

Career-oriented speaking in college English: improving engagement and confidence

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Abstract: This study explores the use of career-oriented speaking tasks in a College English course to improve students' classroom engagement and language confidence. This study recruited first-year non-English majors from a vocational undergraduate university in Chongqing, China. During an eight-week intervention, the experimental class completed career-oriented speaking tasks, while the control class continued with regular textbook-based speaking activities. Data were collected through speaking tests, questionnaires, classroom observations, student reflections, and interviews, with test and questionnaire results converted to a 100-point scale. The findings reveal that career-oriented speaking tasks boosted students' active participation, enhanced their oral confidence, and raised their awareness of the practical value of College English. The study indicates that such tasks can render College English more relevant to vocational undergraduates while preserving its general linguistic education function.

Keywords: college English; career-oriented speaking; vocational undergraduates; classroom engagement; language confidence; task-based learning

1 Introduction

College English is a compulsory course for non-English-major students in Chinese higher education. In vocationally oriented undergraduate institutions, it should support students' future internships, employment, and workplace communication. However, many students still view it mainly as a course for credits and written tests, and their reluctance to speak in class is often due to low confidence, limited expressions, and weak perceived relevance.

Career-oriented speaking tasks may help address this problem by connecting general College English with realistic communicative situations. In this study, such tasks refer to oral activities related to future study, internship, job-seeking, teamwork, service communication, and workplace problem-solving, rather than narrow professional English training.

Drawing on task-based language teaching [1][2] and engagement theory [3][4], this study examines whether career-oriented speaking tasks can improve vocational undergraduates' engagement and confidence in College English speaking activities.

The study addresses three questions: how career-oriented speaking tasks can be designed for vocational undergraduate College English; how these tasks influence students' classroom engagement and speaking confidence; and how students perceive the relevance of College English after participating in the tasks.

2 Literature review

2.1 College English and career-oriented communication

College English in vocationally oriented undergraduate education needs to balance general language development and practical communication. Career-oriented language teaching does not turn College English into a job-training course, but gives language learning a clearer communicative context. For example, designing tasks such as internship interview self-introductions and Q&A drills on clarifying work instructions with supervisors enables students to recognize that English serves as a communication medium for their future studies and careers.

2.2 Engagement in EFL speaking classes

Engagement is often understood as a combination of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive involvement. In a speaking class, behavioral engagement can be seen in students' participation, preparation, and willingness to practise with classmates. Emotional engagement includes interest, confidence, anxiety, and perceived value. Cognitive engagement is reflected in students' effort to organize ideas, improve expressions, and reflect on their performance. For many EFL learners, silence in speaking class does not simply mean that they are unwilling to learn. This phenomenon may stem from communicative anxiety, insufficient scaffolding, ambiguous task objectives, and low perceived value of the activity. When a speaking task has a realistic purpose and students receive appropriate language support, they are more likely to take part in classroom interaction.

2.3 Speaking confidence and task-based learning

Speaking confidence is important because oral communication requires learners to retrieve vocabulary, organize sentences, pronounce words, and respond within a short time. Learners with weak oral foundations often believe that they must speak accurately before they can speak at all [5]. This belief can increase anxiety and reduce participation. Task-based language teaching offers a useful way to reduce this pressure. It encourages learners to use language to complete meaningful tasks rather than merely practise forms in isolation [6]. With sentence frames, model dialogues, peer practice, and teacher feedback, students can complete communicative tasks using simple but functional English. Repeated successful experiences may gradually improve willingness to communicate and reduce speaking anxiety [7][8].

3 Task design

The study's career-focused speaking tasks followed four design principles.

First, tasks were set in realistic scenarios tied to students' future experiences, including interviews, clarifications, problem-solving, and brief presentations.

Second, each task had a clear communication objective, requiring students to introduce themselves, explain strengths, request information, report issues, address complaints, or present proposals.

Third, language support (expressions, vocabulary, models) was provided, aiding less proficient students to start tasks confidently.

Fourth, feedback prioritized task completion and main message accuracy over immediate error correction, with common issues addressed in class.

The teaching cycle involved input, practice, preparation, performance, feedback, and reflection, guiding students from supported to independent speaking.

4 Methodology

4.1 Research design and participants

This study adopted a classroom-based mixed-methods design. Quantitative data were collected to examine changes in speaking performance, engagement, confidence, and perceived relevance. Qualitative data were used to understand students' classroom experience and attitudes toward the tasks.

