

Determinants of Oral English Proficiency Among Chinese Vocational College Students: A Descriptive Analysis

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Abstract—Speaking English as a foreign language (EFL) presents both challenges and engaging aspects for learners. This descriptive study set out to precisely identify the oral English proficiency levels of Chinese vocational college students and to comprehensively determine the factors that influence their oral English capabilities. A total of 60 students were randomly selected and assessed using the LAIX software to gauge their oral English proficiency levels. Additionally, 15 students and 10 teachers were conveniently sampled and interviewed to explore influencing factors. The findings revealed that a substantial proportion of Chinese vocational college students were at Level 1, indicating a relatively low level of oral proficiency. Through in-depth thematic analysis, the factors contributing to this low oral proficiency were found to be mainly in the areas of linguistic elements, psychological factors, language exposure, and language pedagogy, among others. These intricately interrelated factors have a significant and collective impact on the students' oral English proficiency. This research contributes to the existing body of knowledge on EFL learning in the context of Chinese vocational education, offering insights that can potentially inform teaching strategies and curriculum design to enhance students' oral English skills.

Index Terms—EFL learners, oral English proficiency level, Chinese vocational college students, influencing factors, descriptive study

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Background

In the age of globalization, English has established itself as the dominant language spoken by around 400 million people worldwide (Tiing & Yunus, 2021). It has become an international common tongue in the 21st century. It is also frequently utilized on the internet, international relations, business, social media, education research, and other fields (Ahmed et al., 2019). For English language learners, spoken English proficiency is critical for academic performance, future career, and personal success. Compared to university students in China, those attending tertiary vocational schools typically possess a weaker knowledge of English. It is a disheartening reality that a significant proportion of Chinese students exhibit a relatively low level of English proficiency. According to the 2021 TOEFL iBT Test and Score Data Summary, their English-speaking capabilities are notably underdeveloped, indicating a substantial area for improvement in this crucial aspect of language acquisition.

The absence of foreign teacher-led listening and speaking classes in vocational colleges disrupts students' opportunity to gain genuine English conversational experience. Furthermore, there are inadequate English-speaking avenues in China. English classes in most vocational colleges are available twice a week only, allowing for minimal language practice. In addition, instructors often use the Chinese language as the medium of instruction during these two classroom sessions. Despite significant efforts from both the Chinese government and English educators to improve English oral proficiency in the country, vocational college students' oral skills remain poor. Even though they have been exposed to English lessons since primary school or junior middle school, their oral abilities remain unsatisfactory. This is especially a matter of concern regarding vocational college students' job prospects because many of them are considered to have low oral proficiency.

B. Oral Language Proficiency

Oral proficiency is the capability of learners to engage in conversations with one or more interlocutors (Kasper & Ross, 2013). It also refers to language competence which entails the capacity to understand and communicate effectively in the target language (Ngui et al., 2020). Speaking is one of the most important skills to be developed and enhanced in communication (Leong & Ahmadi, 2017). There are several meanings of the term "speaking" that have been presented in research on language learning. According to Webster's New World Dictionary, speaking is saying things aloud, expressing oneself verbally, asking for something, and giving a speech. As per Brown et al. (2005), speaking is a

collaborative procedure of creating significance that encompasses generating, perceiving, and processing information. It is viewed as a deliberate combination of sounds to form cohesive speech. Verbal communication involves transmitting information, ideas, and emotions through spoken words.

The notion of oral proficiency encompasses two components (Sandlund et al., 2016). Firstly, there is the functional language competence outlined in the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages [ACTFL], 2012). This competence pertains to using language effectively in various practical and real-world situations. The second component encompasses the communicative skills of speaking and interaction, as elaborated in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001). These skills involve the capacity to engage in meaningful conversations, convey ideas, and interact with others in a linguistically appropriate and socially effective manner. In a concise recap, speaking skills and oral proficiency share some similarities, but they also have differences. Speaking is considered one of the macro skills that demonstrate tangible oral proficiency, whereas oral proficiency is a language competency that is demonstrated through specific language skills.

Improving oral language in EFL learners entails honing speaking and listening skills, both of which are intricately linked to the understanding of reading and writing. According to August (2008), phonology, vocabulary, morphology, grammar, and discourse elements are all considered to be components of oral language proficiency. Fluency is one of the characteristics of speaking performance. Hughes (2002) claims fluency is the capacity of the learner to talk in an intelligible manner to prevent communication from breaking down due to listeners' potential disinterest. As can be seen in Figure 1 below, oral language is made up of five essential elements: semantics or vocabulary, pragmatics, morphological skills, syntax, and phonological skills (Moats, 2010). The better mastery of these five elements, the higher oral proficiency the learner will have.

