# A critical examination of EFL learners' difficulties in speaking: towards an effective and applicable pedagogy

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**Abstract.** This article seeks to find out Chinese EFL learners' difficulties in speaking. It is of significance because an understanding of their common problems serves as a window into learners' instructional needs and provides opportunities for teachers to plan tailored instruction subsequently. Three students enrolled in English listening and speaking course in a university in southern China participated in out-of-class extra practices for in-depth study. They were given seven monologic speaking tasks adapted from TOEFL. After the completion of each task, students were prompted to provide detailed reflections on the problems that they experienced when planning and producing speech and what kind of teacher interventions they considered necessary and helpful. The analysis of their written self-reflections provided evidence that learners mainly encountered three types of difficulties in speaking: 1) ideas (what to say); 2) language (how to say); and 3) delivery (how to say it well). The results also shed light on what kind of instructional support in terms of speaking development would be necessary. Accounts from students revealed that the following types of teacher assistance, a) prompting questions to help them gather ideas; b) key words that help them express their ideas; and c) cohesive devices that help them develop their ideas fully and effectively. The teachers' assistance can help the students perform better in the tasks at hand and move them forward in their zone of proximal development. This article has generated useful insights into college English learners' speaking abilities and learning needs. Its major contribution lies in how it informs a coherent and effective pedagogy in English speaking.

**Keywords:** English as a foreign language, speaking performance, speaking difficulties, speaking teaching.

## INTRODUCTION

Though having spent many years learning a foreign language, most language learners still experience difficulties and anxiety when speaking (Chou, 2018; Liu & Jackson, 2008). Speaking remains the most challenging skill for language learners. Notwithstanding the enormous difficulties posed by speaking, relatively little is known about the exact problems that EFL students encounter when they speak. This limits the development of coherent and effective pedagogy for speaking development.

Insights from research on the oral production process (Kormos, 2006, 2011; Levelt, 1989, 1999) indicate that

the sources of speaking problems could lie in the competition for limited attentional resources among the different cognitive processes involved in producing speech, which further results in failures to attend to different components of L2 speech, namely, complexity, accuracy and fluency (Vercellotti, 2017). Prior empirical research has examined L2 learners' concerns in speaking (Ferris, 1998; Kim, 2006). However, L2 learners' self-reflections on their online speech production has barely been used in these studies to enable a more comprehensive understanding, and the significance of

these results for classroom practices has not been fully explored.

This study aims to address these shortcomings. It is conducted within the context of a larger research effort to develop computerized English-speaking mediation procedures. This paper constitutes its first step and draws on Chinese EFL learners' self-reflection data to generate insights on common speaking problems and corresponding pedagogical interventions. Following an overview of the theoretical framework, the researcher will review some empirical research results on EFL/ESL students' speaking difficulties before presenting the design of the study, its results, and pedagogical implications.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Theoretical framework

One approach to understanding and investigating L2 speaking is through the psycholinguistic perspective. It sees speaking as a cognitive process, and speech is a result of segmental speech production modules. Levelt's (1989) model is the most widely adopted theory for speech production in psycholinguistic research (Kormos, 2006). It portrays the process of language production in three loops: conceptualizer, formulator, and articulator. Language goes from the ideational level where the message is generated to taking on its grammatical and phonological form and is finally articulated in sounds. The author points out that speakers can monitor and control what they say or are saying, and this happens between the first stage of conceptualizing and the second stage of formulation.

As Levelt's model was originally built to describe the normal and spontaneous language production process of native speakers (de Bot, 1992), a problem with applying it to analyze L2 speaking performance was that it "presumes a well-organized and elaborated lexicon" in the speakers (Skehan, 2009, p. 524), which is not available in L2 learners. With the recognition of this process, Skehan (2009) adapted Levelt's model as he theorized findings on L2 oral task performance. He structured the influences on L2 speech performance on three main locations: 1) conceptualization, 2) formulation: lemma retrieval and 3) formulation: syntactic encoding. Similar to what Levelt (1989) has explained, in Skehan's (2009) words, the conceptualization sees the development of a message. During the next stage, speakers can access and activate the needed lexical items. Consequently, problems for L2 speakers could stem from slower access to difficult words. The last step is the syntactic stage of formulation. What can benefit syntactic building at this stage, according to Skehan (2009), is pre-task planning. The value of planning, especially teacher-led planning, on improving the accuracy and complexity of L2 oral performance has also

been confirmed by Foster and Skehan (1999). More specifically, preparations on syntactic frames, sentence parts, or even ready-made sentences provide macrostructure and help speakers focus on details and avoid mistakes during speaking (Skehan, 2009). Regarding task type as a variable, O'Grady (2019) investigated how pre-task planning benefited L2 speaking test performance in different task types and found that it was particularly helpful for picture-based tasks.