The study was conducted at a vocationally oriented undergraduate university in Chongqing, China. The participants

were 84 first-year non-English-major students from two intact College English classes. One class, with 42 students, served as the experimental class. The other class, also with 42 students, served as the control class. Both classes used the same textbook and were taught by the same teacher.

The intervention lasted eight weeks. The experimental class received career-oriented speaking tasks, while the control class continued with regular textbook-based speaking activities. Students were informed that the data would be used anonymously and would not affect their course grades.

4.2 Teaching intervention

During the eight-week intervention, the experimental class completed a series of speaking tasks connected with future study and workplace communication. In the first week, students completed a diagnostic speaking activity and discussed prospective applications of English. Over the subsequent weeks, they practised internship self-introductions, stating personal strengths, requesting supervisors to clarify instructions, reporting simple workplace issues, discussing solutions in groups, and giving short presentations. In the final week, students completed a post-speaking task and wrote a reflection on their learning experience.

The control class also had speaking practice, but the activities mainly followed textbook topics and did not include systematic career-related scenarios or structured workplace communication tasks.

4.3 Data collection and scoring

Data were collected from pre- and post-speaking tests, questionnaires, classroom observations, student reflections, and semi-structured interviews. The speaking tests were evaluated according to fluency, accuracy, vocabulary use, interaction, task fulfillment, and contextual appropriacy. To keep the results clear and comparable, all speaking scores were converted to a 100-point scale.

The engagement and confidence questionnaires were also reported on a 100-point scale. Higher scores indicated stronger engagement, greater confidence, or a higher perception of relevance. Observation notes focused on participation, pair work, task completion, and students' willingness to speak. Student reflections and interviews were used to supplement the numerical results.

5 Teaching cases

5.1 Internship interview self-introduction

One of the first career-oriented tasks was an internship interview self-introduction. In earlier speaking activities, many students introduced themselves only by giving their name, hometown, and major. In this task, they were guided to make targeted introductions by including basic personal information, one personal strength, a brief supporting example, and a learning or career goal.

Prior to each task, the teacher provided functional expressions including "One of my strengths is..." and "For example, I once...". Students first prepared individually, then practised with a partner, and subsequently delivered a one-minute self-introduction. This task enabled students to view self-introduction as goal-driven communication rather than a rote-memorized speech.

5.2 Asking for clarification

Another task centered on seeking clarification in workplace contexts, with pre-supplied functional expressions. One student acted as a supervisor and gave an instruction, while another acted as an intern who needed to confirm unclear details.

This task benefited lower-proficiency students because it demanded short but practical exchanges rather than long speeches. It also helped learners recognize that effective communication involves seeking information, verifying intended

meaning, and avoiding misunderstanding.

5.3 Reporting a workplace problem

In the problem-reporting task, students imagined that they were interns reporting a problem to a team leader. The problem could be a delayed delivery, incorrect documents, a malfunctioning printer, or miscommunications with customers.

The teacher provided a simple structure: "I'd like to report a problem," "It may affect..." and "I suggest that we...". This task encouraged students to organize information clearly and speak in a responsible tone.

5.4 Customer service role-play

To make speaking practice more interactive, students completed a customer service role-play. One student acted as a customer with a complaint, while another acted as a service staff member. The complaint involved situations such as a wrong order, delayed service, a damaged product, or an unclear payment record.

The service staff member needed to greet the customer, listen to the customer's complaint, ask for details, apologize politely, and propose a possible solution. This activity helped students practise both information exchange and polite problem-solving.

5.5 Short group presentation

The final major task was a brief group presentation. Students worked in groups to put forward a small improvement for campus life, such as a lost-and-found service, a second-hand book exchange platform, or a campus navigation guide for new students. Each group explained the problem, introduced a solution, and described one benefit.

Compared with individual speaking tasks, the group presentation offered students more peer support and helped them practise content organization, teamwork, and public speaking skills.

6 Findings

6.1 Speaking performance

Speaking test results showed that the experimental class made greater progress than the control class. On a 100-point scale, the experimental class average score increased from 63 to 73, while the control class rose from 64 to 68.

Progress in the experimental class was most evident in task fulfillment, content organization, and contextual appropriacy. Post-test responses were more task-oriented, though grammar and pronunciation showed less improvement, indicating that the intervention prioritized communicative performance over accuracy.

6.2 Classroom engagement

Students in the experimental class became more active in speaking activities. Their average active participation score increased from 56 to 73, task preparation from 60 to 76, and willingness to practice with classmates from 62 to 78 on a 100-point scale.