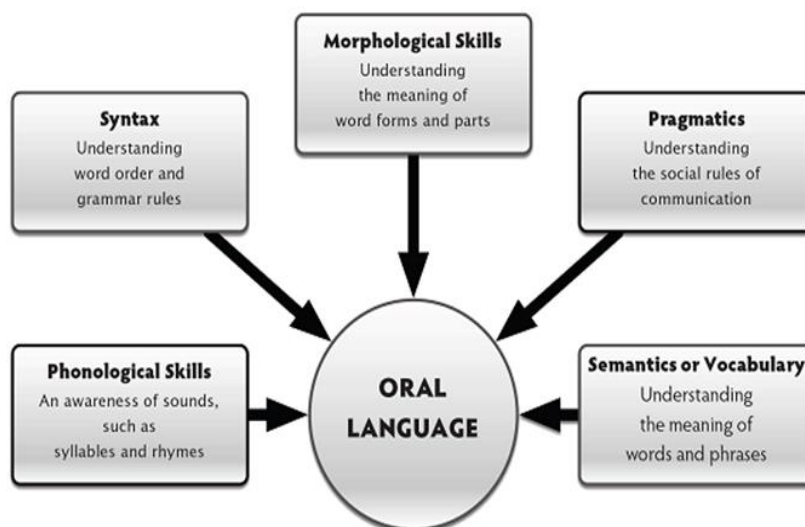


Figure 1. Components of Oral Language (Moats, 2010)

Fluency involves reacting coherently by connecting words and phrases, articulating sounds clearly, and utilizing emphasis and intonation (Hedge, 2000). As per the recommendations of Mazouzi (2013) and Leong and Ahmadi (2017), learners are advised to emphasize grammatical structures, vocabulary, and pronunciation during their oral presentation, with special attention paid to the correctness and comprehensiveness of the language used. It is crucial to not only produce specific linguistic components but also understand when, how, and why to use them effectively. Additionally, possessing the necessary vocabulary is a pivotal aspect of oral communication (Beck et al., 2013; Ouellette, 2006).

Oral proficiency is crucial in language learning because it is essential for effective communication. It allows learners to express themselves fluently and accurately and to understand and respond appropriately to what others are saying. In addition, oral proficiency helps learners to develop their listening and comprehension skills as well as their vocabulary and grammar knowledge. Being able to speak a language confidently and clearly can also have a positive impact on learners' confidence, motivation, and overall language learning progress. Furthermore, oral proficiency is often a requirement for various academic and professional contexts, such as job interviews, presentations, and academic discussions. In this light, several literature studies are provided that served as the basis for this investigation.

C. Factors Attributed to Oral English Proficiency

Many factors affect the oral proficiency of language learners. Culture is an obstacle because many Chinese students are shy and not so assertive when speaking in English. According to Aziz and Kashinathan (2021), speaking English is difficult because speakers must be proficient in a wide range of skills, including pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. Essentially, vocabulary is seen as an important component of language proficiency and performance (Schmitt, 2010). Parallel to this, Adam (2016) pointed out that vocabulary deficiencies seriously hinder EFL

students' capacity for interpersonal communication. According to previous research on oral proficiency, the factors influencing foreign language competency are still unknown. However, a lot of studies have found that vocabulary and grammar had the greatest impact on oral proficiency levels (Iwashita, 2010). Other factors, such as pronunciation and fluency, are also present at higher levels (Pangket, 2019). Grammatical competence can help speakers apply and perceive the structure of the English language correctly which leads to their fluency (Latha, 2012). When assessing oral language skills, the whole is more important than the sum of the parts, and realistic and authentic language samples offer more reliable results (Geva, 2006).

On the other hand, oral English learning is also connected to learning motivation, learning strategies, and autonomous learning capacity, which makes oral proficiency research a demanding and difficult task (Ni, 2010). Cognitive, linguistic, and affective factors may also affect students' oral fluency (Derakhshan et al., 2016). According to Brown (2011), the emotive element is crucial to the process of acquiring a second or foreign language. This is affirmed by Gorkaltseva et al. (2015) who found that learners' poor desire for verbal contact contributed to their lack of language and pragmatic ability.

