The Influence of Curriculum of English Major on Oral Communicative Competence: A Case Study of Zhejiang University of Science and Technology

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Abstract

With China's integration into the global economy, there is a growing demand of college English major students qualified for oral communicative proficiency. Speaking is the most direct and efficient way of communication. Therefore, oral communicative competence is the top priority for cultivating English major students. However, at present, most of the English major students are facing a hard dilemma that their overall English oral communicative ability is weak, their output ability is incompetent and their accuracy is not acceptable. Moreover, the oral English teaching in large-scale classes for English major is far from satisfactory. Utilizing curriculum settings in an effective way to help English major students increase the fluency of the language output. Oral English classroom plays an important role in guiding students. The survey found that the majority of students believe that current oral curriculum settings has some problems and does not work well. What pedagogical goals should be achieved and what kinds of lessons should be presented in the English major oral classrooms also provoked our thinking. To alleviate students' oral anxiety, refining the curriculum with an emphasis on oral instruction, clarifying the goals of such teaching, and enhancing assessment techniques might be effective measures to improve students' oral competence.

Keywords: oral communicative competence, English major students, oral curriculum settings, language input and output

1. Introduction

In the wave of globalization, English, serving as the lingua franca for international communication, is undeniably significant. For English majors, excellent oral English communicative competence is not only an academic pursuit, but also the core competitiveness of future career development and cross-cultural communication. Therefore, it is of great practical significance and academic value to study how English major courses affect students' oral English communicative competence.

However, at present, most English majors present the capability of weak oral English speaking, incompetent output ability, lack of deep cultural understanding and strong expression accuracy. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to comprehensively analyze the key factors such as the curriculum setting, teaching content and teaching methods of English majors, and to explore how they jointly affect students' oral English communicative competence. Through this study, we hope to reveal the internal relationship between English major courses and oral English communicative competence and to provide scientific basis for curriculum optimization so as to help students more confidently display their oral English talents in the international arena.

2. Definition of Oral Classroom

Oral classroom is a randomized controlled trial of a whole-of-classroom intervention to improve Children's oral communicative competence. Oral language, as a basic cross-disciplinary skill, is essential for effective communication. Students are required to learn to communicate orally in a range of contexts, especially in the classroom setting (King & Hui, 2021, P.1). Eliciting student talk encourages using oral language to express their understanding of a concept or idea. It is more than just knowledgeable peers sharing answers; it is the use of language as a tool to construct meaning. Not only can student talk help them better construct understanding of an idea or concept, it can also indicate the instructor whether a particular activity is supporting student learning and

whether students are achieving course learning objectives (Chism & Tomaswick, 2018).

An oral classroom is a teaching activity in which the main goal is to improve students' oral skills. In this type of classroom, students practice their oral expression in English through interaction with the teacher and their classmates. The characteristics of oral classroom include:

(1) Highly interactive: there are a large number of oral communication activities between teachers and students and between students and students, such as dialogue practice, group discussion, role-playing and so on.

(2) Practice-oriented: This factor emphasizes the practical application of language skills. It involves simulating real-life situations and scenarios to enhance students' expressive abilities and adaptability, ensuring that language learning is directly applicable to real-world contexts.

(3) Timely feedback: teachers provide timely corrections and guidance to students' oral performance, help students correct pronunciation and grammatical errors, and improve fluency and accuracy of expression.

(4) Diversified activities: classroom activities are rich and varied, including dialogues, speeches, debates, discussions, simulations and so on, aiming to stimulate students' interest and enthusiasm in learning.

(5) Emphasis on cultural understanding: through oral classroom, students not only learn the language, but also understand the cultural background of the target language and improve their cross-cultural communicative competence.

The core of the speaking classroom is to provide students with a language learning environment of free expression and interactive communication to help them overcome language barriers and improve their actual oral communication skills.