Both Levelt's (1989) and Skehan's (2009) work based on the cognitive perspective clarifies that speech production is constrained by attentional capacity. Results reported by Skehan (2009) provide particular usefulness for research on L2 speaking as it sheds light on what poses extra challenges and what eases the pressure for L2 speakers. However, research from the cognitive strand has left out the voice of L2 speakers, who can contribute insightful comments on what challenges they experience and what pedagogical instruction they consider helpful.

### Empirical results

Several empirical studies investigated speaking difficulties by incorporating learners' views. Ferris (1998) and Kim (2006) showed that the most challenging speaking activities considered by L2 learners were presentation and class discussion. Evans and Morrison (2011) explored what difficulties students experienced when they used English for academic purposes. According to this study, students felt that the most difficult aspect of speaking lied in grammar and linguistic accuracy. Both Al Hosni (2014) and Ulla (2020) revealed that students suffered from a lack of necessary vocabulary to express their ideas appropriately. Gan (2013) reported that the two major problems encountered by L2 learners were 1) limited linguistic competence and 2) lack of speaking opportunities both in and out of the classroom.

Though the results from these studies have identified the challenging factors in English speaking, they used questionnaires and surveys as primary sources of data. Such data collection techniques have limitations as Evans and Morrison (2010) recognized in their writing. Itemized survey results are limited in revealing the underlying root problems and learner needs. In this sense, the sources of students' difficulties could only be speculated. Therefore, this technique prevents the results from being translated into effective pedagogical strategies in classroom teaching. Also, a survey is a snap-shot activity that captures the moment rather than the full process. Furthermore, surveys make speaking problems difficult to be identified. Finally, actual performance data from language tasks and learners' self-reflections have not formed the basis of evidence (Evans & Morrison, 2011, p. 200).

Yang (2010) contributed to this line of research with

qualitative data by examining how 5 Chinese ESL students experienced and learned from an oral task when they attended university in Canada. She focused on their speaking competencies as part of academic literacy. Her results demonstrated that the major challenges faced by students when accomplishing an oral academic task came from 1) limited skill in composing English conversations; 2) limited understanding of the Canadian academic context, and 3) limited experience with group work. She suggested that training on different in-class speaking activities (e.g., presentation, discussion, and informal reports) and context-specific courses can help ESL students achieve desirable development in oral academic skills.

Yang's (2010) results have illuminated the broad areas practitioners could work on to help ESL students. The results, therefore, were of pedagogical significance. However, her study did not fill the gap in understanding EFL student's speaking difficulties as it conceptualized English speaking as part of academic literacy and oral development as part of academic socialization. Finally, its data came from students' task preparation out of speaking classrooms as part of a business course. Therefore, the study did not offer the most direct relevance to EFL classroom practices.

## Research questions

So far, relatively limited knowledge is known about EFL students' speaking difficulties and what corresponding instructional practices could cope. To address this need, the current study explored the experience of three Chinese EFL learners as they completed several speaking tasks.

The research questions that guided this study were:

1. What are the common problems of the 3 Chinese EFL learners when they engage themselves in speaking tasks?
2. What pedagogical assistance can help them mitigate these speaking problems?

## METHOD

### Grounded theory

This study uses grounded theory, developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), as the overarching form of inquiry. In grounded theory, the researcher aims to generate a new theory grounded in the data - "the behavior, words, and actions of those under the study" (Goulding, 1999, p. 6). To research using grounded theory, data concerning the identified area of interest is collected, and analyzed, simultaneously, to sort out information and establish initial

concepts and categories about the phenomenon under study. Following this, further data collection is carried out to explore the early concepts and categories in greater depth, and finally, the new theory is written up, traceable back to the data.

Although the emphasis of grounded theory is the generation of new theory, it is by no means that extant knowledge has no role to play. It is acknowledged by Glaser (1978) that existing knowledge is important, for it enables the researcher to understand the conceptual significance of emerging patterns and categories and to show relevance to prior theories when presenting a new perspective. This feature of grounded theory is relevant to the present study. Previous work (e.g., Levelt, 1989; Skehan, 2009; Gan, 2013) discussed in the literature review has provided a foundation for this study to be planned and carried out.

