

The Moderating Role of Technology-Based Resources and Motivation: Examining the Influence of Soft and Hard Skill on English-Speaking Proficiency Among College Students in Nanchang, China

Zhang Donghua and Samah Hatem Almaki

Abstract—The study investigates the influence of soft skills, hard skills, technology-based resources, and motivation on English-speaking proficiency among college students in Nanchang, China. Through a comprehensive examination of these factors, the research aims to provide insights into the complex dynamics of language acquisition in an educational context characterized by globalization and digitalization. Findings reveal the interplay between soft skills, such as communication and empathy, and hard skills, including grammar and vocabulary, in shaping language proficiency. Additionally, the study highlights the moderating role of technology-based resources and intrinsic motivation in facilitating language learning. By adopting a holistic approach to language education and leveraging technological innovations, educators and policymakers can better support students in achieving English-speaking proficiency and preparing for success in an increasingly interconnected world.

Keywords—soft skills, hard skills, technology-based resources, motivation, English-speaking proficiency

I. INTRODUCTION

Competency in English language is becoming more and more crucial to college students from all over the world as a result of the globalization of education and the growing significance of English as a global language (Crystal, 1997). Despite the English language being an essential part of the Chinese curriculum, a significant language proficiency gap persists, with less than 1% of mainland Chinese considered conversational in English (Ministry of Education of China, 2020). Disparities between urban and rural areas exacerbate the issue, as city students benefit from better resources and teachers. In rural settings, high costs for senior high school drive students towards vocational schools, leading to a premature halt in English education (Ministry of Education of China, 2020). Despite the fact that English has now gained importance in the global business and the presence of private language schools in China, some still perceive limited usefulness of the language in the country. This language proficiency challenge highlights the need for addressing educational inequalities and promoting English proficiency nationwide (Ministry of Education of China, 2020).

One side of the problem comes from the disparity

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between the emphasis on rote learning and the application of practical language skills (Purmama, 2019). Many Chinese students know that learning English is of utmost importance to them. Nevertheless, a significant hurdle arises. This hurdle is the lack of opportunities to practice speaking outside of the classroom (Ministry of Education of China, 2023). As a result, spoken English frequently lags behind students' proficiency in writing and reading English. Some people are too shy to talk, and others have trouble understanding others and coming up with quick answers (Ministry of Education of China, 2023). This difficulty poses a substantial obstacle, particularly for those aspiring to study abroad, despite encouragement to do so. Compounding the issue is the prevailing negative attitude toward learning English (Ministry of Education of China, 2023).

Most Chinese students realized that speaking is one of the most challenging skills to master in English. The difficulty in speaking English among Chinese college students is often regarded as impossible due to its limited use and the shortage of people to talk to, contributing to the fact that there is no motivation among the student population (Purmama, 2019). The challenges faced by Chinese university students in developing English-speaking proficiency can be seen in many studies. According to Peng (2014), students consistently regard speaking as one of the most difficult English skills to learn let alone command. This is a perception which is shared among both English and non-English majors. This perception is reinforced by Zhang (2022), who identified verbal and non-verbal obstacles hindering spoken English. The hurdles being identified are anxiety, timidity, and a lack of cultural background knowledge. He (2013) further emphasized the role of foreign language speaking anxiety in students' oral English proficiency of today and the future. These studies point to the fact that there is a pressing need for a comprehensive and systematic approach to address the deficiency in English speaking proficiency among Chinese university students. The prevailing sentiment suggests that even if an individual attains proficiency, the lack of practical outlets for using the language contributes to a discouraging cycle of learning and subsequent forgetting and loss of interest.

Understanding the elements impacting English-speaking proficiency becomes critical in China, where proficiency in the language is essential for both academic and professional success. The role of technology in enhancing English-speaking proficiency among college students in Nanchang, China is a key focus of recent research. Fatt (1991) emphasizes the need for a

communicative approach to language learning, which could be facilitated by technology-based resource. Shuoyan (2021) and Tian (2020) both highlight the potential of network technology in improving English language learning, with Shuoyan specifically proposing an education platform based on network technology. Nguyen (2022) further supports the use of technology. He said that the use of technology can significantly impact the teaching and learning of speaking skills in English as a foreign language. These studies collectively suggest that technology-based resources can play a moderating role in the influence of soft and hard skill on English-speaking proficiency among college students in Nanchang, China.