3. Current Situation of Oral Classroom Settings for English Major in Zhejiang University of Science and Technology (ZUST)

The oral English curriculum for our university's English major is as follows: a one-semester Oral English course with a native-speaking teacher; two semesters of Public Speaking and Debate; three semesters of English Listening and Speaking; one semester of Intercultural Communication and four semesters of Comprehensive English. In addition, there is some oral interaction in other specialized courses, such as English Reading.

Take Comprehensive and Public Speaking as an example. Firstly, integrated English classes are rich in reading and listening materials, which can provide students with a lot of comprehensible input, thus facilitating students' oral output activities. Teachers stimulate classroom activity through flexible and inspiring methods. For example, setting up topic discussions, film appreciation, and Ted Talks have all been effective in stimulating classroom discussions. These activities have received positive feedback, with students actively expressing their viewpoints. Secondly,we have pre-class presentations on set topics in public speaking class where students voluntarily and independently present their classroom presentations. Sometimes, teacher will organize impromptu speaking activities within the classroom. Students responded positively to the teacher's organization and are highly motivated in the classroom.

As for the other courses, they are also closely related to the improvement of speaking skills. English listening and Reading classes play an important role in accumulating oral output materials. For each class, teachers will give us a certain topic related to the teaching materials and then ask students to say something about this topic. Students can say whatever they like related to these certain topics. If you have something to say, you can expound at length. If you have no idea about such topic, you can simply say a few words. The oral classes and the teacher's goal is to push you to express your viewpoints and give you the chance to practice your oral English speaking. This type of class won't grade your competence and the class should be easy for students to take. Teachers will correct our expressions and teach us some new words, phrases and sentence patterns.

Besides, the size of the teaching class for English major in our school is rather small with relatively fewer students, thus ensuring everyone has the opportunity to participate in oral practice in class. Also, oral teaching is highly practical with flexible organization, rich content and diverse teaching methods (Zhang, 2014, P.64).

In summary, the current curriculum shows the necessity to help students transition from oral input to output, but the practical implementation of the specific operations may still require further enhancement.

4. Research Methodology

We employed a questionnaire survey method, distributing survey questionnaires online. Our team investigates a total of 102 students from the first to the fourth year of the English major at ZUST, resulting in 102 valid

questionnaires. The overall level of the respondents was unevenly distributed, with a majority at the intermediate level, a few with better proficiency, and some with weaker skills. (See the attached Appendix 1.)

Besides, in order to enhance the credibility of our survey results, we additionally conducted individual interviews with 10 students from our major. Utilizing a semi-structured interview format, we sequentially posed questions designed to elicit insights into the students' perceptions and suggestions regarding the oral communication curriculum. These interviews allowed for a directed conversation while also providing the interviewees the opportunity to expound on their views openly. (The detailed interview questions are presented in Appendix 2 for reference.)

5. Results

The survey results intuitively show us that the majority of English major students believe that the current professional oral course settings are of certain help to us, however, there is a problem of being too heavily oriented towards written language. At the same time, the majority of students in this major hope to add more classes with native-speaking teachers to improve their oral English proficiency.

According to our questionnaire, the current oral classroom settings for English major have some problems. One of the major problems is the students' passive acceptance and shyness to speak in front of the whole class. They lack the desire and motivation to speak and express their ideas and views. Native English teachers think they have tried their best to have every oral class, yet students always have a feeling that they find themselves still a little "dumb" and unable to use the knowledge they acquired in oral English class to make communications fluently even though they have finished their oral classes seriously.

Overall, the majority students keep silence in oral English classes, which would definitely bring a negative effect to the development of English major students' ability of oral English. Before some of the students choosing English as their major, they just have received the standard Chinese English teaching methods that is Traditional English learning pattern. They pay much attention to their writing, reading and listening skills and ignore their oral communicative ability. Therefore, most of them form the Chinglish mindset. Researchers claim that Chinglish is mainly caused by syntactic transfer from Chinese, the influence of Chinese thought patterns, inadequate authentic English environment and insufficient oral English practice (Swain, 1985).

