisfied with the textbooks which they believe are outdated and somewhat useless for classroom teaching. Even if they find some authentic materials in addition to the textbook, for example, some video/audio programmes produced by native speakers of English, they do not have the facility to use them in class. In many cases, teachers could not get access to multi-media equipment in their classroom.

The textbook is not up-to-date. And the teaching facility and teaching material cannot meet my teaching demands. In oral English class, I still depend only on the teaching material I have been given. It is not easy for me to use the authentic material, not because I can't find it, but there is no equipment for me to use the material effectively. (T16)

Another challenge emerging from the teaching context is the large number of students in class with 40 to 60 students being the norm. But in some universities, the number could be as high as 100. Large class sizes have a direct impact on the amount of time individual students have to get involved in the activities and lower the effectiveness of these activities. They also hinder communication between students and teachers.

There are more than 60 students in my class, so it's difficult for me to organize classroom activities. Students had rare opportunities to practise speaking English. (T17)

Many respondents also feel the difficulty is caused by the insufficient teaching time being allocated for oral English instruction. Most of curriculum time is spent on reading, writing and listening, all of which are required in the exams. Oral English is always put at the bottom of the teachers' priority list and teachers say they often have to neglect oral English activities because they cannot afford the time.

The most difficult part is the limited time we have in teaching oral English. We usually put listening and speaking together, and listening tasks are usually time-consuming. We do not even have enough time to practise their listening and writing abilities, not to say oral English. (T18)

Less time allocated to teaching oral English in the curriculum. More attention has been put on passing CET4/6. (T19)

A demand for teacher training programmes

In the semi-structured interviews, 30 teachers were asked to identify what kind of training programmes were needed to support oral English instruction. About 28 teachers mentioned that they desperately needed some training on teaching methods to increase their pedagogical knowledge for teaching speaking:

I think training on teaching methodology is very important. I want to improve their oral English, but I don't know how to do it. I sometimes ask my students to give a speech or do a role play, but in the end it became a mess. I think I do need some guidance about the methods to carry out the activities effectively. (T 20)

Twenty-two teachers called for training programmes that can improve their own oral English proficiency:

Frankly speaking, I don't have much confidence about my own oral English. I don't have a British or American accent, and I am not sure about the expressions I use. I even don't know whether they sound native or Chinglish. So I think we need some training to improve teachers' proficiency first. (T21)

Ten teachers cited that the best way to increase teachers' knowledge about oral English and oral English teaching is to give teachers the opportunity to participate in programmes in English-speaking countries:

I think we should have more chance to go overseas, for example, England, America, Canada, etc. Therefore, we can be immersed with authentic language input, and our oral English would definitely improve. We can also bring their teaching methods back to our teaching contexts. (T22)

Discussion

These findings reveal that one of the biggest challenges to oral English teaching in China is the teachers' low self-efficacy with regard to their oral English proficiency. Liu (2007) posits that EFL teachers often suffer from an inferiority complex because they are never able to achieve the level of linguistic proficiency that is so valued in their profession, such as the ability to speak with a native-speaker accent. Previous research has found that teachers' self-efficacy beliefs affect their instructional behaviours in many ways, including the effort they invest in teaching, and the goals

and challenges they set up for themselves and for their students (Chacon 2005; Knoblauch and Hoy 2008; Tschannen-Moran and Hoy 2001). As Pajares (1996, 544) states, '[p]eople engage in tasks in which they feel competent and confident and avoid those in which they do not'. This may have adequately addressed the case for most teachers involved in this study. Although the teachers generally feel that they are competent in English grammar, reading and writing, they are not confident about their abilities in speaking. As non-native English-speaking teachers in an EFL context, most of them are not familiar with the authentic, natural oral English that native speakers use in real-world conversations. They report that their feeling of inadequacy prevents them from conducting oral English instruction in their classrooms ('I am comfortable with grammar, reading and writing, but my oral English is not good. I don't want to teach oral English because I don't want to misguide my students'). Some of them assume that native speakers are the ideal candidates for teaching oral English. Subsequently, they even question their own worth to the profession ('I'm worried that my students cannot improve their oral English under the instruction of a non-native speaker like me.'). Such perceptions of low self-efficacy are clearly an issue for many teachers, and it may not be unique to teachers in China alone. Furthermore, such fears may not be rational, and cannot be fully justified in the age where English is taught and used as an international language. Nevertheless, it is a problem that besets many teachers and should be addressed appropriately in language teacher training programmes.

The challenges in China are compounded by the fact that university EFL teachers have generally not been trained for the profession (Wu 2001). Most teachers are graduates from the English department in universities who received little or no training on pedagogy, as there is no systematic pre-service training in China. Teachers

therefore often begin their career feeling unprepared for the task ahead of them. This lack of a theoretical basis and pedagogical knowledge threatens teachers' self-confidence and discourages them from teaching oral skills. Having few strategies at their disposal, they primarily resort to their own learning experiences (as stated by T2). When these learning experiences were not satisfactory, they felt frustrated and in most cases gave it up ('I can't help, so just let it be. My teachers never taught us oral English, I learned it all by myself, so maybe my students can practice it by themselves as well'). However, the frustration does not seem to be unique to novice teachers. Teachers reveal that even after years in the profession, their knowledge about oral English instruction is 'obscure and fragmented' and their teaching is mostly driven 'by intuition'. They are in need of theories that 'guide their teaching' so as to help students improve oral English proficiency in a principled and effective way. Opportunities for in-service training, however, are minimal. Of the 30 interviewees, only five who have taught English for more than eight years had attended in-service training programmes. Without proper training and support, teachers will inevitably feel inadequate and unprepared to teach oral skills.