Improved English-speaking ability is mostly dependent on motivation. This comes from a variety of sources and forms. According to Soriano (2021), important variables that will influence motivation include the classroom atmosphere, parental impact, instructor influence, learning delight, and the wants and needs to learn English. While Ahmad (2021) emphasizes the necessity for greater desire to promote oral competence, Lee (2011) highlights the significance of interest in enhancing proficiency. Toni (2012) provides additional evidence in favor of the favorable relationship between speaking ability and motivation. Thus, attaining English language proficiency among college students in China is an indisputable objective that plays a pivotal role in academic development and global engagement, especially in non-native contexts. Therefore, with reference to the background presented so far, the probable relationship between motivation and oral proficiency in China is still worthy of further study. As a result, the present research is a new attempt for the identification of the extent of the effect of motivation and technology-based resources. This, the researcher feels will influence the relationship between hard and soft skill and English-Speaking Proficiency Among College Students in Nanchang, China.

We've come a long way in our knowledge of how people learn and use language, but there are still plenty of unanswered concerns. The extent to which soft and hard skills contribute to English proficiency among university students in Nanchang, China, is an example of such an issue. The literature on language acquisition, especially in the context of English language competency, has largely ignored the relevance of "soft skills" like communication, empathy, and adaptability (Hoi & Mu, 2021). When compared to "hard skills" like grammar and vocabulary, the influence of "soft skills" on language acquisition has received less attention from researchers. Filling this gap would be made easier by the proposed study, which would look at whether Nanchang college freshmen's English ability and hard and soft skills correlate. The final goal of this research is to shed insight on the roles that adaptability, empathetic attitudes, and communicative abilities all play in language learners' success.

The impact of grammatical knowledge, vocabulary, and pronunciation on English proficiency among university students in Nanchang is still poorly understood, despite widespread agreement that these are essential building blocks of linguistic fluency. Few studies have examined all of these elements together. This far studies done were isolating individual ones like pronunciation or

grammar, and their effects on a person's overall level of fluency in speaking (Li et al., 2022). The proposed research would investigate the effect of hard skills on linguistic ability, filling a current knowledge gap. The study's overarching goal is to shed light on the value of "hard skills" like grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation on improving English language proficiency.

The cultural context of Nanchang, China has a significant impact on the attitudes, methods, and results of language students there. However, when it comes to college students' English proficiency, much of the existing literature overlooks the significance of cultural factors in language acquisition. Cultural values like collectivism and face-saving tendencies may affect students' propensity to participate in English speaking activities and language development (Chung, 2021). This researcher hope to fill this gap by studying the impact of regional customs on second-language learning. By investigating these links, this researcher hopes to help fill in some of the blanks in our understanding of how culture affects language acquisition results.

Although there are studies on language learning strategies, there is a lack of data on the efficacy of these strategies for helping college students in Nanchang enhance their English communication abilities. The debate continues about the relative efficacy of traditional classroom training, online courses, and travel-based language immersion. Teachers and policymakers who care about helping children increase their English proficiency should be aware of what strategies have been shown to be effective. The proposed study will address this vacuum by investigating the relationship between the study habits of college students in Nanchang and their English proficiency (Peng et al., 2023). The lack of research on how both soft and hard skills affect one's capacity to communicate successfully in English is perhaps the largest mystery (Peng et al., 2023). While there has been extensive study of the components of language proficiency individually, the interplay among them has received comparatively less attention. The purpose of this study is to address this gap by investigating the connection between soft skills and language ability among college freshmen in Nanchang. By learning how these skills reinforce and affect one another, this research hopes to shed insight on the full development of English proficiency (Tamah et al., 2020). The Researcher will also be studying the mediating effect of technology-based technology and how this is going to assist the teachers to improve their teaching methodology. Below are the objectives which has been set for this study:

- 1) To identify the level of college students speaking skills in Nanchang, China Based on China's Standards of English Language Ability.
- 2) To investigate the relationship between soft skills (Communication, empathy, and flexibility) and improving English-speaking proficiency of college students in Nanchang, China.
- 3) To examine the relationship between hard skills (grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation) and improving English-speaking proficiency among college students in Nanchang, China.

- 4) To identify the moderating role of technology-based resources and motivation on the relationship between soft skills and hard skill, and improving English-speaking proficiency of college students in Nanchang, China.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Constructivist Theory

Constructivism is an approach to teaching and learning based on the premise that cognition (learning) is the result of "mental construction." In other words, students learn by fitting new information together with what they already know. Constructivists believe that learning is affected by the context in which an idea is taught as well as by students' beliefs and attitudes. Constructivism is a learning theory found in psychology which explains how people might acquire knowledge and learn. It therefore has direct application to education. The theory suggests that humans construct knowledge and meaning from their experiences. Constructivism is not a specific pedagogy. Piaget's theory of Constructivist learning has had wide ranging impact on learning theories and teaching methods in education and is an underlying theme of many education reform movements. Research support for constructivist teaching techniques has been mixed, with some research supporting these techniques and other research contradicting those results. Driscoll (2000) explains that constructivist theory asserts that knowledge can only exist within the human mind, and that it does not have to match any real-world reality. Learners will be constantly trying to derive their own personal mental model of the real world from their perceptions of that world. As they perceive each new experience, learners will continually update their own mental models to reflect the new information, and will, therefore, construct their own interpretation of reality. According to Jonassen (1994), constructivism is also often misconstrued as a learning theory that compels students to "reinvent the wheel." In fact, constructivism taps into and triggers the student's innate curiosity about the world and how things work. Students do not reinvent the wheel but, rather, attempt to understand how it turns, how it functions. They become engaged by applying their existing knowledge and real-world experience, learning to hypothesize, testing their theories, and ultimately drawing conclusions from their findings.

