

# Impact Factors for Difficulties in Oral English Learning

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**Abstract:** Oral English proficiency is a component of English learning. However, many learners face many challenges in oral learning. This paper systematically reviews relevant theories and empirical research to explore the manifestations and causes of difficulties in oral English learning. The research finds that oral difficulties are primarily reflected in insufficient language complexity, accuracy, and fluency. These difficulties not only hinder the accurate transmission of information but also reduce learners' confidence. The factors contributing to oral learning difficulties can be divided into subjective and objective aspects. To address these issues, this paper proposes several suggestions for improving, such as task repetition and creating a stress-free learning environment. The research provides valuable references for educators and learners, aiming to help learners overcome obstacles in oral learning and improve their oral English proficiency.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (2022 Edition) and the College English Teaching Guidelines (2022 Edition) in China emphasize the importance of English oral proficiency, stating that learners should be able to engage in meaningful communication in English. This ability is essential for meeting the needs of daily life, academic studies, and future work-related information exchange. However, English teaching is influenced by exam-oriented education, which tends to focus more on listening, reading and writing, resulting in relatively weak oral skills among students. So far, many scholars have studied and made researches on the causes of difficulties in oral English learning. They primarily categorized them into subjective factors such as language ability, psychological tension, anxiety, and lack of confidence, as well as objective factors such as language environment and teaching method. However, there is still a lack of comprehensive summary and organization of these factors.

Therefore, this paper reviews the development of research on oral English learning difficulties, organizes and summarizes relevant theories, and proposes suggestions to help overcome the oral learning difficulties of English learners.

## 2 REVIEW OF RELEVANT THEORIES

### 2.1 Definition, Development, and Classification of Oral Proficiency

Oral language is generally considered as a form of expression, a type of spoken language that is not based on written text. However, different scholars have different definitions of oral proficiency. At first, some scholars have raised communicative competence. It requires grammaticality and acceptability. Communicative competence can be separated into four aspects, which already reflect the characteristics of oral proficiency. Subsequently, some scholars have defined oral proficiency as the ability to engage in oral communication. Oral proficiency and communicative competence are interconnected. Some scholars divided oral proficiency into language form, language content, and communicative rules, indicating that language ability is a crucial component of oral proficiency (Wen, 2001). In summary, oral proficiency is an external manifestation of language ability.

### 2.2 Measurement of Oral Proficiency

China and Europe both have their own scales for measuring language proficiency: the China Standards of English (CSE) and the Common European

Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Both scales include measures for oral proficiency, which test language activities, language knowledge, and communicative strategies (Peng & Liu, 2024). The CEFR divides oral proficiency into six levels from A1 to C2, with each level evenly spaced according to Logit Number. Level A describes basic language use. Level B describes independent language use. Furthermore, Level C describes proficient language use. The CSE includes an oral expression scale covering six aspects which demonstrate logical use of spoken language in both daily and academic contexts, such as narration and argumentation. It is divided into nine levels, with each level corresponding to different educational stages in China. For example, CSE Level 4 roughly corresponds to the high school level.

### 3 REVIEW OF EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

#### 3.1 Manifestations of Oral Difficulties

For most language learners, oral language remains the most challenging part. Learners often encounter difficulties in oral use, and many scholars have conducted related research. Studies show that learners' problems are primarily concentrated on linguistic difficulties (Hosni, 2014). Complexity, accuracy, and fluency can be used as three dimensions to measure language ability, meaning that insufficient complexity, accuracy, and fluency can be seen as manifestations of oral difficulties (Peter, 2009).

One crucial part for oral proficiency is the correct use of language forms. Language forms include grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. Compared to native English speakers, English learners find it harder to master these aspects (Bygate, 2005). Common grammatical errors in oral English include mistakes in verb tenses, noun singular and plural forms, and fixed collocations (He & Gong, 2013). Additionally, the frequent use of prepositions in English often leads to prepositional errors in oral communication (Zhang & Ji, 2024). These grammatical errors significantly affect the accuracy of information and create a negative impression on listeners. Moreover, insufficient grammatical knowledge may cause students to avoid using complex structures, thereby affecting the complexity of oral language. English learners aged 9-12 often have limited vocabulary, relying on simple and

general words such as "good," "bad," "happy," and "sad," which prevent them from accurately expressing their thoughts with correct grammar. This results in incoherent, inaccurate, and incomplete sentences, especially in professional fields where their knowledge is even more limited (Chen, 2016). Vocabulary issues affect both the complexity and accuracy of oral language. Furthermore, many studies have found that English learners have noticeable pronunciation problems. For example, they have difficulty in distinguishing vowels and consonants, sentence stress, linking, and intonation (Jin, 2005). In addition, they confuse long and short vowels, such as /i:/ and /i/, which affects the accuracy of oral language. A survey of 948 university students in Shanghai found that 65% were still at a beginner level in controlling pronunciation and intonation, which may impact on oral fluency (Jin & Liu, 2015).

In addition to language performance, other manifestations include abnormal pauses, which affect oral fluency (Kang, 2023). Research shows that unfamiliarity with the language may lead to loads of passive psychological factors like nervousness and tension, causing learners to hesitate, pause excessively, and over-correct when using oral language (Kang, 2023). Nervousness and fear can affect the proficiency of oral language use, leading to insufficient fluency.

The above theories and research generally reflect that accuracy and fluency are the most important criteria for evaluating oral proficiency, yet most English learners fail to meet these two requirements.

#### 3.2 Factors Contributing to Difficulties In Oral Learning

Scholars both in China and abroad have studied the factors influencing difficulties in English oral learning and found that subjective factors such as learners' psychological factors, language ability, native language, learning motivation, and learning emotions all affected oral English learning. At the same time, objective factors such as lack of language environment, cultural differences, limited opportunities for oral practice, foreign language class settings, foreign language teaching policies, and teachers' teaching levels also contribute to difficulties in English oral learning.

#### 3.3 Subjective Factors

There are many factors contributing to oral difficulties, with language ability being the most common. Insufficient vocabulary is a major factor

causing difficulties between English learners (Liu & Jackson, 2008). In addition to vocabulary issues, grammar and pronunciation are also stumbling blocks. Some studies suggest that 90% of English learners make grammatical errors in oral communication. While other studies show a lower error rate of 69% (Li & Wang, 2022). However, it still indicated that most learners encounter grammatical issues in oral communication. Pronunciation problems include sentence stress, linking, plosives, unclear phrasing, and intonation (Jin, 2005). For example, native Chinese speakers tend to pronounce each syllable with equal duration and stress, whereas English uses stress as a timing unit, emphasizing sentence stress and creating a strong rhythmic alternation between stressed and unstressed syllables. This makes it difficult for students to grasp, which is not only a pronunciation issue but also a problem caused by their native language (Wang & Tan, 2023). Some studies indicate that learners often struggle to find appropriate vocabulary and construct sentences, which lead to an undesired and an inability to speak (Hosni, 2014).

Other scholars argue that the source of oral difficulties for English learners lies more in psychological factors than in language ability (Amoah & Yeboah, 2021). Some studies consistently show that the root cause of oral learning difficulties lies in psychological factors including anxiety and unconfident. These factors manifest as inhibition, causing students to hesitate, worry about making mistakes, fear criticism, and avoid attention (Mei & Masoumeh, 2017). As a result, they choose to remain silent to avoid mistakes, criticism, and ridicule. In addition to learners' lack of confidence in their English proficiency, comparisons with peers and the potential for passive evaluations also negatively impact oral English (Dil, 2009).

Early research suggested that learning motivation affects oral learning. A lack of motivation may hinder learners from speaking in class or participating in discussions (Babu, 2010). However, recent studies indicate that learning motivation has a minimal impact on oral learning. Despite having strong learning motivation, many learners still face oral difficulties (Amoah & Yeboah, 2021).

### 3.4 Objective Factors

Some scholars have found that the environment is a major factor, including limited oral environments, learners' passivity, large class sizes, and mixed learner abilities (Mahbub & Hadina, 2021). O'Malley argues that "only by placing language learners in a

certain context can students acquire appropriate language forms." The environment is crucial for language learning and for effective oral output. However, due to varying English proficiency levels among learners in the class, teachers use native language most of the time in English classes. Using mother tongue may cause an adverse impact on students' oral learning (Yao, 2002). Additionally, in large classes, only one student can speak at a time, resulting in limited speaking opportunities for each student. Some students are very active throughout the class, while others rarely or never speak (Mei & Masoumeh, 2017). Moreover, most English classes are teacher-centered, with teacher talking for about 70% or even 90% of class time, so many learners report that it is not common to speak English outside the classroom (Gan, 2013). With limited chances for oral practice in school and daily routine, oral learning becomes difficult, and oral proficiency is hard to improve. Besides the classes, teachers also play a vital role in oral learning. A lack of effective teaching methods is a major factor contributing to students' oral learning difficulties (Zhou, 2016). A survey of 331 teachers found that 208 reported insufficient oral skills and teaching knowledge, making it difficult to cultivate learners' oral skills (Chen & Goh, 2011). Students believe that teachers should not neglect cultural issues in teaching. Studies show that over half of learners view cultural differences in thinking as the biggest obstacle to English oral learning (Wei & Zhang, 2013). Students often think in their native language and then translate their thoughts into English when speaking. Most students believe that teaching Western culture is essential and should be strengthened.

## 4 SUGGESTIONS

After reviewing relevant research, there are some shortcomings: different studies have distinct results. Many conclusions are not universal, so it is necessary to consider adding research conditions and adjusting research standards. Most studies focus on students, particularly university students in China, with relatively few studies on other groups such as international students or social elites who need to use English in their work. Many studies do not propose improvement strategies based on their findings or lack evidence to prove the effectiveness of their suggestions.

To improve English oral proficiency and address oral learning difficulties, certain strategies should be adopted. Researchers have found that repetition can

enhance oral fluency and accuracy. The more opportunities for repetition, the improvement in fluency and accuracy will be more distinct (Bygate, 2013). Repetition of the same task promotes both fluency and accuracy. While in different tasks, it only improves fluency. But none of them has a significant effect on complexity (Gass, Mackey, Alvarez - Torres, Fernández - García, 1999). Although repetition is an effective strategy, monotonous tasks may reduce students' passion and have little impact on their oral learning. Some researchers believe that through self-cognition and independent learning, finding the most suitable learning method can help overcome the impact of psychological problems, learning motivation, teaching methods and other difficulties (Rusli, Yunus, & Hashim, 2018). Empirical research shows that a comprehensive correction method involving self-reflection, peer evaluation, and teacher correction can improve students' oral learning ability, addressing issues such as grammatical errors, vocabulary misuse, excessive pauses, and filler words (Mu, 2010). Psychological factors, being significant influences on oral learning, should be given attention. Scholars both in China and abroad agree that creating a stress-free learning environment can greatly alleviate students' anxiety, nervousness, and lack of confidence. Research on group interactions has found that group oral communication, especially among familiar classmates, is closer to real-life conversations and can significantly help students overcome their reluctance to speak and can greatly improve oral proficiency and confidence (Bygate, 2005). Additionally, online communication platforms can provide low-skilled students with a space to practice language skills (Abu Bakar, Latiff, & Hamat, 2017). Students do not need to worry about being seen by other students or teachers, fearing making mistakes, or feeling shy, while also increasing opportunities for oral practice.

## 5 CONCLUSION

In summary, this paper reviews the development of research on English oral learning difficulties, organizes and summarizes the manifestations of these difficulties, and identifies the subjective and objective factors contributing to them. It also proposes targeted improvement suggestions. English oral learning difficulties are primarily reflected in insufficient complexity, accuracy, and fluency, influenced by learners' language ability, psychological factors, learning motivation, language environment, native language, teaching policies, and teachers' teaching

levels. These factors are intertwined and collectively affect learners' improvement in English oral proficiency.

This paper deepens the understanding of English oral learning difficulties through reviewing and summarizing, providing valuable references for educators and learners. By clarifying the difficulties and their causes, educators can adjust teaching strategies more effectively, and learners can overcome their shortcomings more consciously to improve their oral English proficiency.

Future research should continue to explore oral English learning difficulties, develop more effective teaching strategies and learning methods, and contribute to the development of English oral education. At the same time, educators should attach more importance on individual differences among learners, adopting tailored teaching approaches to provide the most suitable learning environments and resources for each learner.

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