Another feature of grounded theory of relevance to this study is its adherence to data. The aim of grounded theory is "parsimony and fidelity to the data" (Goulding, 1999, p. 16). According to Riley (1996, p. 37), transferability is not considered the responsibility of the investigator who researches in the vein of grounded theory. Instead of claiming for generalization, the researcher needs to refer the data collected back to the methods of analysis and interpretation, and to accurately describe the context of the studied individuals' behavior so that the phenomenon under investigation can be thoroughly explored.

## Context and participants

### The students

Three students from a university in southern China volunteered to participate in an in-depth study. In this article, the researcher used the pseudonyms Colin, Lewis, and Henry for the participants. They all possessed an intermediate level of English proficiency. At the time of the study, all of them had just finished their first semester at university and completed an English listening and a speaking course taught by the researcher. An advertisement was posted in the class online communication group looking for participants for a study focusing on English speaking difficulties after all course-related exams and marking were done. Three students sent messages to the researcher to show their willingness to participate. Their consents were sought before data collection.

### The course

The course taught by the researcher entitled English listening and speaking provided the participants with some contextualization and a rough understanding of this

study before they participated. This is a compulsory course for all first-year undergraduate students in their university. During the class, students were given some listening drills, and they were encouraged to talk about their opinions and experiences as speaking practices. However, the speaking activities were usually received somewhat coldly. In terms of testing, students completed multiple-choice questions for listening comprehension and spoke about a given topic for 2 minutes with their responses recorded. The researcher of the study planned it as a voluntary extension of this course to explore the difficulties that students experienced in speaking.

### *Tasks as pre-condition for reflection*

Seven speaking tasks were used in this study. In each of the tasks, participants read a statement, prepared for a minute, then stated and elaborated on their own opinions for another one minute. All the tasks were adapted from TOEFL independent speaking practices (Gallagher, 2007; ETS, 2017). Questions from TOEFL speaking sub-section are considered appropriate tools and used frequently to assess L2 learners' ability to communicate orally (e.g., Ockey, Koyama, Setoguchi & Sun, 2015). Topics of the tasks chosen for use were all related to college life, including online courses versus traditional classroom teaching, important qualities for success in university, parents' involvement in their academic decisions, etc. Overall, these tasks served as pre-condition for students to reflect on their L2 speaking performance.

### Data collection and data analysis

Upon completion of each task, participants proceeded to produce written reflections. Their written reflections constituted the major source of data in this study. Students were prompted to reflect on 1) the difficulties they experienced while planning and producing speech, 2) their perceived weaknesses of their task responses, and 3) the kind of teacher assistance that would be welcomed to help them overcome speaking difficulties.

In the first session, participants' speech production and written reflection data became available for initial analysis. Preliminary areas of difficulties were identified and rough categories were formed through open coding (Merriam, 2009). This was done by searching for themes, patterns, and their relationships in the data and attaching open codes to them. Guided by the grounded theory approach, these codes were made public to the participants and they were invited to provide feedback on my analysis by including comments in their further written reflections. This procedure enabled refinement and revision of data (Boeije, 2010). Apart from reflections, other sources of data - such as my field notes - helped document the context (Yang, 2010).

With all reflections collected from the participants, The researcher worked through the data and developed a set of "exploratory categories" (Fulcher, 1996, p. 216) to represent participants' speaking difficulties and wanted pedagogical assistance. The data suggested that participants' problems in speaking could be accounted for by three main categories. These explanatory categories were created from participants' voices in the data, validated by words and comments they made in different pieces of the data through constant comparison between data collected on different dates from different persons (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

In the presentation of data in the next section on findings, excerpts of written reflections will be presented in italics, as they were translated to English from Chinese. Translations of the reflections that were originally written in Chinese were done by the researcher and checked by another English language instructor in the same institution.

## FINDINGS

Participants' written reflections revealed that they experienced an array of challenges when completing speaking tasks: idea, language, and organization. For each of these challenges, they have discussed the kind of teacher assistance that they considered helpful to mitigate these problems.

### Idea

Analysis of students' written reflections revealed that during their engagement with given speaking tasks, one of the main challenges was idea-related issues. An idea refers to the pre-verbal plan that will initiate and guide further language production and articulation. A lack of ideas prevents the participants from producing a satisfactory task response.

