A COMPARATIVE STUDY ON THE IMPACT OF LITERATURE-BASED AND TRADITIONAL INSTRUCTION ON ORAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCIES AND MENTAL HEALTH WELL-BEING OF TESL UNDERGRADUATES IN HENAN PROVINCE

Wu Sha[1] and Hari Krishnan Andi[2]

[1,2] *Faculty of Social Science, Arts and Humanities, Lincoln University College, Malaysia*

Corresponding Author: wusha@lincoln.edu.my

KEYWORDS

literature-based instruction, traditional teaching methods, oral communication, communicative English proficiency.

ABSTRACT

This quasi-experimental study investigates the comparative effectiveness of literature-based instruction (LBI) and traditional teaching methods on the oral communication competencies and mental health well-being of 60 TESL undergraduates in Henan Province, China. Over a 12-week period, the experimental group (N=30) engaged with literary texts designed to promote not only linguistic development but also emotional expression and confidence, while the control group (N=30) followed conventional grammar-translation and rote-learning methods.

Pre- and post-test analyses revealed statistically significant improvements in fluency ($p < 0.01$), accuracy ($p = 0.03$), and communicative confidence ($p < 0.01$) among students in the LBI group. In addition, qualitative feedback suggested that the literature-based approach contributed to reduced speaking anxiety and improved emotional comfort in communication settings—both key indicators of mental health well-being in language learners.

The findings support the integration of literature-based instruction in TESL curricula as a means of enhancing both communicative competence and learner well-being, aligning with national goals for communicative English proficiency and holistic education (Ministry of Education, 2022).
.

Introduction

Oral communication competency is a cornerstone of effective language teaching, particularly for TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language) undergraduates in China, where the demand for proficient English educators has surged alongside the country's integration into global economic and cultural systems (Ministry of Education, 2022). Despite decades of emphasis on English education, national assessments reveal persistent gaps in oral proficiency. For instance, only 37% of English majors nationwide attain "advanced" speaking scores on standardized tests such as the China Standards English Test (CSE), with rural regions like Henan Province lagging further behind at 22% (China Education Panel Survey, 2021; Luo & Zhang, 2020). This disparity underscores systemic challenges, including an overreliance on traditional, teacher-centered pedagogies that prioritize grammatical accuracy and rote memorization over communicative fluency (Li & Wang, 2019; Hu & McKay, 2012). Such methods, often characterized by repetitive textbook drills and translation exercises, have been

widely critiqued for fostering passive learning environments that fail to simulate real-world language use (Richards, 2006; Tran & Lewis, 2022).

In Henan Province, a region marked by limited access to immersive English-speaking environments and socioeconomic disparities in educational resources, these challenges are exacerbated. A 2020 study of Henan's TESL programs found that 81% of classroom activities centered on grammar instruction, with fewer than 15% of students regularly engaging in unstructured oral discourse (Chen et al., 2020). This imbalance has tangible consequences: nearly 70% of local TESL graduates report anxiety when conducting classes in English, citing inadequate preparation in communicative pedagogy (Wu, 2021). Such outcomes highlight an urgent need for pedagogical innovation, particularly as China's national curriculum reforms increasingly emphasize "practical English application" to meet workforce demands (Ministry of Education, 2022, p. 14).

In response, this study investigates the potential of *literature-based instruction* (LBI)—a student-centered approach leveraging novels, poems, and plays—to bridge this gap. Grounded in sociocultural theory, LBI immerses learners in authentic, context-rich narratives that stimulate critical thinking, cultural empathy, and collaborative dialogue (Lazar, 1993; Paran, 2008). For example, debates on ethical dilemmas in *To Kill a Mockingbird* or role-plays based on Shakespearean dialogues have been shown to enhance lexical precision, intonation, and spontaneous interaction in EFL contexts (Dewi, 2016; Khatib et al., 2011). Notably, a meta-analysis by Tran and Lewis (2022) found that LBI interventions improved oral fluency in Asian undergraduates by 31% compared to traditional methods, with effect sizes strongest in low-exposure settings like Henan. However, empirical studies focusing on Chinese TESL trainees remain scarce, particularly in regions grappling with resource constraints. By evaluating LBI's efficacy in this context, this research seeks to inform curriculum reforms that align with global best practices while addressing local infrastructural realities.

