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Chinese business English undergraduates' speaking proficiency: a developed-module effect

Ke Hu[1], Asmaa AlSaqqaf[2]
[1]Faculty of Psychology and Education, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Kinabalu City, Malaysia
[2]Centre for the Promotion of Knowledge and Language Learning (PPIB), Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Kinabalu City, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

The rapid growth of English in the world has resulted in its vital role in diverse domains. However, the outcomes of learners' speaking skills remain controversial. The objective of the study was to investigate the effect of the developed teaching speaking module on the speaking proficiency of 96 Chinese English as a foreign language (EFL) business English undergraduates at the target applied university in China. This module integrates content-based instruction (CBI) and a three-stage skill development approach, namely awareness-raising, appropriation, and autonomy (3As approach). A quantitative study with a pretest and posttest quasi-experiment design was carried out at an applied university within an interventional period of 10 weeks, employing pretests and posttests as data collection tools. The quantitative data were analyzed using the SPSS 29 version suggesting that this teaching-speaking module yields significantly improved speaking proficiency among Chinese EFL undergraduates in business English than the traditional classroom has done. These findings shed a favorable light on the development of curriculum and instruction for teaching English for specific purposes (ESP) and the education of English majors in China.

Corresponding Author:

Asmaa AlSaqqaf
Centre for the Promotion of Knowledge and Language Learning (PPIB), Universiti Malaysia Sabah
UMS Street, 88400 Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia
Email: asma3030@ums.edu.my

1. INTRODUCTION

In the early of 21st century, China was admitted to the World Trade Organization (WTO), which was seen as one of the greatest witnesses for China's participation in the global economy [1]. The ability to handle various tasks in cross-cultural communication using English proficiently is deemed crucial due to its reputable status worldwide. The subsequent phase was marked by educational reforms aimed at the internationalization of higher education in China. This was primarily manifested in the passive reception of foreign language instruction and the integration of English into the national curriculum [2]. By recognizing its importance, different initiatives have been taken by China's Ministry of Education to ensure that English language education represents the status in English as a foreign language (EFL) education across all schooling levels [3]. According to the latest release of the English proficiency index by English first [4], China was ranked 82nd among 113 countries and regions for English skills, indicating a low language proficiency. The challenges faced by EFL learners to correctly use a second language (L2), or foreign language is indeed daunting, given the interweaving of various factors during learning. Speaking proficiency is particularly complex as it is not only a cognitive skill but also a social skill [5], [6]. It requires the absorption and expression of thoughts in speech flow, which needs to be both meaningful and contextually

appropriate. In other words, speaking involves not only the accurate use of vocabulary and grammar, but also the effective delivery of ideas in a manner that resonates with the counterpart's understanding and expectations in the real time. The improvement of teaching quality of speaking proficiency is viewed as an important task in the field of foreign language education [7]. Consequently, teaching models that are beneficial to the enhancement of teaching quality are continually being sought by the foreign language education community. In conclusion, the overall situation strongly indicates the need for more assistance and support to supplement the current English teaching methods, to improve the speaking proficiency of EFL undergraduates in Chinese universities.

Due to these, the main objective of the study was to investigate the effect of the developed teaching speaking module on the speaking proficiency of Chinese EFL business English undergraduates at the target applied university in China. Given that, the research question of this study is proposed as follows: research question: does the developed teaching-speaking module help improve the speaking proficiency scores among EFL business English undergraduates at a private university in China? Additionally, two corresponding hypotheses are also formed: i) there is no significant difference in the mean score of the speaking-proficiency pretest between the experimental and the control group among EFL business English undergraduates at a private university in China (H_1) and ii) there is a significant difference in the mean score of the speaking-proficiency pretest and post-test in the experimental group among EFL business English undergraduates at a private university in China (H_2).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews relevant literature. It interprets existing literature concerning trendy issues in the field to assist in building consistency in knowledge and the relevancy of extant documents. Thus, the following discusses English for specific purposes (ESP) in China, speaking proficiency, and the theoretical framework of the study.