Classroom observations mirrored these findings. Initially passive, students increasingly prepared ideas, rehearsed with partners, and engaged in role-plays as tasks became familiar. Activities with clear roles and practical language were particularly effective in boosting participation.

6.3 Language confidence

Students' confidence improved during the intervention. Confidence in self-introduction rose from 59 to 78, in asking simple questions from 53 to 70, and in speaking in front of classmates from 48 to 64 on a 100-point scale.

Student reflections indicated that learners' confidence developed through continuous small successes. Many reported less anxiety about speaking after realizing that simple English could be useful, with pair practice and sentence frames easing performance pressure.

6.4 Perceived relevance of college English

The intervention shifted students' perception of college English. Agreement that college English would benefit future work or internships increased from 64 to 81, and recognition of the real-world relevance of speaking activities rose from 55 to 78 on a 100-point scale.

Student interviews revealed participants began linking English communication to job interviews, internships, teamwork, and workplace problem-solving. Even those with limited oral proficiency reported greater willingness to try tasks with clear roles and useful expressions.

7 Discussion

The findings suggest that career-oriented speaking tasks can make college English speaking practice more meaningful and accessible for vocational undergraduates. By embedding language use within familiar future-oriented situations, the tasks provided students with clearer incentives to speak and narrowed the gap between classroom learning and possible real-world communication.

The improvement in engagement appears to be closely related to task relevance. Students were more willing to participate when they could understand the purpose of the activity and imagine how it might be useful in future study, internship, or work. This supports the view that meaningful tasks can promote learner involvement in language classrooms.

The growth in confidence was also linked to scaffolding. Students did not become more confident simply because they spoke more often. They gained confidence because the tasks were manageable, the sentence frames were practical, and they had opportunities to practise prior to speaking publicly. This finding is consistent with research emphasizing the role of emotional support and successful communication experiences in language learning.

However, the intervention did not solve all speaking problems. Some students still depended on sentence frames and notes, and improvements in grammar, pronunciation, and spontaneous interaction were limited. Therefore, career-oriented speaking tasks should be used as a starting point rather than a complete solution. In future teaching, teachers can gradually reduce scaffolding, add follow-up questions, and create more opportunities for flexible response.

8 Teaching implications

This study offers several implications for college English teaching in vocationally oriented undergraduate institutions.

First, teachers can redesign existing speaking topics by adding realistic communicative contexts. A simple self-introduction, discussion, or presentation can become more meaningful when it is connected with an interview, internship, workplace problem, service situation, or team project.

Second, speaking tasks should be supported but not over-controlled. Useful expressions, model dialogues, and preparation time can reduce anxiety, especially for lower-proficiency students. However, teachers should also encourage students to adapt the language rather than only read prepared sentences.

Third, classroom feedback should focus first on communication. If every grammatical mistake is corrected immediately, students may become more nervous and less willing to speak. It is more helpful to recognize successful meaning-making first and then guide students to revise common language problems.

Fourth, speaking assessment should include more than fluency and accuracy. In career-oriented communication, task completion, politeness, clarity, interaction, and contextual appropriacy are also important. These dimensions can help students understand what effective communication means in realistic situations.

Finally, teachers should help students build confidence gradually. For many vocational undergraduates, a short successful exchange may be more valuable than a difficult speech. Small but repeated communicative success can encourage students to take more risks in speaking English.

9 Conclusion

This study examined the use of career-oriented speaking tasks in a college English course for vocationally oriented undergraduate students. The results show that these tasks helped improve students' speaking performance, classroom engagement, language confidence, and perceived relevance of English learning. On the 100-point scale, the experimental class improved from 63 to 73 in speaking performance, while the control class improved from 64 to 68. Students in the experimental class also showed clear growth in active participation, preparation, willingness to practise, and confidence in completing simple oral communication tasks.

The study suggests that college English should not be separated from students' future-oriented needs. At the same time, it should not be simplified into narrow vocational skill training. Career-oriented speaking tasks offer a balanced approach by linking general English learning with authentic communication. Through meaningful scenarios, clear purposes, language scaffolding, feedback, and reflection, students can gradually develop the confidence to use English in academic, internship, and workplace contexts.

This study has several limitations. It was conducted in one university in Chongqing, and the intervention lasted only eight weeks. The sample size was limited, and the teacher also served as the researcher, which may have influenced classroom observation. Future research could include more institutions, a longer intervention period, delayed post-tests, and more detailed analysis of how students move from supported speaking to more spontaneous communication.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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