

Main Causes and Corresponding Strategies of “Dumb English” Phenomenon among Secondary School Students in Mainland China: A Review of Relevant Research Findings

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Abstract:

This paper reviews selected literature published since 2000 to explore the increasing concern among scholars and educators in Mainland China, regarding the phenomenon of “dumb English” among secondary school students. Existing research primarily analyses the main causes of “dumb English” from the perspectives of deficiencies in English teaching in rural areas, the absence of native language culture in English instruction, deviations in students’ focus during oral English training, and psychological factors, etc. Corresponding strategies have been proposed to address these issues. Future research could focus on adjusting and optimizing the traditional English teaching models and evaluation systems in secondary school classrooms.

Keywords: Mainland China, Secondary school students, Dumb English, Causes, Strategies

1. Introduction

According to Lu Renshun (2002), “high scores but low abilities, dumb English, and time-consuming inefficiency” are the most prominent issues in English teaching in Mainland China. Specifically, “dumb English” refers to the inability of learners to communicate and express themselves freely and fluently in English, even after several years or even more than a decade of English learning. Currently, the phenomenon of “dumb English” is widespread among secondary school students in Mainland China. However, the English curriculum standards for junior and senior high school levels in Mainland China explicitly oppose the continued prevalence of “dumb English.” The “Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standards (2022 Edition)” clearly defines the connotation of English subject core literacy, which includes the “language ability”, namely language comprehension and expression skills showcased in specific contextual language activities while using language and non-linguistic knowledge, as well as various strategies.” Additionally, the “General Senior High School English Curriculum Standards (2017 Edition Revised in 2020)” emphasizes that “language ability refers to the ability to understand and express meaning in social contexts through listening, speaking, reading, viewing, writing, etc., as well as the language awareness and sense formed during the process of learning and using

language.” This once again emphasizes the importance of “speaking” and “expression” in the core literacy of the English subject. Therefore, reversing the phenomenon of “dumb English” at the secondary school stage is an essential requirement for implementing English curriculum standards, enhancing students’ intercultural communication and exchange abilities, and cultivating their core literacy in the English subject. To eliminate “dumb English,” it is necessary to clarify its main causes and develop effective strategies to address them. Both workforce in the teaching profession and students in the learning process face significant challenges. Based on the current situation, this paper provides a detailed review and analysis of selected research findings on “dumb English” among secondary school students in Mainland China since 2000. It summarizes the main causes and corresponding strategies, aiming to promote the reform and innovation of English oral teaching in the secondary school stage in Mainland China, enhance students’ English-speaking abilities, and truly cultivate their core literacy of the English subject.

2. Causes and Strategies of “Dumb English” Phenomenon among Secondary School Students in Mainland China

2.1. High proportion of students in rural ar-

eas and outdated English teaching methods

In terms of population composition, the rural population in Mainland China accounts for a significant proportion of the total population, and rural secondary school students form a large group. Taking junior high school students as an example, Wang Lijuan (2014) pointed out that rural junior high school students account for approximately 60% of the total number of junior high school students nationwide. In terms of English oral teaching, rural schools lag behind urban schools in terms of both hardware and software (Zhu Jiahong, 2011). Teachers in rural schools generally have lower qualifications, weak English-speaking abilities, and adopt outdated teaching methods that are not conducive to diverse oral instruction. Moreover, English teaching in rural schools is mainly geared towards the high school entrance examination, with little emphasis on oral English training, resulting in extremely poor English speaking and communication abilities among students. Therefore, to eliminate “dumb English” among secondary school students in Mainland China, it is crucial to focus on English oral teaching in rural areas. In light of this situation, Wang Lijuan (2014) suggests optimizing English oral teaching strategies and strengthening teacher-student interaction as well as peer interaction. Zhu Jiahong (2011) also recommends that teachers update their concepts, keep up with the times, reevaluate their English classrooms, scrutinize English curriculum standards, discard the erroneous view of “score-oriented learning,” adopt a dialectical approach towards the “drill and practice” teaching method, create a relaxing classroom atmosphere infused with the “flavour of English,” engage in diverse classroom activities, and make English learning enjoyable for secondary school students, thereby mobilizing their initiative and enthusiasm for practicing oral English.

2.2. Lack of native language culture in English teaching

In analysing high school English textbooks utilized in Mainland China, Zeng Fei (2011) points out that cultural teaching in foreign language education in Mainland China excessively relies on target language culture, while neglecting native language culture. Due to insufficient or superficial discussions of native language culture, many students are unable to express native language cultural content appropriately and clearly in English. Jia Chunfang (2018) also states that cultural education in the high school stage in China faces significant challenges, as the arrangement of cultural teaching content in related textbooks is unreasonable, resulting in a lack of native language culture and hindering two-way communication. Wang Zhen (2016) also believes that the current situation of native language culture teaching in Chinese secondary

school English classrooms is not optimistic, mainly due to insufficient native language cultural information provided in textbooks and a lack of teachers’ knowledge of native language culture. In response to the above situation, Zeng Fei (2011) proposes adhering to the “principle of comparison” when dealing with native language culture in foreign language teaching, comparing English and Chinese culture, and absorbing the essence of English culture while understanding how Chinese culture is expressed in English. Wang Zhen (2016) also calls for strengthening cultural comparison teaching and enhancing students’ exposure to native language culture. Gu Mengmeng (2013) suggests that it is necessary to handle the relationship between native language culture and target language culture, rationally arrange secondary school English textbooks, strengthen cultural cognitive ability assessment, and improve English teachers’ cultural literacy.

2.3. Deviation in the focus of oral English training

Wang Dawei (2000) argues that students often pay attention to difficult-to-understand and “gorgeous” words when reading English materials, but they tend to neglect “simple and ordinary” words. Students appreciate and have the impulse to remember so-called “advanced expressions” and complex sentences. However, these expressions are not commonly used in daily oral communication and lack practicality. On the contrary, students easily overlook some relatively simple but highly authentic English expressions. Therefore, proactive measures should be taken to redirect students’ focus towards practical and reusable vocabulary. Additionally, Wang Dawei (2000) points out that students have a lack of attention to function words. Generally, content words and semantics receive higher attention, while function words, carrying less semantic meaning, are easily overlooked, leading to phenomena such as “inability to use articles correctly” or “confusion between singular and plural” in oral communication. To address this, Wang Dawei (2000) proposes several strategies. Firstly, the compilation of a reusable vocabulary handbook should be done to make students understand the purpose of reusing vocabulary and read, appreciate, and memorize practical words with a mindset of reuse. Four principles should be followed in the compilation process: “commonly used in meaning, wide coverage”, “emphasis on common usage of common words”, “attention to areas where Chinese students are prone to errors” and “ability to attract students’ attention.” Secondly, efforts should be made to attract students’ attention to function words. In the compilation of the reusable vocabulary handbook, annotation explanations or exercises should be used for language units with less prominent semantics to draw stu-

dents' attention.

2.4. Psychological barriers in oral English training among secondary school students

Psychological barriers are a major factor contributing to the phenomenon of “dumb English” among secondary school students in Mainland China. Several psychological factors are commonly observed when secondary school students engage in oral English training. Firstly, there is a sense of shyness and inferiority (Guo Jie, 2003, et al.), where students feel hesitant to speak English in front of others, fearing to be corrected or ridiculed. Secondly, there is a sense of apathy (Yang Nianhua, 2011, et al.), where students lack interest in oral English training, are unwilling to motivate their minds actively, and may merely limit their practice to the classroom. Thirdly, there is a sense of anxiety (Yang Nianhua, 2011, et al.), also known as “fear of difficulties,” where students perceive their English proficiency to be limited and fear their inability to express their thoughts accurately and effectively. To overcome these psychological barriers, Hao Ligang and Li Xin (2007) advocate that teachers, in the initial stages of organizing oral English training, should not excessively emphasize language accuracy but instead focus on cultivating students' interest in expressing themselves. Yang Nianhua (2011) and others advocate for the establishment of a harmonious and cooperative classroom environment, fostering positive student-student and teacher-student relationships, and eliminating students' fear, tension, and anxiety towards English oral expression. Guo Jie (2003) and Hao Ligang (2007) suggest that English teachers should make full use of visual teaching aids such as pictures, slides, and VCDs, as well as multimedia technology, to promptly observe students' reactions, vary the methods of training, and enhance the pertinence and student engagement in English-speaking training.

3. Research Outlook

Overall, some research findings since 2000 have shown that domestic scholars and educators have made fruitful achievements in studying the phenomenon of “dumb English” among secondary school students in Mainland China. However, considering the current situation in China, many strategies are still only at the theoretical level and have not been effectively implemented in English classrooms in secondary schools. In order to eradicate “dumb English,” future research should focus on the adjustment and optimization of traditional English teaching models and evaluation systems.

Research has proven that adjusting and optimizing traditional English teaching models is an effective measure to eliminate the phenomenon of “dumb English.” However,

there are still significant limitations in the research on traditional English teaching models, mainly manifested in the following two aspects. First, some researchers only propose that traditional English teaching models “need to be changed” without specifying “how to change them” in detail. Second, some researchers provide seemingly reasonable adjustment plans without conducting detailed comparisons between the actual conditions of English teaching in urban and rural areas, resulting in a “one-size-fits-all” approach. Future research should aim for “specific situations and specific analysis”, conducting in-depth investigations in different regions before proposing detailed and feasible adjustment plans.

At the same time, the traditional evaluation system also requires further adjustment. Currently, English classrooms in secondary schools in Mainland China are still primarily oriented towards the middle and high school entrance examinations, where “examination scores are superior to everything else.” Additionally, most regions in China do not include assessments of students' oral English proficiency in the middle and high school entrance examinations. This leads to the majority of students, English teachers, and parents focusing only on exam scores and rankings to judge the proficiency of a student's English abilities. Consequently, English teachers only focus on teaching language knowledge such as “grammar rules” and “language points”, as well as practicing “test-taking skills,” without guiding students to express their thoughts in English. This inevitably results in the proliferation of the phenomenon of “dumb English” among secondary school students. Therefore, future research should focus on adjusting the evaluation system for English subject in secondary schools, exploring how to gradually increase the proportion of oral English scores in stage tests, final exams, especially in the middle and high school entrance examinations, and arousing the attention of teachers, students, and parents to oral English training.

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