2.1. English for specific purposes in China and business English program

ESP is a short form for ESP, which differs from English for general purposes (EGP). It could be developed to meet the demands of the internationalization of higher education. Its development has attracted attention from China's Ministry of Education, and English for cross-cultural interaction and communication urged the emergence of business English, thereby soon becoming an independent discipline for Chinese undergraduates in universities and colleges, but the challenges have always come along with its curriculum reform [8], [9]. The existing textbooks developed for Chinese ESP education are characterized by bilingual educational materials, rather than the essence of ESP. They failed to address the needs of stakeholders, and teaching theories, and to create authentic ESP materials for users in nature [10]. It is confirmed that a dearth of studies on how Asian student needs are met by ESP materials development, despite the growth of ESP courses in the Asian region is popular [11]. In the field of ESP research in China, the prevailing focus has been non-empirical. However, since 2011, there has been a noticeable increase in the number of empirical studies [12], [13]. This shift toward empirical research reflects a growing interest in evidence-based approaches to understanding and enhancing ESP practices in the Chinese context. Previous research on ESP practice in China, particularly in the context of business English, has yielded valuable insights into the current state and preliminary analyses within the field [14]. However, a notable gap is identified that most of these studies have not thoroughly explored comprehensive evaluation for curriculum and instructional development in business English. Specifically, the use of quantitative analysis to assess the effectiveness of teaching speaking modules for business English undergraduates remains limited. Embarking on such a study can contribute significantly to the empirical literature on business English education by shedding light on effective pedagogical approaches and enhancing language learning outcomes.

2.2. Students' English language proficiency

In the past few decades, the Chinese government has made great efforts to promote English education. English has been taught as a compulsory subject since primary school, and it is one of the three required subjects in the national matriculation examination. English is also a required course for all college students, regardless of their major [15]. In college, non-English majors are assessed for their English proficiency by the college English test (CET) 4 or 6, while English majors are assessed by the test of English majors (TEM) 4 or 8 [16]. In 2018, the Chinese Ministry of Education released the China standards of English ability (CSE), which is divided into three stages and nine levels. English majors are expected to reach CSE level 6 by their sophomore year, and CSE level 7 by graduation. This scale is aligned with international English proficiency scales, such as the common European framework of reference for languages (CEFR), which are equivalent to B2 and C1 levels, respectively as seen in Figure 1 [17], [18].

In this study, the average scores of the research participants from both the experimental group and control group on the CET 4 were 435.5 and 442.1, respectively. These scores are above the passing score of 425, and there was no significant difference between the two groups. This suggests that the participants had similar English proficiency levels. However, the aforementioned tests focus on listening, reading, writing, and translation skills, and neglect speaking skills. Therefore, it is necessary to focus on speaking skills, even if the participants have similar proficiency levels. According to previous research, Chinese EFL learners are expected to be able to travel to English-speaking countries as tourists, engage in small talk with others, and understand simple emails at workplaces [4]. However, Chinese EFL undergraduates struggle with generating ideas, language expression, and delivery [19], [20]. In addition to these, the role of cross-cultural issues, learning strategies, and linguistic causes in speaking difficulties for learning performance and achievement [21]. Given that, the focus of the study is placed on Chinese EFL business English undergraduates in oral business English (OBE) courses.

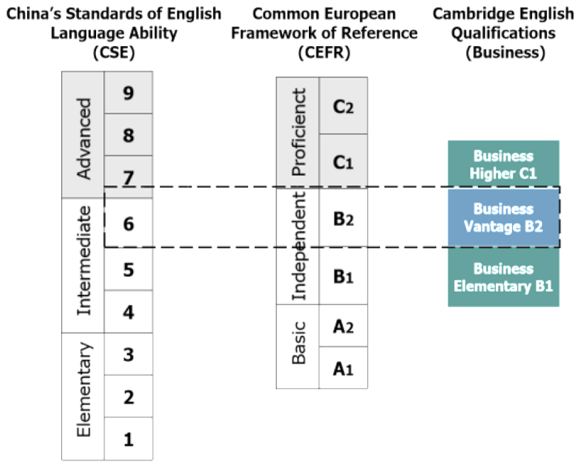

Figure 1. Aligned CSE to CEFR and Cambridge English qualification (CEQ) for the determination of speaking proficiency

2.3. Theoretical framework

Various studies of L2 acquisition suggest that instructional interventions can potentially impact speaking proficiency [22], [23]. Due to the unique demands of business English programs for Chinese EFL undergraduates, it is crucial to cultivate individuals with both a strong content foundation and linguistic competence. Consequently, content-based instruction (CBI) emerges as an optimal approach for designing and developing a teaching speaking module for this target audience. The effectiveness of CBI stems from its rationale to foster increased relevance and motivation, provide authentic language exposure for real-world experiences, and enhance content knowledge and critical thinking skills, which results from the learning theories of communicative language teaching (CLT) and comprehensible input [24], [25]. It is confirmed by Pu and Lu [26] that the use of CBI is paving a new way by integrating content-based courses and skill-based courses, learning to a change in the concept of curriculum development, and making the curriculum development, textbook writing, as well as the teaching of English major education in China more practical. Furthermore, mastering speaking proficiency necessitates a multifaceted process that requires not only cognitive abilities but also sociocultural skills. Considering this, Thornbury's three-stage approach to teaching speaking aligns with the notion [27]. This approach aims to cultivate speaking proficiency through three phases: awareness-raising, appropriation, and autonomy (3As approach). Cognitivism is emphasized in the awareness-raising and autonomy stages, while a sociocultural perspective is employed to guide learners in appropriating the language. The integration of CBI and the 3As approach can be particularly beneficial in equipping students with the English language skills they need to thrive in their chosen field.

3. METHOD

The following section describes the methodology of the study. It includes the research approach and design, sampling technique, instrument, and data collection procedures. It is believed that the type of research could determine the research approach and its design, which should underpin the research and data collection methods to achieve the objectives of the study.

3.1. Research approach and design

This study adopted a quantitative approach, using a pretest and posttest quasi-experimental design to examine the causal relationship between the independent variable (a developed teaching speaking module using authentic materials) and the dependent variable (speaking performance) [28]. Cohen *et al*. [29] explained quasi-experimental research allows for the evaluation of interventions in real educational settings through the administration of experimental and control groups, despite constraints on random assignment. The results obtained from the pretest and posttest of both experimental and control groups were compared to assess the effectiveness of the developed teaching speaking module on participants' speaking proficiency and to measure the extent of change resulting from the intervention.

3.2. Sampling technique and participants

The participants in this study were two intact classes of second-year business English undergraduates from the 2021 batch at the target applied university using a purposive sampling technique [30]. However, both classes were randomly assigned by tossing a coin. As noted by Schneider and Rohmann [31], employing a smaller sample size is the common practice in quasi-experimental studies. For example, studies conducted by [32], [33], they respectively employed 90 students and 36 students in educational studies, focusing on the potential effects of intervention. In this study, one class with 48 students was designated as the experimental group, while the other served as the control group with an equivalent number. These 96 participants shared many similarities. For instance, they were admitted to the university through the national matriculation examination, which had similar admission requirements for all. Furthermore, they all majored in Business English with similar demographics (e.g., prior educational background), and both classes were guided by the same professional training plan, and there was hardly any difference in terms of the facilities available on campus. This uniformity across various factors ensured a fair and balanced experiment.

3.3. Instruments and data collection

The study was conducted over 10 weeks, with participation from both experimental and control groups. Each session held once a week lasted for 110 minutes, excluding a 10-minute break, resulting in approximately 18.3 hours of experiential learning. The control group followed the regular instruction schedule for OBE, utilizing only the prescribed textbook and exposing it to the traditional content with the pedagogical model of presentation, practice, and production (PPP). On the other hand, the experimental group was exposed to an intervention that incorporated the CBI and 3As approach with authentic materials aligned with the CEFR B2 level (i.e., coined as CB3As teaching speaking module, thereafter, teaching speaking module). This intervention embedded local values, such as promoting Chinese norms globally, and trending topics like cyber celebrities in e-commerce, to make the content more relatable to the participants. The content knowledge was designed and developed following the themes of the prescribed textbook used by the control group, adhering to the requirements of the professional training plan for business English at the target university. This teaching speaking module consists of 10 units, with 3 units focusing on oral strategies to help students understand the 3As approach. The remaining 7 units cover a variety of business topics, including company competition, company strategy, management styles, market development, e-commerce, and logistics. Each unit is equipped with teaching materials such as handouts, worksheets, and assignments. The research was carried out in two intact classes, with the researcher acting as a facilitative teacher to implement the intervention. Both pretest and posttest were utilized as data collection instruments. The speaking component of the Business English Certificate (BEC), which originates from the reputed Cambridge English assessment and is recognized for its reliability and validity in China, was employed [34]. Pretest and posttest for the study were conducted at the beginning and end of the second semester of the 2023-2024 academic year, respectively. Both speaking tests used before and after the intervention were adapted from BEC Vantage B2, including an interview, a long turn, and a collaborative task. The tests were designed to be equivalent in difficulty to China's CSE 6 and CEFR B2 on an international scale. During the tests, participants were encouraged to use English for problem-solving in given business scenarios. In this study, the speaking performance of each candidate was rated by two certified examiners of BEC, they were either assigned to give marks in terms of linguistic aspects (20 points) or overall achievement (5 points) to make up for a total score of 25 points. The belief is that bringing in certified examiners could maintain professionalism in assessment and increase the credibility of speaking outcomes.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In answering the proposed research question and its corresponding hypotheses, pretest and posttest were conducted for data collection. Given that, business English speaking proficiency among the experimental and control groups was measured to compare the effect of the developed teaching speaking