Constructivism is a theory that asserts that learning is an activity that is individual to the learner. This theory hypothesizes that individuals will try to make sense of all information that they perceive, and that each individual will, therefore, "construct" their own meaning from that information. Constructivism represents one of the big ideas in education. Its implications for how teachers teach and learn to teach are enormous. If our efforts in reforming education for all students are to succeed, then we must focus on students. To date, a focus on student-centered learning may well be the most important contribution of constructivism. The principles of constructivism, increasingly influential in the organization of classrooms and curricula in schools, can be applied to teaching and

learning. The principles appeal to our modern views of learning and knowledge but conflict with traditional practices. Teachers need to reflect on their practice in order to apply these ideas to their work. Constructivist teachers encourage students to constantly assess how the activity is helping them gain understanding. By questioning themselves and their strategies, students in the constructivist classroom ideally become "expert learners." This gives them ever-broadening tools to keep learning. With a well-planned classroom environment, the students learn how to learn.

Resource-based View Theory

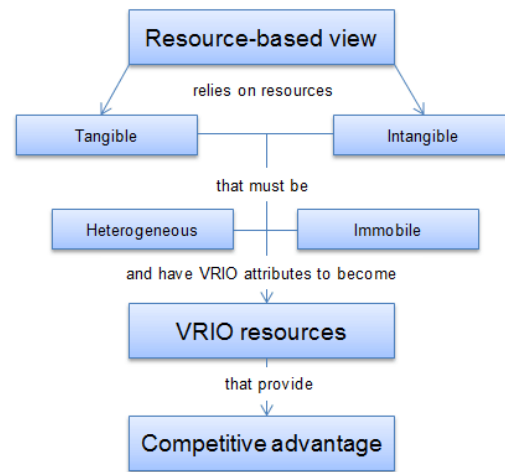


Figure 1: Resource-based View Theory

Resource-based view of competition holds that firms gain advantage by controlling scarce and valuable assets. With platforms, the assets that are hard to copy are the community and the resources its members own and contribute, be they rooms or cars or ideas and information. Resource-based theory contends that the possession of strategic resources provides an organization with a golden opportunity to develop competitive advantages over its rivals. This theory has been widely applied as a managerial framework to determine vital resources for a firm to achieve a sustained competitive advantage. The theory provides an essential framework to explain and predict the fundamentals of a company's performance and competitive advantage. This can be applied to the use of technology-based resources in teaching English speaking and in promoting the proficiency of speaking English.

Self-Determination Theory

Psychologists Richard Ryan and Edward Deci developed the Self-Determination Theory of motivation, which topped the dominant belief that the best way to get human beings to perform tasks is to reinforce their behaviour with rewards. Self-Determination Theory holds that individuals demonstrate the motivation to engage in positive behaviours or behaviour change when they have the knowledge and feel capable of taking the steps required to maintain positive behaviours or make changes (competence), the choice to do so rather than feeling pressured. Self-Determination is an idea that includes

people choosing and setting their own goals. Being involved in making life decisions, self-advocating, and working to reach their goals. Although people often say it, self-determination is really not about control. Self-determination theory suggests that all humans have three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness, that underlie growth and development. Self-determination theory seeks to explain how being self-determined impacts motivation, that people feel more motivated to take action when they think that what they do will have an effect on the outcome.

The biggest advantage of Self-Determination Theory is the awareness that it provides. Once you realize how important competence, relatedness and autonomy are to motivation and performance, you can take steps to ensure that your needs are being met. Self-Determination Theory suggests that fostering classroom conditions where employees feel supported in their autonomy is not only an appropriate end in itself but will lead to more employee satisfaction and thriving, as well as collateral benefits for organizational effectiveness. This theory offers a valuable insight into what it takes to increase students' autonomy, competence and relatedness, it enhances their intrinsic motivation to learn. This is easier said than done, as motivation is complex, nuanced and in a constant state of flux.