As shown in these two excerpts, both Colin and Lewis experienced some problems with planning the message. They were aware that clear ideas needed to be formulated before speaking (excerpt 1), and that information on reasons were necessary following an opinion (excerpt 2). However, for them, ideas either took too long to take shape or were unavailable at the moment. This problem with ideas clearly impacted their performance in speaking tasks and was conceived as a challenge in speaking.

Some of the references related to ideas in the participants' reflections indicated that they not only suffered from a lack of ideas but also problems with keeping track of ideas when doing online planning and online processing.

Unlike the scenarios described in previous excerpts, in excerpts 3 and 4, Lewis had some ideas of the speech

**Excerpt 1**

It took me too long to figure out what I wanted to say about this topic. (Colin, 0210)

**Excerpt 2**

I could not think of reasons to support my opinion. (Lewis, 0210)

**Excerpt 3**

I forgot about my ideas when I started speaking and recording. (Lewis, 0210)

**Excerpt 4**

I lost my train of thought when I was being recorded. (Lewis, 0211).

**Excerpt 5**

I had problems with expressing my ideas. I have ideas but it's difficult to find proper language to say them. (Lewis, 0213)

**Excerpt 6**

I knew those points and reasons in Chinese, but I could not translate them into English. (Henry, 0210)

plan. However, the planned messages were lost when he diverted attention to speaking and recording. This shows that attentional constraints on retaining ideas can also constitute a challenge for L2 speakers.

In their reflections, the participants voiced their wants for teacher assistance to help overcome difficulties in terms of lacking ideas and losing ideas. All of them have expressed "I need some ideas" at some point in their reflections, while they did not detail what kind of teacher interventions would be effective in prompting ideas in them. This problem remains a question for practitioners to consider.

**Language**

As might be expected, the participants experienced considerable difficulties when completing the speaking tasks due to linguistic obstacles in the L2. Their reflections contained evidence of their concerns over their linguistics gaps in the L2, their self-monitoring of their L2 speech production, and how they sometimes resorted to strategies to overcome linguistic difficulties in speaking.

Excerpts 5 and 6 showed that the two speakers' principle difficulties stemmed from finding appropriate

**Excerpt 7**

I had a lexical gap over "analyze". (Colin, 0213)

**Excerpt 8**

I had problems with arranging the words in the correct order when I wanted to say "this is the first step to success". (Lewi, 0212)

**Excerpt 9**

I made a grammatical mistake. I misused "but" for "although". (Lewis, 0215)

**Excerpt 10**

I was disfluent sometimes because I had difficulties with particular words. (Colin, 0210)

**Excerpt 11**

I felt my language ineffective when I was trying to say my second point - "a friendly teacher enables better communication between teachers and students". (Colin, 0215)

linguistic items in the L2 to represent their ideas that were already formulated. They had in mind a message to be delivered, but the delivery was hindered by their linguistic incompetence. These could happen in both lexical and syntactic domains, as it will be illustrated in the following.

Linguistic incompetence can be manifested at all levels. Excerpts 7 and 8 are two examples of linguistic problems in terms of lexical search and sentence building. The participants were looking for proper items to represent the ideas they conceptualized, but experienced problems when a lexical item was unavailable and syntactic building could not work out.

Students were doing online monitoring of their L2 speech production when problems due to limited linguistic repertoire occurred. They were aware of the results of linguistic obstacles.

As the participants expressed in excerpts 9, 10, and 11, they have noticed grammatical errors, disfluency, and ineffective language in their task responses. This shows their on-going efforts to monitor their L2 speech, while at the same time, their recognition that their linguistic gaps could harm accuracy, fluency, and effectiveness in their

language.

Notwithstanding this, the participants took active measures to compensate for linguistic deficiencies in the L2, as is reflected in Excerpts 12.

Clearly, in Henry's case, he experienced difficulties when trying to express the idea, but he did not abandon the planned idea. He resorted to the "restate[ing]" strategy to get his meanings across.

Regarding this second group of speaking problems, language, the participants have stated explicitly what their anticipated teacher interventions would be.

All the participants expressed that help with vocabulary was necessary. They also indicated how teachers could provide such help - by giving them some keywords and expressions around the topic in discussion, so they could put some of the given items in use when speaking.