However, Chinese EFL learners speaking problems are more closely related to psychological problems like anxiety, fear of making mistakes, reluctance, and fear of negative assessment than to linguistic problems like a dearth of vocabulary, poor pronunciation, or a lack of understanding of grammar rules (Amoah & Yeboah, 2021). As affirmed by Chen and Goh (2011), foreign language anxiety is popular among Chinese college students. The anxiety stems from professors, tests, classmates, and various educational activities. Likewise, a language-learning setting can also cause students to feel anxious and restricted (Littlewood, 2007). The causes of student anxiety can be observed in a classroom context (Pangket, 2019).

In the current academic context, it is paramount to identify the determinants that affect the oral proficiency of Chinese college language learners. This is because such an identification will offer valuable insights into the challenges that students encounter while striving to enhance their oral communication skills in English. By understanding these factors, educators can develop more targeted and effective teaching strategies, and students can be better equipped to overcome their difficulties and improve their English language proficiency.

D. Research Gap

Upon a comprehensive review of the existing literature, it has been discerned that the body of research dedicated to the oral English proficiency of Chinese vocational college students remains rather limited. All the existing depictions of Chinese students' oral proficiency, from an observational standpoint, merely categorize them under the broad and general term "poor." Regrettably, there is a notable scarcity of empirical and objective studies or assessment tools that can effectively demonstrate the oral English proficiency of this substantial cohort of students.

Furthermore, although previous studies have delved into the factors influencing Chinese students' oral proficiency, there is an urgent imperative to conduct more in-depth and targeted explorations specifically concerning the oral English proficiency of vocational college students. Such investigations are essential for the formulation of future teaching strategies and the implementation of effective pedagogical approaches. This need for more focused research is further underscored by the data released from the Chinese National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI). The CNKI data clearly reveal that there is a dearth of empirical and objective research data centered around the oral proficiency levels of students in Chinese vocational colleges.

Consequently, the overarching objective of this present study is to utilize empirical data to accurately describe the oral proficiency levels of Chinese vocational college students. More specifically, the aims of this research are twofold: first, to precisely identify the oral English proficiency levels of Chinese vocational college students; and second, to determine the factors that exert an influence on these students' oral English proficiency. In pursuit of these aims, this research endeavors to find answers to the following research questions:

- (a). What is the oral English proficiency level of Chinese vocational college students?
- (b). What factors influence Chinese vocational college students' oral English proficiency?

E. Significance of Study

This research intends to identify potential approaches to improving students' oral skills and to derive useful pedagogical implications from these findings. The ultimate goal is to offer further understanding and guidance on learning spoken English for Chinese vocational college students, and hopefully, this research can serve as an important foundation for teachers of oral English in Chinese vocational schools to improve and expand upon their teaching methods and practices. With these collective efforts, it is expected that students will be able to improve their language proficiency and proficiency in spoken English, thereby enhancing their academic and professional opportunities.

II. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

In this study, a descriptive research design was adopted. This design is a versatile and exploratory approach applicable to both qualitative and quantitative research. By integrating both quantitative and qualitative methods, a comprehensive understanding of the research topic was pursued.

The quantitative method was employed to ascertain the students' oral English proficiency levels. This method primarily focuses on surveys, questionnaires, and the statistical analysis of data amassed through polls, questionnaires, and surveys, as noted by Creswell (2012). Through numerical data collection and analysis, it offers an objective measure of the students' oral English capabilities.

Conversely, the qualitative method was utilized to identify the factors influencing students' oral English proficiency. Qualitative research methods, as posited by McDonough and McDonough (2014), allow researchers to analyze a phenomenon or process within its natural context. This creates opportunities for in-depth exploration and examination. When using qualitative analysis to understand a phenomenon or process, data is first collected, then systematically organized. Subsequently, the data is compared for similarities and differences before being categorized based on codes or descriptive categories. The resultant data is then thoroughly analyzed to identify emerging themes, as described by Creswell (2014). This qualitative approach provides rich, context-based insights into the underlying factors that impact students' oral English proficiency, complementing the findings from the quantitative analysis.

B. Research Setting and Target Population

Yibin Vocational and Technical College served as the research locale. Two factors led to the selection of this college as the study location. First, the researcher being affiliated with the college has first-hand experience with the students' oral English competencies and how English instruction is implemented. Second, this college is one of the parallel colleges in prefecture-level city colleges; hence, the problems and issues found could typify other colleges in China. To address the first research question, 60 students were randomly sampled. Stratified random sampling methods were used since students who majored in the science and technology department represent the average level of the whole college. For the second research question, a total number of 25 participants (15 students plus 10 teachers) were conveniently selected to participate in the interview. Participation in this research was entirely voluntary. Convenient sampling was chosen for its practicality and ease of implementation. It allows for the selection of participants who are readily available and accessible, making the research process more convenient and efficient.

C. Data Collection Tools

In collecting the data for the first research question, a software named LAIX was utilized to collect students' English proficiency, pronunciation proficiency, and vocabulary repertoire. LAIX Inc. is a Chinese artificial intelligence startup that develops and provides goods and services to promote English learning. The online test was composed of three parts: a vocabulary test, an English proficiency test, and a pronunciation test. The vocabulary test lasted for about three minutes, and students could obtain general descriptive data showing what tasks they could fulfill with the vocabulary size. The English proficiency test is made up of three parts: a preliminary test, an advanced test, and a higher advanced test, and each part would be done within 3-5 minutes. LAIX consists of seven levels of proficiency, and each level indicates performing different tasks:

Proficiency Level 1: At this level, individuals can understand basic English and communicate essential personal information in the language. They are also capable of providing simple responses during clear and slow-paced conversations. For example, they can introduce their family members.

Proficiency Level 2: At this stage, individuals are expected to manage basic English communication in daily scenarios. This includes being able to describe common objects and achieve straightforward communicative objectives. For instance, they can introduce a new job they've started or go through the process of checking in at a hotel.

Proficiency Level 3: At this proficiency tier, individuals are required to proficiently engage in discussions on a diverse range of life-related topics in English, such as love, health, and work. They should also have the ability to concisely articulate their personal experiences, future plans, and opinions. For example, they can vividly describe a signature local dish or meticulously plan a summer study-abroad program, demonstrating their language capabilities at this level.

Proficiency Level 4: At this advanced stage, individuals possess the confidence and linguistic prowess to engage in seamless conversations with native English speakers. They are fully equipped to achieve all their daily communication objectives with ease. The competencies demonstrated at this level span a wide range, such as engaging in in-depth discussions about different lifestyles or effectively sharing joyous news in a natural and articulate manner.

Proficiency Level 5: Those at this level have attained a high level of English proficiency. They can effortlessly navigate through foreign countries, savor local cuisines, and immerse themselves in the local entertainment scene. Moreover, they are able to articulate their opinions and attitudes both fluently and accurately. Examples of the capabilities associated with this level include engaging in detailed discussions about travel itineraries and clearly expounding on the reasons for their departures.

Proficiency Level 6: At this pinnacle of language proficiency, individuals are fully capable of sustaining an entirely English-speaking environment, whether in the classroom or office. They can communicate complex ideas with clarity and appropriateness, adapting their language to the context seamlessly. A prime example of the skills mastered at this level is the ability to engage in in-depth discussions about potential strategies for enhancing work projects, demonstrating a high level of linguistic and communicative finesse.

Proficiency Level 7: Understand American TV shows/movies sans subtitles, engage confidently in business negotiations, and effortlessly achieve advanced communication goals.

Based on the assessment system adopted by LAIX, students' pronunciation proficiency can be classified into five distinct levels. Level 1 is designated as "Basic," representing the fundamental stage of pronunciation acquisition. Level 2 is termed "Fair," indicating a moderate level of pronunciation skills. Level 3, "Proficient," denotes a relatively high degree of proficiency in pronunciation. Level 4, "Advanced," implies an advanced level of pronunciation ability, showing a high level of accuracy and naturalness. Finally, Level 5 is labeled as "Native," signifying that students' pronunciation is on par with that of native speakers, demonstrating near-perfect pronunciation and intonation.

Regarding the second research question, an interview guide was utilized to investigate the challenges associated with speaking and the factors that give rise to them. Comprising open-ended questions, the interview guide was designed to more comprehensively evoke students' responses to the three tests.

In addition, third-party resources such as audio recordings were incorporated to guarantee the integrity and consistency of the data collection process. This approach not only enhanced the reliability of the data but also provided an objective means of documenting and analyzing the interviews, thereby strengthening the overall validity of the research findings.

D. Data Gathering Procedure

Prior to commencing data collection, the software was subject to verification by two professors specializing in language education. A preliminary evaluation was carried out to gauge the software's credibility. Once the instruments had received approval, LAIX was employed to evaluate students' vocabulary range, English language proficiency, and pronunciation proficiency. This was succeeded by interviews conducted through an online platform, specifically WeChat video, as well as face-to-face interviews.

The assessment component was completed within approximately 20 minutes, while the interview segment endured for five to eight minutes. Concurrently, the participants' responses were recorded. Subsequently, these recordings were transcribed into textual format and translated into English. The English-language text of the translation was then sent back to the participants for a second verification of its content, thereby ensuring the accuracy and integrity of the data.

E. Data Analysis

A total of 180 original images of computer screens or electronic devices displaying students' test results were obtained. Each student involved was instructed to prepare and deliver three separate reports, consisting of an assessment of their English language proficiency level, a measure of their range of vocabulary, and an evaluation of their ability to correctly pronounce words. (i.e., English proficiency level report, vocabulary repertoire report, and pronunciation proficiency report). The quantitative data gathered were inputted into Excel form for analysis. The data were analyzed using frequency distribution and percentages to identify the students' oral English proficiency levels including their vocabulary and pronunciation skills.

For the qualitative data, thematic analysis was done. From the transcribed data, significant statements shared by the participants were highlighted and selected. These statements were then organized and grouped into different sub-themes and themes using Excel form, which allowed for easy categorization and analysis. Overall, these two methods of analysis--the percentage and theme distribution of the students' and teachers' responses, as well as the thematic analysis of the interview data--were used to gain a comprehensive understanding of the data collected in the study.

F. Ethical Consideration

Research protocols and guidelines were strictly followed in the conduct of the study. The study was conducted following the recommendations and ethical standards of the Saint Louis University-Research Ethics Committee (SLU-REC). The respondents' consent was sought before participating in the online test using LAIX. Moreover, participation in the interview was voluntary. Lastly, the participants were assured of the confidentiality of the information acquired from them. They were guaranteed that the data would be used solely for the study.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Oral English Proficiency Level of the Chinese Vocational College Students

This section presents the oral English proficiency of the students. This includes their English proficiency level, vocabulary repertoire, and pronunciation proficiency.

(a). Oral English Proficiency Level

TABLE 1
STUDENTS' LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY REPORT

Level description	Number of students	Frequency
Lv1	48	80.0%
Lv2	10	16.7%
Lv3	2	3.3%

Table 1 presents the oral English language proficiency level of 60 Chinese vocational college students. The test results from LAIX indicate that 80% of students are at Level 1, which means they can only communicate in English with some basic expressions. A few students (16.7%) are at Level 2, which implies few can talk about basic topics fluently and

accurately in English and achieve basic communicative purposes. Only a couple of students (3%) reached Level 3, which means only a very limited number of students can talk about more life topics in English. The results are similar to that of Xu (2020) who found that students can express their thoughts in simple English and can and often use the fixed phrases and sentence patterns they have mastered in oral communication.

Students in vocational colleges have a relatively weak foundation in English language learning. Most of the students who failed the National College Entrance Examination in China came from Vocational Colleges and those who failed in the Provincial Senior High School received a two- to three-year education in a technical secondary school. This situation is consistent with the viewpoint of Su (2015), who claims that students with stronger academic performance tend to choose universities for their higher education instead of vocational and technical education schools. Aligned to what Su discovered, only a few students consider themselves proficient or highly proficient in English, and the perceived English proficiency in mainland China is even more significant. When the participants were asked about their perceived oral proficiency level, they generally agreed that their level was quite low. The majority perceived themselves at Level 1 or 2, with only a few exceptional students at Level 3 or higher.

(b). *Vocabulary Repertoire*

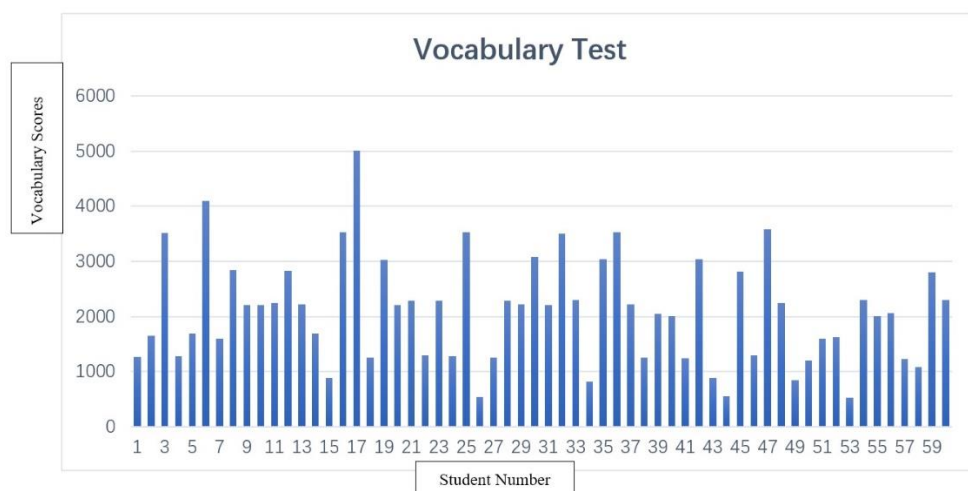


Figure 2. Students' Vocabulary Report

Based on Figure 2, the vocabulary test results from LAIX showed that most students (83.3%) had a limited understanding of fewer than 3000 words. From this, it can be inferred that students' ability to use English was restricted to basic and straightforward communication, and a few of them could only understand short narrative plots. Parallel to the results, Xu (2020) found that the primary challenge Chinese vocational college students face in terms of oral proficiency is their inadequate vocabulary. The LAIX findings show that only a single student achieved a vocabulary size of 5055 words, indicating that he could understand the finer points of news stories and the general themes conveyed in everyday texts or passages. During the interview, the participants mentioned visiting international websites and browsing social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, etc. The results indicate that most students lack sufficient vocabulary, which is essential for them when expressing themselves orally. Their low level of oral English proficiency can be attributed to the inadequacy of their vocabulary. According to Adam (2016), the lack of vocabulary significantly impairs EFL learners' ability to effectively engage in interpersonal communication. Moreover, Li (2016) pointed out that the primary difficulties encountered by higher vocational students in their English language skills are related to weak fundamental knowledge, insufficient vocabulary, unclear grammar, and difficulties in implementing English in practical settings.

(c). *Pronunciation Proficiency*

TABLE 2
STUDENTS' PRONUNCIATION REPORT

Pronunciation level	Number of students
Level 1: Basic	11
Level 2: Fair	29
Level 3: Proficient	18
Level 4: Advanced	1
Level 5: Native	1

Table 2 illustrates that there are five distinct levels of classifying students' pronunciation skills. Based on the results, only two students outperformed, reaching a level comparable to that of a native speaker or someone who has advanced skills. Unfortunately, many students (66.7%) failed to attain proficiency in their pronunciation. A mere 33.3% of students

reached proficiency in their pronunciation. Similar to the results, Zheng (2010) and Mak (2011) noted that Chinese EFL learners are especially weak in speaking and pronunciation. Also, Liang (2015) who conducted a similar study, revealed that more than half of the participants struggled with the correct pronunciation of assimilation, liaison, and weak form.

One common pronunciation problem that Chinese vocational college students face is the incorrect pronunciation of certain sounds in English. The common pronunciation errors for Chinese vocational college students are the pronunciation of English vowels /i/ and /i:/, /ai/ and /æ/, consonant sound contrasts (for example, /z/ and /ð/, /s/ and /θ/, /b/ and /p/, /w/ and /v/, etc.). Students also committed common errors in stress and intonation. This can be due to differences in phonetic systems and the lack of exposure to native English speakers. The poor pronunciation skills of students are strongly linked to their ability to comprehend spoken language, leading to difficulties in understanding the English language. This, in turn, can impede their ability to express themselves orally. As Liang (2015) concluded, there is a significant correlation between Chinese EFL learners' articulatory level with their performance of listening comprehension. It should be noted that the student who was classified as a native speaker mentioned that he enjoyed watching British and American dramas. He emphasized the significance of imitation of native tones and the influence of language environment on pronunciation.

The results imply the utmost need for the students to improve their vocabulary and pronunciation skills for them to be orally proficient in English.

B. Factors Affecting the Students' Oral English Proficiency

Combining the teachers' responses with those of the students, some significant statements emerged during the interview. Based on the thematic analysis, the following themes representing the factors affecting the students' oral English proficiency were derived: linguistic factors, psychological factors, language exposure, and language pedagogy.

(a). Linguistic Factors

Linguistic factors refer to those language-related competencies that are essential in oral English proficiency. These may include English language foundation, vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation.

Students enrolled in vocational and technical colleges lack proficiency in the English language like insufficient vocabulary, deficient grammatical rules, poor pronunciation, and weak listening comprehension. This view is supported by the interview findings. For instance, most of the students admitted their limited vocabulary. Meanwhile, some students (S2, S6, S7, S9, and S14) stated they have not obtained solid grammatical rules and were influenced by their mother tongue (negative transfer of L1). According to teacher 2 (T2), students can understand basic rules in coping with the exam but not firmly, or even confusingly. Moreover, T5, T7, and T8 expressed that inadequate grammatical knowledge is a great hindrance to students' oral English communication. Meanwhile, some students were conscious that their poor pronunciation became a hindrance to oral English. Even the top student (S8) admitted that he has difficulty uttering liaison, and a few students (S3, S6, S8, S12, S13) acknowledged they had difficulty in pronunciation. Meanwhile, S11, with the level of a native speaker in pronunciation, emphasized that it is necessary to imitate the intonation and rhythm of the native speakers to be more authentic.

Listening competency was also one of the linguistic factors mentioned by the interviewed students (S2, S3, S5, S8, and S12). They manifested their worries about incompetent listening comprehension. S2 shared that there is a significant gap between what is learned in textbooks and how language is used in real life. This finding shows that students' oral English proficiency is influenced by their listening skills. As Doff (2008) claims, learners cannot improve their speaking abilities if they do not acquire listening competence.

For students to build on their oral English proficiency, it is crucial for them to work on their language competencies in vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. As Pangket (2019) and Shvidko et al. (2015) pointed out, students' oral fluency is impacted by linguistic factors.

(b). Psychological Factors

Psychological factors entail the students' behavior and attitude that affect their oral English proficiency such as their confidence, motivation, interest, personality, fear, and shyness. These psychological factors were significantly featured during the interview. Some students expressed the importance of confidence in oral communication, and they admitted that they suffered from anxiety, nervousness, timidity, and fear of negative evaluation from their peers, which aligned with the classroom observation of the interviewed teachers. Most of the teachers (T1, T3, T4, T5, T6, T7, T8, T9) observed students have psychological barriers such as shyness, fear to make mistakes, fear of speaking in front of classmates, fear of being ridiculed, lack of interest, and lack of purpose when speaking English. As the findings indicate, many psychological factors hinder the students to be orally proficient in English. This concurs with the findings of Piechurska-Kuciel (2008), who demonstrated that within the context of foreign language learning, language anxiety is reported to be negatively associated with both oral proficiency and self-perceived speaking proficiency. Parallel to the findings of Ariyanti (2016), psychological factors may significantly impact the speaking skills of EFL students.

Aligned with the findings of the current study, Ali et al. (2020) discovered that Pakistani ESL students faced various linguistic, social, and psychological challenges while communicating in English. Likewise, the findings closely correspond with the research conducted by Amoah and Yeboah (2021) on psychological factors related to Chinese EFL learners speaking anxiety, revealing that shyness and fear of making mistakes are the most significant obstacles. Similar findings were found by Nurhasanah (2015) and Ali et al. (2020), who concluded that psychological issues such as

nervousness, fear of making errors, peer pressure, lack of confidence, etc. had a major influence on students' speaking presentations.

(c). *Language Exposure*

Language exposure denotes avenues by which the students use English in oral communication. Most of the interviewed students expressed their concerns about the absence of a language-use environment. In addition, many of the interviewed teachers noted that there is a lack of genuine contexts that encourage students to express themselves, resulting in limited opportunities for students to speak and utilize English. The findings indicate that the students' exposure to English use is so limited; hence, they are not able to practice speaking the language, especially in oral communication. English classes in most vocational colleges are held twice a week, allowing for very minimal language practice. This is consistent with the findings of Kluge and Taylor (2009), the most significant obstacle to developing fluency in oral English communication among students is the absence of opportunities to use the language outside of class.

In the context of EFL, learning frequently occurs in settings where the language plays a less significant role in the community and is primarily learned only in the classroom. Also, EFL students in China, particularly those residing in mainland China, have limited opportunities for direct face-to-face interaction with native English speakers. The lack of a language-use environment is the primary factor that impedes the students to communicate effectively in English. As Neri et al. (2002) pointed out, the crucial element for successful language acquisition is exposure to the target language, as it provides a model for learners to follow.

(d). *Language Pedagogy*

In the study context, language pedagogy refers to the teaching methods, approaches, and practices in Chinese vocational colleges.

Teachers interviewed identified additional factors that exert influence on students' oral proficiency. These factors include instructional approaches and methods, as well as the teacher's professional competence. For instance, T2 articulated that insufficient training in read-aloud activities and lack of practice in listening have a significant impact on speaking. T5 mentioned backward teaching methods and teaching conditions. T6 remarked that teaching style, outdated textbooks, and teaching material also impede students' oral proficiency. T7 expressed that in exam-oriented education, students can only get skills trained in limited reading and writing but not in oral English practice. This array of insights from different teachers underscores the multifaceted nature of the issues that may constrain students' development of oral proficiency in English. These factors, ranging from instructional practices to educational paradigms, should be comprehensively considered when formulating strategies to enhance students' oral language skills.

On the other hand, as noted by Teacher 8 (T8), teachers often resort to traditional teaching approaches. These conventional methods prove ineffective in motivating and engaging students and contribute to a lackluster classroom atmosphere. Teacher 10 (T10) further expressed concerns regarding the teaching faculty. Middle-aged and older teachers, according to T10, may not possess a high level of oral proficiency, while younger teachers may lack the necessary experience and confidence in front-line teaching. Teacher 9 (T9) also pointed out that the amount of input, specifically auditory and visual input, is severely insufficient.

The findings of this study clearly indicate that the practices and methods employed in teaching English as a foreign language substantially impact the development of students' oral English proficiency. Currently, college English teaching remains predominantly exam-oriented, with a dearth of English-speaking activities both inside and outside the classroom. The present study's findings are highly congruent with the outcomes presented by Hsu (2015). The prevalence of exam-oriented teaching and learning has led to a relative underemphasis on spoken English compared to reading and writing, which is in line with grammar-oriented or form-based training. These findings strongly suggest that English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers need to reevaluate their teaching practices and methods to better promote the improvement of students' oral English proficiency. As emphasized by Neri et al. (2002), to accommodate diverse learning styles, input should be provided in multiple formats, including textual, auditory, and audio-visual. Such a comprehensive approach to teaching has the potential to enhance students' language acquisition, particularly in oral communication.

IV. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

A. *Conclusions*

This study meticulously ascertained the oral English proficiency levels of Chinese vocational college students and the factors that exert influence thereon.

The results clearly demonstrate that Chinese vocational college students exhibit relatively low oral English proficiency. This is manifested through their limited vocabulary reserves and sub-optimal pronunciation skills. A multitude of factors has been identified as having a negative impact on their oral English proficiency. These encompass linguistic factors, psychological elements, the extent of language exposure, and the pedagogical approaches employed in language teaching.

The students' oral English proficiency is significantly shaped not merely by language-related skills such as vocabulary acquisition, grammatical knowledge, pronunciation accuracy, listening comprehension, and speaking fluency. Psychological factors also play a pivotal role. Their interest in the English language, motivation to learn, and confidence in speaking English all contribute substantially to their oral proficiency levels. More than these factors, their language

exposure and the way they are taught the English language are crucial in developing their oral language proficiency. Beyond these factors, the degree of language exposure the students experience, and the instructional methods used in English language teaching are of critical importance in the development of their oral language proficiency. Understanding these complex interrelationships is essential for educators and policymakers to design more effective language teaching strategies and interventions aimed at enhancing the oral English capabilities of Chinese vocational college students.

B. Limitations and Implications

The sample of the study might not be fully representative of the vast and diverse population of Chinese vocational college students. And the reliance on descriptive analysis alone restricts the exploration of causal relationships. Without more advanced statistical methods like regression, it's hard to determine which factors truly drive oral proficiency.

For EFL courses in Chinese vocational colleges, more focus should be placed on language competencies like listening, pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar to boost students' oral English. Language teaching must enhance students' English exposure, and teachers should reevaluate their practices.

Specifically, English class frequency should be increased for more immersive learning. English-only zones should be set up for practice. Technology integration, such as using online resources and apps, can make learning more engaging. Extracurricular activities like English clubs should be encouraged. Resources for self-study and cultural exchanges with English-speaking countries should be promoted.

Finally, further studies on oral English proficiency in EFL contexts may be conducted. These may include assessing students' oral communication competencies and needs and exploring language teaching strategies and materials for improving oral proficiency.

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