At the national level, education system in China puts much more emphasis on the cultivation of writing competence than oral communicative competence, which results in students' inabilities to communicate. Therefore, English major students need take some time to adapt themselves to actively accept totally different language learning patterns and get rid of passive acceptance and embrace the active acceptance mode instead. The active acceptance mode means that students need to develop a learning habit of actively sharing knowledge and expressing themselves in class verbally. The effectiveness of oral classroom settings should improve students capability of speaking English fluently and oral proficiency as expected. The goal of oral classroom settings is to explore a set of effective standardized teaching mode of oral English classroom and change students' passive acceptance, and promote the development of students' oral English level. Based on the current situation of oral English teaching, the settings should include three stages that is "driving, promoting and evaluating" to stimulate students' oral ability and further optimize students' overall oral communicative competence.

6. Analysis and Discussion

In order to further figure out the influence of oral classrooms settings on English major students, the research group carried out a questionnaire survey and also conducted individual interviews with ten English major students, including freshman, sophomore, junior and senior in Zhejiang University of Science and Technology. The content of interviews can be found in Appendix 2.

Based on Appendix 1, through analysis, it can be concluded that approximately 53% of the students believe their oral English level is at a lower-middle stage, often stumbling in language expression. 54.9% of the students practice speaking English for less than half an hour each day. 77.43% of them think that English speaking classes have some positive effect on their oral skills, with 42% considering the classroom usage of oral English to be between 35% and 50%. 62% of them have virtually no opportunities to communicate with foreigners in a week, and over 80% students feel that the curriculum is too academically oriented. The reasons students cite for their insufficient oral skills include a lack of emphasis on speaking ability, fear of speaking out, a lack of language environments to practice speaking, and overly academic study habits, with the fear of speaking out accounting for as much as 80%.

Based on Appendix 2 , we find that the interview questions are targeted at the aspects of Course Relevance and

Student Needs, Student Engagement, Effectiveness of Teaching Methods, Role of Technology in Oral Teaching, Student Anxiety and Oral Competence, Curriculum Content and Practical Application.

These results (see Appendix 2) show that students generally feel that the current English curriculum partially meets their oral communication needs but lacks interactive and practical elements. They desire more dynamic classroom models that include role-playing, simulated conversations, group discussions and debate competitions to enhance oral comminucative competence. Students show a preference for activities that allow free expression and active involvement over passive listening. The majority prefer a classroom environment that is more interactive and daily-life oriented, rather than being dominated by one party. Additionally, some students suggested opportunities for mixed practice sessions with international students.

The current teaching models are considered moderately effective in improving oral skills, with suggestions for more practical opportunities and post-class consolidation through online platforms or additional interactions with native speakers.

While some students have used language learning apps and found them beneficial, there is a general consensus on assistance of technology in facilitating oral practice by providing access to diverse cultural interactions and on-demand learning.

Anxiety in oral expression is common and affects students' performance. Strategies to alleviate anxiety include increased practice, preparation and shifting focus from fear of making mistakes to confidence building through regular interactions.

There is a perceived gap between course content and real-life English application. Students wish for a curriculum that is more closely aligned with everyday conversations, professional scenarios, and cultural exchanges, rather than being overly academic.

The students' feedback highlights their desire for more practical, engaging, and culturally relevant course content, which is echoed in the paper's recommendations for curriculum enhancement to better prepare English majors for global communication. The interview responses also validate the paper's identification of key issues such as student anxiety, lack of practical application, and the need for more interactive teaching methods. By integrating these insights, the curriculum can be refined to foster a more effective learning environment that addresses the oral communicative competence of English major students, as discussed in the paper's conclusions.