Literature Review

Literature-based instruction (LBI) leverages authentic texts to contextualize language learning, fostering critical thinking and cultural awareness (Lazar, 1993). For instance, debates on themes from To Kill a Mockingbird improve argumentation skills (Khatib et al., 2011), while role-playing Shakespearean dialogues enhances pronunciation and intonation (Dewi, 2016). Conversely, traditional methods, which emphasize textbook drills and memorization, often fail to develop real-world communication skills (Richards, 2006). In China, 68% of TESL graduates report feeling "underprepared" to conduct classes in English due to overreliance on rote methods (Hu & McKay, 2012). Recent meta-analyses confirm LBI's superiority in improving speaking skills (effect size = 0.71; Tran & Lewis, 2022), though few studies focus on Chinese undergraduates.

Methodology

Participants: The study involved 60 third-year TESL undergraduates (28 male, 32 female) recruited from two public universities in Henan Province, selected through stratified random sampling to ensure representativeness of the region's demographic and academic diversity. Participants, aged 19–22, were divided into experimental (N=30) and control (N=30) groups, with equivalence in baseline oral proficiency confirmed via pre-test IELTS speaking scores (M=5.3 for both groups, SD=0.4). Prior to the intervention, all participants completed a language background survey, which revealed that 88% had no prior exposure to literature-based pedagogy, aligning with national trends reported by Hu and McKay (2012). Ethical approval was obtained from the universities' review boards, and informed consent emphasized voluntary participation with no impact on academic standing.

Intervention:

- Experimental Group: Studied 4 literary texts (e.g., Animal Farm, modern Chinese-English short stories) through role-plays, thematic debates, and creative retellings (12 weeks, 4 hours/week).

- Control Group: Practiced grammar drills, textbook dialogues, and memorization (same duration).

Data Collection:

1. **Pre- and Post-Intervention Assessments**: Participants' oral proficiency was measured through pre- and post-tests evaluating fluency (speech rate measured in words per minute), accuracy (percentage of error-free clauses), and complexity (lexical diversity). Scoring was conducted according to standardized IELTS speaking rubrics to ensure reliability and comparability of results.

2. **Confidence Surveys**: Learner confidence was assessed using a structured survey comprising statements rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). This scale enabled nuanced insights into participants' self-perceived confidence levels in English speaking post-intervention.

3. **Structured Interviews**: Qualitative data was collected through structured interviews with 15 participants from each group after the intervention. These interviews provided participants an opportunity to elaborate on their experiences, perceptions, and reflections, enriching quantitative findings with deeper contextual insights.

Analysis Procedures:

Quantitative data gathered from pre- and post-tests and confidence surveys were statistically analyzed using SPSS version 28.0. Paired and independent sample t-tests were employed to identify statistically significant differences within and between groups, respectively. The qualitative interview data underwent thematic coding, allowing for systematic extraction of recurrent themes, patterns, and insights reflective of participant experiences.

Results

Table 1: Comparison of Oral Proficiency Pre- and Post-Intervention

Metric	Group	Pre-Test (Mean)	Post-Test (Mean)	p-value
Fluency (words/min)	LBI	98.2	126.4	<0.01
	Control	97.8	105.1	0.12
Accuracy (%)	LBI	68.5	82.3	0.03
	Control	70.1	73.8	0.24

Table 2: Post-Test Learner Confidence Survey Responses

Statement	LBI (Mean)	Control (Mean)	p-value
"I feel confident speaking English."	4.3	3.1	<0.01
"I can discuss complex topics."	4.1	2.8	0.01

Qualitative Findings:

- Participants from the LBI group expressed increased engagement and emotional connection with English, highlighting how debates on social justice themes facilitated a deeper sense of purpose and practical language use.

- In contrast, control group participants characterized their traditional language instruction as monotonous, describing it as repetitive and disconnected from authentic communication contexts, leading to diminished motivation and engagement.

Discussion

The significant fluency improvement in the LBI group (28.7%) compared to the control group's modest gain (7.3%) supports Paran's (2008) assertion regarding the benefits of literary texts in providing rich, contextualized language input. Notably, the enhanced accuracy rates observed (82.3% post-test) could be attributed to repeated opportunities for participants to refine their role-play scripts, aligning with findings by Daskalovska (2015) highlighting the grammatical benefits derived from iterative editing practices. Additionally, confidence improvements identified through the survey data (see Table 2) suggest that LBI's collaborative, low-pressure environment successfully mitigated anxiety related to language performance, consistent with Gregersen and MacIntyre's (2014) research emphasizing the importance of supportive learning environments in language confidence development.

Recommendations

1. Train TESL instructors in LBI pedagogies through provincial workshops.

2. Replicate the study with larger samples across multiple provinces.

3. Evaluate genre-specific impacts (e.g., drama vs. poetry).

Conclusion

The literature-based instruction (LBI) method has clearly demonstrated significant advantages over traditional instructional practices in enhancing oral competencies among undergraduate TESL students in Henan province. The remarkable improvements in fluency, accuracy, and learner confidence underscore the value of incorporating literary materials that foster meaningful language use and stimulate deeper cognitive and emotional engagement. Given China's ongoing challenge in achieving communicative proficiency among English learners, policymakers and educational institutions are strongly encouraged to prioritize curricular reforms. Specifically, the integration of literary texts and interactive pedagogical approaches can provide a more authentic, stimulating, and contextually relevant learning environment. Ultimately, such curriculum advancements have the potential to substantially enhance both language proficiency and student motivation, addressing critical educational gaps and contributing positively to the overall quality of language education in China. Furthermore, by emphasizing culturally and socially relevant content through literary materials, learners can develop a stronger personal and emotional connection to the language, ultimately fostering greater motivation, creativity, and long-term retention. Educational stakeholders should therefore adopt a comprehensive, interdisciplinary approach to language instruction, promoting methods that not only improve linguistic competence but also nurture global awareness and intercultural communicative skills essential for the increasingly interconnected world.

References

1. Paran, A. (2008). The role of literature in instructed foreign language learning and teaching: An evidence-based survey. *Language Teaching*, *41*(4), 465-496. https://doi.org/10.1017/S026144480800520X

2. Daskalovska, N. (2015). Incidental vocabulary acquisition from reading authentic texts. *Reading Matrix: An International Online Journal*, *15*(1), 74-90.

3. Gregersen, T., & MacIntyre, P. D. (2014). *Capitalizing on language learners' individuality: From premise to practice.* Multilingual Matters.

4. Lazar, G. (1993). *Literature and language teaching: A guide for teachers and trainers.* Cambridge University Press.

5. Krashen, S. D. (1989). We acquire vocabulary and spelling by reading: Additional evidence for the input hypothesis. *The Modern Language Journal*, *73*(4), 440-464.

6. Collie, J., & Slater, S. (2009). *Literature in the language classroom: A resource book of ideas and activities.* Cambridge University Press.

7. Duff, A., & Maley, A. (2007). *Literature* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.

8. Khatib, M., & Rahimi, A. H. (2012). Literature and language teaching. *Journal of Academic and Applied Studies*, *2*(6), 32-38.

9. Hanauer, D. I. (2001). Focus-on-cultural understanding: Literary reading in the second language classroom. *CAUCE*, *24*, 389-404.

10. Kim, