That's How We Speak English – Oral Presentation Skills of Zhuang Ethnic Minority EFL Students in China

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Abstract

Oral presentation skills are crucial 21st century competencies. In China, oral presentation skills have been listed as one of the targeted core competencies for all college students to achieve in the latest version (2020) of College English Teaching Guidelines. Since the implementation of these guidelines, interest on the topic has intensified. However, a systematic literature review shows that most relevant studies have examined Chinese mainstream (Han) students and few studies have shed light on the oral presentation skills of ethnic minority students. This study examines the oral presentation skills and learning needs of students in Zhuang ethnic minority group. A mixed method research design was employed involving 451 Zhuang students at a public university in China. Participants' oral presentation skills were examined through self-assessment and teachers' evaluation of actual performance. Besides, the gap between their current level and the required level was identified. Moreover, the learning needs for developing these skills were explored. Data were collected by using a questionnaire, an oral presentation test and semi-structured interviews. The results showed that (1) Zhuang students perceived their oral presentation skills were at the minimal level. (2) Both self-assessment and expert rater assessment showed that a gap existed between their current level and the required level. (3) Zhuang students wanted to develop skills for all categories, especially questions-handling. These findings have implications for the teaching and learning of oral presentation skills in contexts in which English is taught in EFL contexts, particularly among ethnic minority groups.

Keywords: Oral presentation skills, Zhuang ethnic, ethnic minority students, performance analysis, needs analysis.

I. INTRODUCTION

There are altogether 56 ethnic groups in China. The Han group make up the majority, while the remaining 55 non-Han nationalities are the ethnic minority groups, constituting 8.4% of the total population (Xiang, 2017). Among the 114 million, the Zhuang group is the largest. The Zhuang live in Guangxi province in southwestern China, a remote, economically backward inland area. Zhuang people speak their local dialects as their first language. Mandarin, is the sole official language, is learnt as the second language (L2), and English is also learnt as the third language (L3),

Therefore, Zhuang students may be disadvantaged in the learning of English, compared to Han students.

Oral presentation skills (OPS) are stipulated as one of core speaking competencies in the latest version of College English Teaching Guidelines (2020). Therefore, it is important to ensure Zhuang college students develop their oral presentation skills to meet the national requirement. Additionally, mastery of oral presentation skills has become a key factor in equipping Zhuang students with work-ready skills to participate in economic activities which have become increasingly global in

nature due to China's rapid economic development in recent years. Therefore, as the first step to enable Zhuang students develop these necessary skills, this study addresses Zhuang students' oral presentation performance and learning needs. The following four research questions guided the study:

RQ1: How do Zhuang college students perceive their own oral presentation skills?

RQ2: What are Zhuang college students' actual oral presentation skills?

RQ3: Are there any gaps between Zhuang college students' oral presentation skills and the required national oral presentation skill level?

RQ4: What are Zhuang college students' learning needs for developing their oral presentation skills?

II.   LITERATURE REVIEW

To obtain an in-in-depth view of research conducted among EFL ethnic minority students in China, a systematic literature review was conducted using the CNKI, biggest journal database in China. The keywords of "ethnic minority" "English" "speaking" "writing" "reading" and "listening" generated a total of 61 articles. Then, two criteria used to determine the most relevant articles - the time span was restricted to 2010 to 2019 and only those articles published at the national (China) level publications - yielded 35 articles. These were carefully read, and only 32 articles were considered relevant and used in the content analysis. The bulk of research interest was focused on the "English learning strategies" (Qi & Chen, 2014; Yuan et al, 2010; Miley &Hu, 2010; Ma & Zhang, 2016, Xu,2011; Xu& Cao, 2012; Cao & Yao, 2010), followed by "learning attitudes and learning difficulties" (Lu & Luo, 2012; Wang, 2016; Mei, 2014; Zhou, 2012;Yang, 2019), and "mother tongue transfer on pronunciation" (Ma and Blachford, 2016; Tang, 2013; Guo & Luo, 2012; Tian & Liu, 2012; Cai &Yang, 2010) Anxiety, motivation, confidence also received some attention. The analysis revealed that ethnic minority students'

oral presentation skills were under explored. Available studies examined several or dozens of ethnic minority groups as one homogenous group and did not consider differences among ethnic minorities. Only study focused on the Zhuang students. Clearly, very little attention has been paid to students belonging to the largest minority group in China. These gaps in knowledge motivated this study.

III.   METHODOLOGY

A descriptive research design with a mixed method approach was employed in this study. The design consisted of two parts: performance analysis and needs analysis.

(a) Research design

According to the China Standard of English Language Ability (CSELA), the country's scale system of English ability, all students in tertiary education in China are required to achieve Level 5 or above（9 in total, the minimum level of English learning achievement. This study investigated Zhuang students' oral presentation performance to determine if they had already achieved Level 5 on the scale of achievement. The performance was assessed through self-assessment (referred to as the self-perceived level) and expert-assessment (referred to as actual performance). Self-assessment was done through a questionnaire while the expert assessment was based on an oral presentation test. Both assessments were administered separately.

(b) Data Collection

To achieve the objectives of the research, this study was conducted at a public university referred to as GU (a pseudonym) in Nanning city of Guangxi province. Three instruments were used in this study.

Questionnaire: A 11-item questionnaire was created by extracting statements from the CSELA. The constructs were established based on the oral presentation framework of Zhou and Wan (2019). The respondents were required to evaluate their own oral presentation skills in four categories: content and organization,

language, delivery and handling of questions. Questionnaire items were designed based on a five-point Likert scale, 1 = "Deficient" 2= "Minimal" 3= "Basic", 4= "Proficient", 5= "Advanced". On the scale, Basic level=3 was the cut point, representing the minimum requirement set by the state. Scores falling below this cut point denoted that the performance failed to meet the state's minimum requirement for oral presentation. On the contrary, when scores exceeded the cut point, the performance was better than the state's required performance level. Questionnaire respondents (referred as Sample A) were chosen via a simple random technique.

Test: An oral presentation test was administered to measure Zhuang students' actual oral presentation skills. A simple random sampling technique was used to choose 50 test candidates from 451 questionnaire respondents (Sample A). A presentation task was assigned to the candidates one week in advance for them to prepare. A topic, The Best Gift I Received, was selected from a textbook titled An Integrated Skills Course published by Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press (Wang, 2016, p. 37). The participants were required to give a speech to an audience based on the given topic. PowerPoint slides and visual objects were allowed during their presentations. However, eventually, only 46 showed up and took the oral presentation test. They are referred as Sample B in this study.

Semi-structure-Interview: Learning needs were elicited from the interviews. To obtain illuminating insights into Zhuang students' learning needs, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 test candidates (labelled as ST1 to ST12) and five (5) lecturers (T1 to ST5). The former group was selected from Sample B via a stratified random technique and the latter group was purposively selected from in service English teachers at GU. They included two test-raters, a head of English Department and two senior teachers.

(c) Data collection Process and Analysis

Data collection lasted for about five months, from May 15 to Sept 14, 2020.The quantitative data were analyzed by using SPSS (Version 23) while the qualitative data were analyzed with help of NVivo. The oral presentation skills were determined according to the mean score range in the following levels based on the data analysis:

4.50-5.00 indicates advanced level

4.00-4.49 indicates proficient level

3.00-3.99 indicates basic level

2.00-2.99 indicates minimal level

0.0-1.99   indicates deficient level

IV. FINDINGS

The findings encompass four aspects: self-assessed performance; actual performance; gap, learning needs and are presented below.

(a)   Self-assessed Performance

The results in TABLE I shows the respondents self-assessment of their oral presentation skills, according to four categories (content & organization, delivery, language and handling of questions). Their mean scores (M) were M=2.39, 2.31, 2.29, 2.25 respectively. The overall mean score was M=2.32. These results indicate that Zhuang students in the study were not confident of their own oral presentation skills. Moreover, the standard deviations (SD) in content & organization, delivery, language and question-handling were 1.080, 1.040, 1.032, 1.046 respectively, far higher than 0.5. The huge variation in SD values revealed the huge gap that existed in Zhuang students' individual assessment results from the required levels.

TABLE I. *SELF-PERCEIVED PERFORMANCE IN OPS*

Oral English Language Presentation Skills	Mean	S.D.
Content & organization	2.39	1.080
Delivery	2.31	1.040
Language	2.29	1.032

Question-respondence	2.25	1.046
Overall mean score	2.31	1.049

(b) The actual performance

The findings, reported in TABLE II, show that overall mean score was M=2.847, indicating that the actual performance of Zhuang students was below par. However, the Zhuang students fared better in three categories (content and organization, language and delivery) as can be seen in the mean scores of 3.203, 3.04, 3.021 respectively. These mean scores indicate that the actual performance in these three categories was better than the students' self-assessment of their own oral presentation skills. However, participants also received the lowest score in question-handling (Mean=2.04, SD=1.058), which was even lower than the students' self-assessment mean score (M=2.25). Clearly, both students and expert raters acknowledged that Zhuang participants had not developed the skills to answer questions. Furthermore, the SD of 1.058 highlighted the huge difference in Zhuang students' performance.

TABLE II. *ACTUAL PERFORMANCES IN OPS*

Dimension	Mean	Std. D
Content and organization	3.20	.725
Delivery Skills	3.11	.905
Language	3.02	.719
Question-responding	2.04	1.058
Overall	2.84	0.852

(c) Gaps between Zhuang college students' oral presentation level and the country's required level

There are nine levels in the CSELA and all college students are required to achieve Level 5. However, FIG I shows that less than half of the students' scores (40.2 %) were higher than the Basic level namely, the cut scores. Of this percentage, most of the students (26.1%) scores fell into the Basic level. Relatively few were competent speaker as only 13.2 % were at the

Proficient level and 1.5% at the Advanced level. FIG. I. shows that most of the students (59.2 %) obtained Below Basic level scores. These statistics showed that a substantial number of the Zhuang students still achieved scores that failed to meet the country's requirement even though they were taking college English courses.

For insights into specific components of Zhuang students' oral presentation skills, TABLE III indicates that many students encountered difficulties with language use (60.9%) and question handling (60.6%) as their scores were below the basic level. In all four categories, approximately a quarter of students achieved the basic level and very few students reached the proficient and advanced levels.

FIG. I. *Percentage of OPS Achievement*

The basic level (3.0) is an important level as it represents the baseline cut score. When the mean score is at or above 3.0, students have achieved the country's required level. On the contrary, when mean score falls below 3.0, it denotes that the students have failed to achieve the country's required level. This study identified gaps between students' level and the country's required level(see in Table III).

Besides, FIG 2 reports that the mean scores based on students' self-assessment(n=451), in four categories fell below the cut score(M=3.0), the negative gaps were recorded as content & organization (gap=-0.61), delivery (gap= -0.69), delivery (gap= -0.71), question-responding (gap=-0.75) respectively. These gaps showed that the students' self-assessment

scores did not meet the minimum requirement set by the country. By contrast, with regard to the evaluation of their actual performance based on the test, the mean scores in three categories, namely, content and organization (M=3.2), delivery (M=3.11), and language (M=3.02) were higher than the cut score (M=3.0), Their positive gaps from cut score were recorded as +.20, +0.11, +.02 respectively. However, the biggest negative gap was found in question-handing (gap=-0.96), indicating that students performed far below the country's required level in this aspect. Besides, some discrepancies were found between students' self-assessment and experts' assessment of their actual competencies. For example, the students' self-evaluation results fell below the Basic level in all four dimensions, while the experts' rating scores fell into the Basic level, except for question-handling. These results showed that students had low self-perceptions of their own oral presentation competencies while the experts felt that the students possessed adequate skills in most aspects of oral presentation, except the handling of questions.
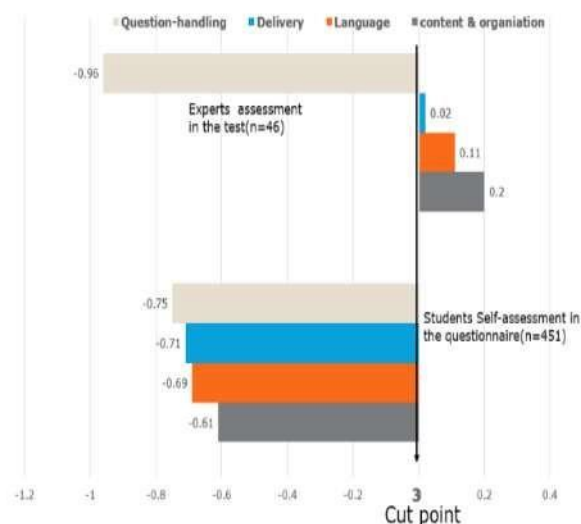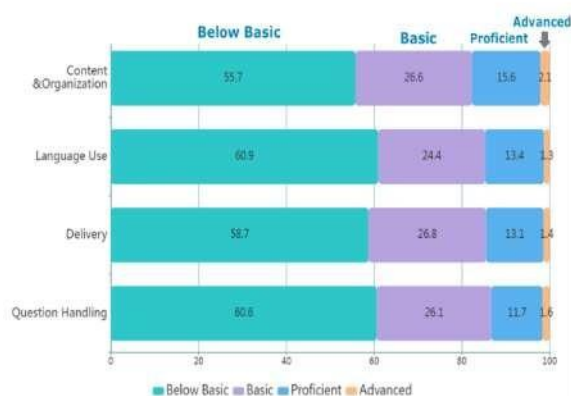

FIG. II. *Gaps from the Cut Score*

(d) The learning needs of Zhuang Students for developing their oral presentation skills

The findings on the learning needs were based on the analysis of qualitative data derived from interviews with students and teacher respondents. In terms of content and organization, Zhuang students wanted to be taught skills on beginning an oral presentation through attention-getting and concluding an oral presentation. For example, T2 explained,

Most Zhuang candidates' beginnings are boring. Their standard opening speeches would be: "I am very happy to give a speech here today, and my topic is…" Why don't they use some attention-getting devices? For example, if a student' topic is "Tomorrow is the best gift for me," if I were him, I would begin with: "Yesterday is history, tomorrow is a mystery, but today is a gift…". But they do not read (English stuff), and thus incompetent in this skill.

In terms of concluding an oral presentation, ST1 said,

"I can't impress the audience. When it comes to the end of the speech, I will just finish my speech in a very simple way. I would say: "this is my speech, thank you for listening." Judging from the audience's expressionless face, I think my ending failed to impress the audience. I think I need to learn more in this aspect."

TABLE III. *GAPS IN FOUR OPS CATEGORIES*

Regarding language use, Zhuang students said that they expected help to broaden their vocabulary and use proper words. They also wanted to master rhetorical techniques. The student respondents admitted that they had very limited vocabulary in English which caused much frustration when speaking to an audience. They emphasized that due to their limited vocabulary, they had to resort to using bilingual online resources like software and dictionaries when preparing for the oral presentation for translations of their ideas. However, it was not possible to use these resources during the question-and-answer session. ST5's frustration was captured in these words:

I admit that my English vocabulary is very limited. It is difficult for me to complete an excellent speech on my own. … I try to write it by myself, but it is beyond my English level. So, I need to seek help from online translation software because the translation software works better than me."

In terms of delivery, Zhuang students wanted help with English pronunciation and speaking fluently. They encountered difficulties with some long multisyllabic words, or words not included in the textbook. Zhuang speakers may be able to spell these words, but many are unable to pronounce them correctly. Based on the duration of the presentations and utterance word count, it was found that the mean speech rate for Zhuang students was 75.5 w/m (SD= 36.07) words per minute, much slower than the normal rate of speaking (180-210w/m) The much slower rate could indicate that they lacked confidence and listeners could find it challenging to follow the content of the oral presentation. In terms of question-responding skills, Zhuang students wanted to develop skills to quickly grasp the content of questions, organize their thoughts and express their ideas. For example, ST10 expressed her anxiety in organizing ideas,

"When the questions are out of my expectation, I mean they are not those I carefully prepared, my brain go blank. I can't organise my ideas on the spot, and I don't know how to give a response, I am lost. I think I need some support on how to give spontanous responses."

Additionally, ST7 described her embarrassment in these words:

"I failed to catch what the teachers said, I requested a repeat, but I still failed to grasp the meaning. At that moment, I was so embarrassed, I wished someone would set off the fire alarm so that I had the chance to leave the test room!"

V. Conclusion & Recommendations

This paper investigated the oral presentation performance of EFL Zhuang ethnic minority students and found that their performance barely met the national requirement. They had not reached level 5 of the CSELA. This study also revealed that Zhuang students had limited competencies in all four categories (content & organization, language, delivery and question-responding but the lowest was seen in the question- handling skills when they were required to answer unanticipated questions and to interact spontaneously. Most of these problems could be attributed to low proficiency in English. To meet the oral presentation target levels set for college students, they will need to be equipped with specific oral presentation and language skills. Indeed, the students are aware of the skills that need to be developed. They want to develop skills for arousing the audience's attention when introducing a presentation and for leaving a strong impression on the audience when concluding a presentation. They also want to expand their vocabulary and to be able to use words appropriately in context. The students were also keen to develop skills to enable them to spontaneously answer questions on their presentations. These demands have implications for teachers, policy makers and administrators responsible for the development and teaching of courses which aim to develop oral presentation skills in Zhuang students to enable them to meet the standards set for college students in China. It is hoped that this study, although exploratory, will inform pedagogical practices to address areas of need and motivate further research into ways in which English language education can be made

more meaningful and effective for ethnic minority groups.

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