Therefore, through the combination of survey questionnaires and semi-structured interviews，we can see that common problems in English speaking classrooms of ZUST are as follow:

(1) Weak foundation of students' speaking: Under China's current education system, many students in primary and secondary schools mainly focus on test-taking education, the lack of cultivation of students' oral English, and very little oral practice, which leads to the lack of oral ability of most students when they enter the university, and even though they have a good foundation of grammar and reading and writing, they are still afraid to open their mouths to speak English, and they lack self-confidence to say it.

(2) Low participation in class: Because the traditional teaching mode is teacher-centered, students' participation is low. Under the traditional education mode and habits in China, whether in primary and secondary schools or colleges and universities, the teacher lectures mostly and the students listen to the lectures, and the students seldom have the opportunity to participate in the class actively, so the students are afraid to open their mouths or are unwilling to take the initiative to participate in the speaking class.

(3) Teachers' varying levels of oral proficiency: Some English teachers have limited oral proficiency themselves and are unable to provide good language demonstrations and enough opportunities for oral practice. Most of them also aim at teaching for the test and do not pay much attention to cultivating their students' speaking skills, and schools also do not take teachers' speaking ability and pronunciation standard as the first condition when selecting teachers.

(4) Limited teaching resources and environment: We lack both good environment and opportunity for practicing English. The most serious problem is that our university has a very limited number of foreign teachers and international students that are native speakers of English, so students lack the opportunity to communicate with real native English speakers.

(5) Single teaching materials and teaching methods: Many speaking materials are outdated and lack of practicality. Some classroom teaching materials are out of touch with daily life.The teaching methods are also monotonous, failing to stimulate students' interest in learning, and students' fear of opening their mouths to speak and lack of interest at the same time will lead to an undesirable cycle.

(6) Imperfect evaluation system: The current oral evaluation system is mostly based on written tests or recitation, which cannot fully reflect the students' oral level, and as a result, the oral course will also become a course of exam-oriented education and lack of specific evaluation standards for oral ability.

In a word, the significance of the effectiveness of oral classroom settings play an important role in transforming students' mindset in learning English and overcome their psychological fear in speaking English in public. Besides, the oral classroom can create a scenario that is closely related to the real communication scenarios. The effective oral classroom settings should focus on the student's need and what they want, upholding student-oriented principle. Their need can be separated into target need and necessary need. The needs of the target situation decide the necessities.

For instance, an educator needs to activate their motivation through interesting topics and designs various types of classroom interaction models to stimulate students' enthusiasm for learning. The effective oral classroom settings can exert a great function of "output-driven" goals and inject new vitality and bring new inspiration to the reform of the oral English teaching mode in universities. They can play as an invisible hand in intervening and influencing students' knowledge of input and intake. Utilizing output-driven roles can set the right orientation for the development of subsequent oral English teaching for English majors, meanwhile, oral classroom should play a role as a transitional platform for students to communicate in the real situations.

7. Improvement Measures and Future Prospects

In response to the survey results and in order to further enhance the quality of oral English education in China, a multiple approach is essential. Integrating immersive and interactive teaching methodologies can significantly boost students' speaking and listening skills. Teachers should incorporate activities such as debates, role-playing, and real-life conversation simulations that encourage students' active participation. Incorporating technology, such as language learning apps and online platforms that connect students with native speakers can provide additional practice opportunities. Furthermore, continuous professional development for English teachers is crucial to equip them with the latest pedagogical strategies and linguistic proficiency. The prospects for oral English education in China are promising, with increasing globalization necessitating strong English communication skills. As educational institutions prioritize English proficiency, and as technological advancements make language learning more accessible and engaging, we can anticipate a generation of Chinese students who are not only fluent but also confident in their ability to communicate in English on a global stage.

In response to the current survey feedback from students in the School of Foreign Languages, which indicates that oral classes tend to be overly formal and the use of spoken language in class is not high. The institution plans to revise the curriculum to incorporate more interactive and practical components. This will include introducing a variety of engaging activities such as debates, role-plays, and impromptu speeches to encourage students to practice their oral skills in a less intimidating setting. Therefore, the derivative issues based on the problems in college oral curriculum settings, such as insufficient training environment and motivation, decoupling of classroom teaching from practical application and insufficient training of output skills (Xie & Li, 2021: 108) need to be solve urgently.