module on Chinese EFL business English undergraduates' speaking proficiency with regular instructions guided by the PPP model empirically. The following tables show the performance of the experimental group and the control group derived from the results of independent samples and samples paired t-tests by SPSS version 29.

4.1. Results of t-test analysis on speaking proficiency among the control and experimental groups

Table 1 reveals the results of an independent samples test, indicating no statistically significant difference in pretest scores between the experimental and control groups (p=0.751>0.05). This suggests that the 96 participants from both groups shared similar backgrounds before the intervention, leading to the acceptance of H1. The 95% confidence interval for the difference (including zero: -0.437 to 0.604) further supports this finding [35].

Table 1. Independent samples t-test of the speaking scores of experimental and control groups

Parameter		Levene's test for equality of variances		T-test for equality of means				
		F	Sig.	t	df	Significance Two-sided p	95% confidence interval of the difference Lower	Upper
Pretest	EVA	.211	.647	.318	94	.751	-.437	.604
	EVNA			.318	91.6	.751	-.437	.604

*Equal variance assumed (EVA), equal variances not assumed (EVNA)

Table 2 shows the group description statistics of the overall scores of OBE in the experimental and control groups. The mean score of the pretests in the experimental group is 12.38, while the mean score of the pretest in the control group is 12.29. The mean score of the experimental group (17.42) and the control group (12.92) in the posttest is higher than that in the pretest, indicating different extent of improvement in speaking proficiency.

Table 2. Group descriptive statistics of the speaking scores of experimental and control groups

Parameter	Tests	N	Mean	Std. deviation	Std. error
Experimental group	Pretest	48	12.38	1.362	.197
	Posttest	48	17.42	1.485	.214
Control group	Pretest	48	12.29	1.202	.174
	Posttest	48	12.92	1.069	.154

The use of a paired-sample t-test was conducted to evaluate the impact of the intervention on participants' speaking proficiency on both the pretest and posttest. There was a statistically significant improvement in speaking proficiency from the pretest (M=12.38, SD=1.362) to the posttest (M=17.42, SD=1.485) (Table 2), t (47)=-27.853, p<.001 (two-tailed) (see Table 3) in the experimental group. The mean increase in speaking proficiency after the intervention was 5.04 with a 95% confidence interval ranging from -5.406 to -4.678, indicating the acceptance of H2. Additionally, the control group also achieved a significant improvement in speaking proficiency from the pretest (M=12.29, SD=1.202) to the posttest (M=12.92, SD=1.069) (Table 2), t (47)=-5.31, p<.001 (two-tailed) (see Table 3) after regular instruction guided by PPP model. The mean increase in speaking proficiency was 0.63 with a 95% confidence interval ranging from -0.862 to -0.388.

These results indicate in Table 4 that there was a large effect size for the difference in the experimental between the pretest and posttest, with an effect size of |-4.020|(4.020>0.8). However, there was a medium effect size (0.5 to 0.8) for the difference in the control group between the pretest and posttest, with an effect size of 0.766 [36]. This suggests that the intervention using a developed teaching speaking module had a considerable positive impact on the speaking proficiency of the experimental group.

Table 3. Paired samples t-test of the speaking scores of experimental and control groups

Parameter	Paired differences					t	df	Significance Two-tailed p
	Mean	SD	SEM	95% confidence interval of the difference Lower	Upper			
Experimental group: pretest and post-test	-5.042	1.254	.181	-5.406	-4.678	-27.853	47	<.001
Control group: pretest and post-test	-.625	.815	.118	-.862	-.388	-5.310	47	<.001

*SD: Std. deviation; SEM: Std. error mean

Table 4. The effect size of the speaking scores of experimental and control groups

		Standardizer	Point estimate	95% confidence interval	
				Lower	Upper
Experimental group	Cohen's d	1.254	-4.020	-4.875	-3.159
Control group	Cohen's d	.815	-.766	-1.086	-.441