Clearly, a discrepancy exists between what teachers need and what EFL contexts, such as China, can afford. In light of the escalating demand for oral English instruction in EFL countries, however, it is well worth the effort of policy makers and administrators to work at helping teachers overcome some of these challenges, thereby enhancing the teaching of English in the country. Some recommendations are listed next.

First, teachers should be given adequate training and support. Pre-service training programmes are needed to prepare teachers with linguistic and pedagogical knowledge. There should be continual support for teachers' professional

development. through in-service teacher education programmes. As Wu (2001, 193) recommends, suitable models for the development of EFL teachers in China should promote: (1) English proficiency levels; (2) knowledge about language in general, English in particular, and language learning; and (3) language teaching philosophies and methodology. It is widely acknowledged that speaking has been a weakness of English teachers in China and many other EFL countries (Chacon 2005; Li 1998; Liu and Dai 2003); therefore, these programmes should not only provide teachers with language skills and pedagogical knowledge in grammar, reading, and writing but also give emphasis to listening and speaking, so that teachers can develop a strong sense of self-efficacy in their all-round efforts at helping students develop English competence.

In addition, students should be more personally engaged in learning oral English. Having been accustomed to a teacher-centred way of learning from their early education, most Chinese students tend to shy away from classroom participation (Cortazzi and Jin 1996; Peng 2007). Many of them consider speaking as a face-threatening task, thus they prefer listening to the teachers to expressing their own opinions. However, if they are to foster their competence in speaking, they need to actively engage in oral practices in and out of class. They can be exposed to authentic language input through movies, TV dramas and radio programmes produced by native speakers of English. Seeing how native speakers converse with each other may help them set realistic expectations, boost their interest in learning and reduce their anxiety in speaking.

In light of the value attached to the ability to use English in the era of globalization, more importance should be given to speaking, an aspect that has received the least systematic teaching in many language curricula (Goh 2007).

Therefore, it is important therefore that curriculum designers develop an effective syllabus for oral English instruction. While such attempts are already underway in China, adequate instructional time must also be allocated to the teaching of it. There could also be more resources invested into teaching and learning facilities such as audio-video laboratories, multimedia equipment as well as personal electronic devices that make learning portable. In the mean time, more research is required to develop textbooks and teaching materials that are relevant to the Chinese EFL contexts. It is also important that the university give due recognition to both teaching and research so that teachers do not have to struggle between 'the limited working time available and the primacy of research when work had to be prioritised' (Jauhiainen, Jauhiainen, and Laiho 2009).

Last, but not least, testing and assessment that to a great extent determine the goals and behaviours of teaching and learning should give due attention to speaking (Wu 2001). In China, English tests, such as CET4 and CET6 still focus mainly on assessing students' abilities in reading, writing and listening. Although efforts have been made to introduce speaking to the testing system, it is only an optional test, which leads to a misconception that oral skills are less important than the other skills. Changes must be made before oral English teaching can be improved.

Conclusion

Teachers in EFL countries such as China encounter many obstacles in their attempt to develop students' speaking competence. Apart from the external constraints from students and the contexts, such as students' resistance to oral participation, lack of authentic language environment, limited teaching resources, large class sizes and

insufficient instructional time, the biggest barrier appears to be the teachers themselves. Most teachers in our study reported low self-efficacy about their oral English proficiency and inadequate pedagogical knowledge for teaching oral skills. There is clearly a need for teacher training programmes to prepare teachers with adequate pedagogical knowledge and language competence to embark on their teaching career. This foundation should be further built upon through in-service professional development programmes. It is also important that these programmes help teachers raise the awareness about varieties of English used around the world. With the increasing recognition of English as an international language, teachers can be helped to realise that speaking development does not necessarily focus on the native model of British or American English. Teachers in China, as well as non-native English-speaking teachers in other EFL countries, may find oral English teaching more realistic if they aim for global intelligibility rather than native-speaker accents.

In addition, training programmes should help teachers with enhancing learner motivation for oral English learning. At the same time, teachers should also learn how to employ activities that are popular with students in an effective way for the development of students' oral English abilities. In EFL contexts such as China, many teachers find themselves in a situation where authentic language environment is lacking. It is therefore important that teachers are facilitated with ways to move beyond these constraints. Because of the limited resources available, teachers need to explore and create opportunities for their students' to improve speaking in the best way possible. This is crucial given the current situation in which class sizes could be anywhere between 40 to 100.

As EFL countries share many characteristics in English teaching, for example, traditional teaching methods and large class sizes (Li 1998), teachers in other EFL

countries may also be facing similar difficulties in teaching oral English. This study, although focused on oral English teaching in China, may therefore have implications for other EFL countries as well.

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