Firstly, in order to further address the issue of oral course settings and the phenomenon of deviation from daily practice, teachers should incorporate more common daily topics and socially relevant audio-visual listening comprehension materials in the classroom. This includes learning vocabulary related to various themes, describing, explaining, and detailing theme-related information, as well as stating opinions and communicating. Topics should range from everyday exchanges about traditional Chinese and Western festivals, movie culture, celebrities, to interactive discussions on hot issues in technology, education, and culture, sparking a collision of Chinese and Western cultures and ways of thinking. This will allow students to truly participate in the classroom, speak up, and thus exercise their oral expression skills, especially the ability to introduce traditional Chinese culture in English and express China's stance and viewpoints on international hot news.

Secondly, in response to the issue of low oral language usage in the classroom, the curriculum can be designed to offer both online and offline dual training environments. This involves setting up online simulated dialogue scenarios to leverage students' autonomy in learning, encouraging them to actively engage in vocabulary learning and output for specific situations. Offline training scenarios can be implemented through the provision of classes with native speakers, who assist in teaching and offer simulated language environments as well as opportunities for face-to-face conversation. This approach is intended to enhance students' confidence and proactivity in language communication. The specific course content can include personal statements, situational performances, and group discussions. Native speakers can adopt a method where they converse with students about a specific

scenario in each class, such as shopping in a supermarket, at a gas station, or in an amusement park. This approach can be used to expand on related expressions, and students can then consolidate their learning by presenting in class or engaging in peer communication based on what they have learned in the session.

The teaching method teachers adopt above is called Blended Learning. Blended Learning provides a new idea of sustaining innovation for current teaching reform. The teaching procedures will be divided into three parts: pre-class, in-class and after-class. The model is centered around solving real-world problems. Its core idea is that effective student learning only occurs when teachers design problems that are oriented towards the real world and provide corresponding guidance for problem-solving. Only then can teachers enhance their teaching effectiveness. The model requires teachers to transform their lecture-based teaching philosophy, shifting from being transmitters of knowledge to becoming guides, assistants, and facilitators in the learning process of students (Li, 2016, P.19). The specific operation process is illustrated in the following chart.
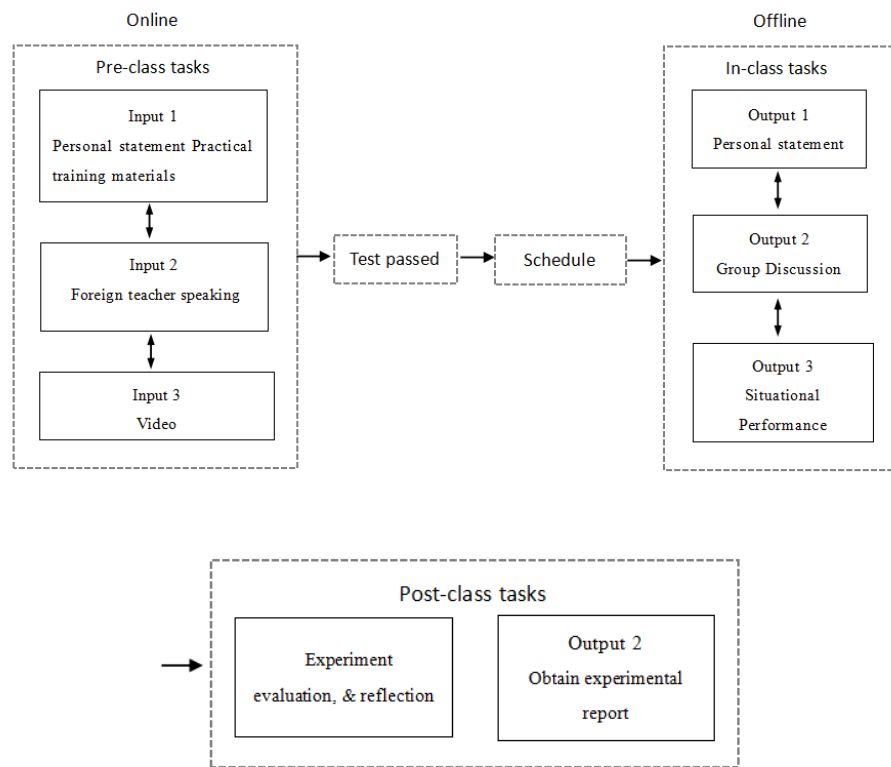