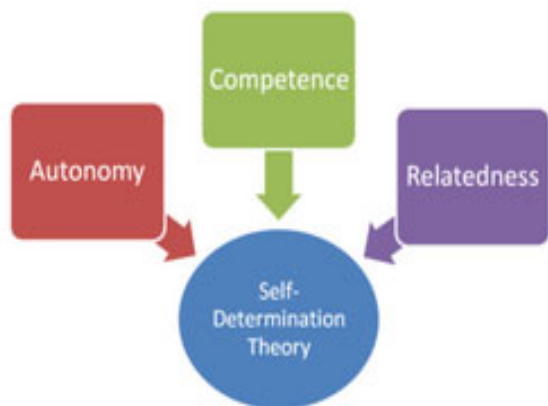


Figure 2: Self-Determination Theory

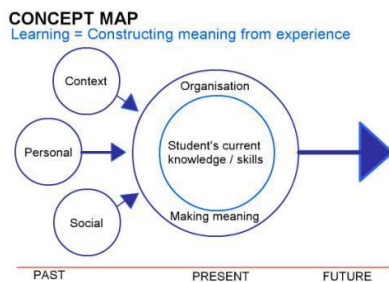


Figure 3: Theoretical Framework

The students' knowledge and skills are based on the contextual, personal and social experience of the learner. The students then make meaning of what they have learned, organize it and formed the current knowledge and skills. To make this possible in a meaningful manner, the students have to be equipped with soft and hard skills.

III. METHODOLOGY

According to Andrade (2019), the research design represents an essential element of the research procedure, since it establishes the structure for the implementation of an investigation and the methods by which data would be gathered and analyzed. There are many distinct studies designs available, each with its own unique objectives and functions. The next part will provide an overview of several research designs, and then offer a rationale for selecting the descriptive research design as suitable for investigating the influence of soft skills and hard skills on improving English speaking among college students in Nanchang, China. The researcher explains below the various designs which she considers and finally settled on.

According to Nayak & Narayan (2019), a questionnaire provides a good research tool used in the investigation of the influence of soft skills and hard skills on improving English speaking among college students in Nanchang. The study employs a standardized survey instrument including a set of pre-established questionnaires, which are delivered to the study's individuals, namely the students in colleges in Nanchang. The survey instrument may consist of a combination of closed-ended inquiries, which provide predetermined answer alternatives, and open-ended queries, which let respondents contribute elaborate interpretations and perspectives.

Within the framework of this study, the questionnaire might be created with the purpose of gathering quantitative information pertaining to many facets teaching English speaking. The inquiry may pertain to the teaching methods used by teachers, the soft and hard skills utilized by learners, the difficulties encountered throughout the learning and teaching process, including the students' perspectives on the existing teaching and learning practices. Through the use of a survey, investigators are able to effectively collect standardized data from a very extensive pool of students. This facilitates the application of statistical analysis techniques, hence allowing for the detection of prevailing developments and trends in teaching and learning methodologies (Mishra & Alok, 2022). Moreover, it offers a methodical and organized framework for gathering useful data pertaining to the teaching and learning procedures used in teaching English speaking.

IV. CONCLUSION

The research uncovered a significant disparity between the perceived importance of English language proficiency and the practical challenges students face in achieving fluency, particularly in spoken English. Despite recognizing the necessity of English for academic and professional success in a globalized world, students encounter obstacles such as limited opportunities for speaking practice outside the classroom and prevailing negative attitudes towards learning the language. These findings underscore the complexity of language acquisition and the multifaceted nature of the barriers students encounter.

Soft skills, including communication, empathy, and flexibility, emerged as crucial factors influencing English-speaking proficiency among college students in Nanchang. The ability to effectively communicate, empathize with others, and adapt to different linguistic contexts were found to significantly contribute to language acquisition. These findings highlight the importance of fostering not only linguistic competence but also interpersonal skills to enhance English proficiency.

Similarly, hard skills such as grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation were identified as fundamental building blocks of linguistic fluency. The study revealed the interconnectedness of these skills, with proficiency in each area contributing to overall language competency. However, the research also highlighted the need for a more comprehensive understanding of the interplay between soft and hard skills in language acquisition, as well as the moderating role of technology-based resources and motivation.

Technology-based resources were found to play a moderating role in the relationship between soft and hard skills and English-speaking proficiency. Platforms leveraging network technology were identified as valuable tools for facilitating language learning, providing students with access to interactive learning environments and real-world language practice. Additionally, the study underscored the importance of motivation in driving language acquisition, with intrinsic factors such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness influencing students' engagement and progress in learning English.

The findings suggest the need for a holistic approach to language education that integrates both soft and hard skills, leverages technology-based resources, and fosters intrinsic motivation among students. Such an approach could help address the persistent challenges faced by college students in Nanchang in achieving English-speaking proficiency. By providing students with opportunities to develop not only linguistic competence but also interpersonal skills and technological literacy, educators can better prepare them for success in an increasingly interconnected world.

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