**Organization**

Another type of problems revealed in the participants' reflections pointed to their concerns over constructing a

**Excerpt 12**

I didn't know how to say, "genius is one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent hard work", so I had to restate it.  (Henry, 0212)

**Excerpt 13**

It will be good if we can have some help with vocabulary, such as "cozy". I could not think of it previously. (Colin, 0216)

**Excerpt 14**

I need some support with expressions when I was discussing the topic of student evaluation. (Lewis, 0216)

**Excerpt 15**

It will be helpful if we can have some keywords and phrases. (Henry, 0211)

**Excerpt 16**

I could come up with words to express my ideas this time, but when I made the response, my speech became disorganized. (Colin, 0215)

**Excerpt 17**

I had difficulties managing the logic throughout my full response (Lewis, 0210)

**Excerpt 18**

I did not have enough time to organize my language (Henry, 0214)

well-organized response when doing the speaking tasks.

Excerpts 16, 17 and 18 revealed the participants' problems in developing a well-organized, coherent, and logical task response. This indicates that the organization of speech is a challenge for them. Their reflections contain some ideas for teachers to provide pedagogical assistance.

The participants felt that some cohesive devices were

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**Excerpt 19**

I need some linking words. (Colin, 0211)

**Excerpt 20**

I want some pre-scripted structures to organize my response. Then I could fill my ideas when I was planning my speech. (Henry, 0211)

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needed for them to construct organized responses. They also commented on how such devices would be used. With some ready-made linking words and phrases provided, they could choose some of them to connect ideas within sentences, between sentences, and in the overall response.

## DISCUSSION

This article has examined the challenges that confronted EFL students in completing speaking tasks. Regarding the first speaking difficulty reported by the participants, idea, it has been shown that students could lose track of ideas and forget what they have planned to say during speech production. This lends empirical support to the cognitive model of language production (Levelt, 1989; Skehan, 2009), that all processes involved in producing speech require attentional resources. This study provides evidence that the pressure of attention in one component, articulation can cause attentional constraints in another component of conceptualization.

Participants' comments on the second main difficulty, language, included some reported incidents of inaccuracy, disfluency, and ineffectiveness. What is more, they could use certain strategies to repair these problems in language. This process shows that their monitors work. This finding points to the monitoring mechanism in the speech production model. In Levelt's (1989) model, the monitor is situated between the conceptualizer and the formulator, which intercepts conceptual and semantic errors in L1 language production. This study provides further evidence for how L2 speakers' monitor operates, that it can oversee and detect a wider range of issues than errors. Thus, its area of impact can be extended to the articulator, as it also checks the speech that has been uttered.

Evidence from participants' written reflections suggests that the EFL students' major sources of difficulties are idea, language, and organization. This is in line with Gan's (2013) finding that one of the major speaking difficulties comes from learners' linguistic obstacles, but his study did not shed light on what instructional practices could make a difference. The value of pre-task planning, and in particular, teacher-led planning, have been discussed as helpful ways to ease L2 speakers' attentional limitations and improve speech performance (Foster & Skehan, 1999; Skehan, 2009). However, it has not been specified what form such teacher assistance should be given. This study fills this gap as the students were invited to name a range of pedagogical support for each difficulty. Help with vocabulary is wanted to manage problems with language and cohesive devices are asked for to improve organization. Participants did not state the kind of help they needed with the idea. I would like to propose prompting questions as a measure. Overall, this method represents an effective and coherent speaking pedagogy that is easily applicable in a classroom setting.

## CONCLUSION AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

This study has advanced our understanding of the main challenges that confront EFL learners while they are engaged in speaking tasks. They encountered problems related to generating relevant ideas, choosing correct and appropriate linguistic forms for these ideas, and delivering their speech in an organized and coherent manner. The research discussed here provides speaking teachers with a wealth of valuable insights to inform their practices. Specifically, teachers can provide learners with prompting questions to facilitate the planning of ideas. Lexical items relevant to task topics that could pose potential challenges should be anticipated by teachers. Then, teachers can create a bank of useful words and expressions to cope with linguistic deficiencies accordingly. Last, to improve the organization of learners' task responses, teachers are recommended to prepare some linking words and phrases.

This study has its limitations. Participants under investigation in this study were small and homogeneous in proficiency levels (all intermediate learners). The format of the task (monologic) and their contents were quite specific (all school-related). Therefore, it is hoped that future research can extend the investigation on L2 learners' speaking difficulties to involve a broader range of learner populations and with learners engaged in a wider range of speaking tasks.

By inducing learner reflections on their weaknesses and learning needs, this study has shown the usefulness

of metacognition as a research strategy. Beyond its usage for generating research data, metacognitive reflection has potential benefits for enhancing learners' output, affect, and motivation. More explorations on this issue are necessary and valuable in the future.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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