Figure 1. Flowchart of the blended English oral practical training process for college students

Thirdly, the oral course design should integrate the output-driven hypothesis into the curriculum. University teachers need innovate traditional teaching method and mindset, supplement students with appropriate extracurricular materials, stimulate their initiative in learning, thereby enhancing their enthusiasm for autonomous learning, and guide students to break away from the mindset that overemphasizes the text (Wen, 2013, P.20).
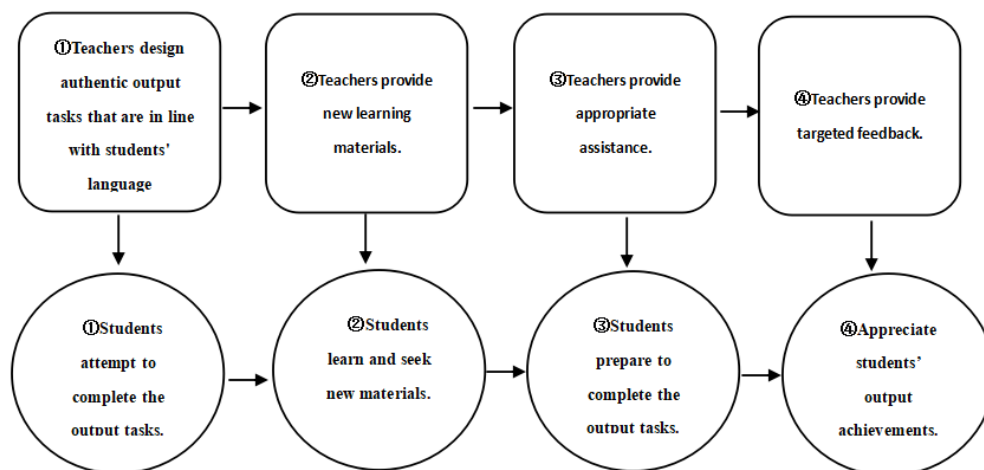
Figure 2. Basic process of implementing output-driven teaching

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, the study on the influence of the curriculum of English majors on oral communicative competence highlights the crucial role that educational curricula play in shaping the linguistic abilities of students. The findings highlight the importance of incorporating comprehensive, practical, and interactive language-learning strategies within the curriculum to effectively enhance students' oral communication skills. A balanced blend of language skills training, cultural awareness, and real-life communication simulations is essential for fostering an environment conducive to the development of proficient and confident English speakers.

While both models aim to improve English speaking skills, the approaches are often shaped by local educational priorities and resources. In China, oral English classes may struggle with large class sizes and a focus on rote learning, whereas overseas models tend to be more interactive and communicative. However, China is progressively adopting more modern, student-centered methodologies and integrating technology to enhance the effectiveness of oral English instruction.

Additionally, the study reveals that regular assessment and feedback mechanisms are instrumental in identifying areas for improvement and adjusting teaching methods accordingly.

Ultimately, the curriculum for English majors must adapt to evolving industry needs and technological advancements, ensuring that graduates are equipped with the oral communicative competence required to succeed in a globalized world.

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Authors contributions

Yixuan Wang took the lead in drafting the outline of the paper and was instrumental in the overall revision and refinement of each section of the paper.

Qinren Zhu was responsible for the analysis of the current state of oral English teaching and the predominant classroom models in Zhejiang University of Science and Technology.

Zhan Zhao contributed significantly to the methodology of our study and the exploration of future directions for oral English education.

Min Zhu supervised the whole research work, including the design of research methodology and framework. She was responsible for revising the linguistic expressions and format of the paper.

Collectively, all the authors participated in the distribution of the survey questionnaires, conducted interviews with participants, and were actively involved in the statistical analysis of the data. Furthermore, each author played a role in the final revision of the manuscript, with a focus on enhancing the clarity, coherence, and academic rigor of the content.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Obtained.

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No additional data are available.

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Appendix 1

Feedback on English major students in ZUST of English Classroom and Oral Communication

1. How would you rate your spoken language proficiency? [Single Choice Question]

Options	Subtotal	Percentage
A. Relatively weak	14	13.73%
B. Average, Sometimes stumbling	55	53.92%
C. Fairly Fluent	24	23.53%
D. Fluent and Natural	98	82%

2. How much time do you usually spend practicing spoken language each day? [Single Choice Question]

Options	Subtotal	Percentage
A. Less than half an hour	56	54.9%
B. About half an hour	30	29.41%
C. Half an hour to one hour	12	11.76%
D. More than one hour	43	92%

3. How helpful do you think the current English course settings are for oral communication? [Single Choice Question]

Options	Subtotal	Percentage
A. Not very helpful	19	18.63%
B. Somewhat helpful	77	75.43%
C. Significantly effective	65	88%
D. Very significantly effective	0	0

4. How do you rate the current usage rate of spoken English in English major classes? [Single Choice Question

Options	Subtotal	Percentage
A.Less than 35%	28	27.45%
B.35% to 50%	43	42.16%
C.50% to 65%	19	18.63%
D.More than 65%	12	11.76%

5. How frequently do you usually communicate with foreigners in English? [Single Choice Question]

Options	Subtotal	Percentage
A. Almost none	64	62.75%
B. Once a week	32	31.37%
C. Twice a week	43	92%
D. Three times a week	21	96%

6. Do you think the professional course settings are too academically oriented? [Single Choice Question]

Options	subtotal	Percentage
A. Yes	82	80.39%
B. No	20	19.61%

7. What do you think are the reasons for the existence of "mute" spoken English among current major students? [Multiple Choice Question]

Options	Subtotal	Percentage
A. Lack of emphasis on spoken language skills	59	57.84%
B. Fear of speaking out	82	80.39%
C. Lack of environment for practicing spoken language	76	74,51%
D. Overly academic learning	60	58.82%
E. Other	20	19.61%

Appendix 2

Interview Questions

1. Course Design and Student Needs Matching Issue:

Q: Do you feel that the current English major curriculum meets your needs for improving oral communicative skills? Can you describe the kind of oral classroom you expect?

2. Student Engagement Issue:

Q: What kind of classroom activities do you find most motivating for participating in oral practice? Do you have any preferences in terms of activity formats?

3. Effectiveness of Teaching Methods:

Q: How would you rate the effectiveness of the current teaching modes in the English major curriculum for enhancing speaking skills? Do the oral topics practiced in class get reinforced and trained offline?

4. Application of Technology in Oral Teaching:

Q: Have you used any speaking practice apps (Cambly/Hellotalk/iTalk, etc.) or AI to exercise your English speaking skills? If so, what role do you think technological tools play in oral teaching?

5. Student Expression Anxiety and Oral Skills:

Q: Do you ever feel afraid of expressing yourself orally or anxious about oral communication in daily life? How do you think this anxiety affects your oral performance? What strategies do you think could help alleviate this anxiety?

6. Relevance of Course Content to Practical Application:

Q: How relevant do you think the current content of the English major curriculum is to the practical use of English in real life? What aspects of oral expression would you like to learn in the classroom?