4.2. Discussion of the results

As indicated by the results, it is evidenced that combining the CBI and 3As approaches in developing a teaching speaking module can significantly improve undergraduates' speaking proficiency in the business field, which aligns with the expected results of Hu *et al*. [37]. Before the intervention, both groups of participants had similar learning backgrounds and experiences in learning, as well as they received similar teaching methods and materials, which may have contributed to their comparable speaking skills at the outset. These findings are consistent with previous studies [38]–[40]. Additionally, the effect size of the 10 weeks teaching intervention is 4.020, which has a considerable effect on participants' speaking proficiency in the OBE. Participants in the experimental group engaged in language performance practice within the designed interactive and communicative activities, strengthening their information exchange with classmates in pair and group work, thereby enhancing the effect of comprehensible input and creating real-world situations for enhanced learning output. This aligns with previous research studies [41]–[43].

In addition, teachers in the experimental group played a facilitative role in the teaching process, fostering a perception of rich and engaging classroom activities among students. This transformation compels teachers to face the identity change from imparting knowledge in traditional classrooms to facilitators, undoubtedly having a positive impact on forming EFL learners' learning autonomy [44], [45]. Besides that, it could be assumed that participants in the experimental group improved their speaking proficiency in OBE through learning via foreign language content. With these concerns, they have the opportunity and support to practice their knowledge and understanding of the subject in English. This can stimulate their motivation to learn and make them feel the importance of achieving goals in the classroom. However, enhanced speaking proficiency was also seen in the control group, yet not significantly. This may be attributed to the traditional teaching model of PPP used in the classroom, where teachers directly influence students through knowledge transmission, modelling, and classroom management, primarily assuming the dominant role in English language teaching (ELT) [46], [47]. In traditional teaching, the subject-based courses often get influenced by the preparation for related examinations. It is noteworthy that the domestic English proficiency tests are designed to assess students' English skills for general use. In contrast, the developed speaking teaching modules aim to enhance students' English proficiency in professional and specific content in OBE.

5. CONCLUSION

This study integrates the CBI and 3As approach into a teaching speaking module within the OBE course to investigate the impact of the module on the speaking proficiency of Chinese EFL business English undergraduates. Before the intervention, the overall scores of the participants in the experimental group and the control group were similar, as determined by the pretest analysis. The reassessment of speaking proficiency after 10 weeks of intervention and regular instruction revealed that the experimental group, which increased by 5.04 points, performed significantly better than the control group. It has also contributed to the literature on the CBI and 3As approach in ELT, with a particular focus on ESP in Chinese higher education. Adding to these, the results of the study also have practical implications for educational stakeholders. For instance, unlike previous studies, this study serves as a working example of aligning CSE with the CEFR in ESP education, giving focal attention to cultivating speaking proficiency through a developed teaching module. Such an attempt could benefit the teachers for their future lesson planning in conjunction with making good use of CSE to prepare Chinese EFL learners for confident and active engagement in the globalized community. Nevertheless, this study has certain limitations. Above all, only the overall OBE performance was analyzed, while data interpretation could be more comprehensive. Further analyses could be conducted to compare the scores obtained from the three sub-tasks assigned in the tests. This would provide insights into the participants' abilities to solve different problems, leading to a better understanding of the effects module and improved development for curriculum and instruction. In addition, it is also recommended to employ the semi-structured interview to gain qualitative perspectives on how well the use of teaching speaking modules improves the speaking proficiency of Chinese EFL business English undergraduates.

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BIOGRAPHIES OF AUTHORS

Ke Hu is currently a Ph.D. candidate in education, specializing in teaching English as a second language (TESL). He received both master's and bachelor's degrees in TESL from Universiti Malaysia Sabah. His research interests lie in the areas of English for specific purposes (ESP), curriculum and instruction development, and e-learning in language teaching. He is deeply committed to enhancing the learning experience and constantly exploring innovative strategies for language teaching in the digital age. He can be contacted at email: hu_ke_dp21@iluv.ums.edu.my.

Asmaa AlSaqqaf is a Senior Lecturer of English at Centre for the Promotion of Knowledge and Language Learning (PPIB), Universiti Malaysia Sabah. Previously, she served for a few years at the TESL Program, Faculty of Psychology and Education, UMS. She teaches undergraduates and postgraduates and supervises master's and Ph.D. students, both local and international. Currently, she is publishing her work under the Knowledge, Attitude and Practice (KAP) Research Group, PPIB, UMS. She can be contacted at email: asma3030@ums.edu.my.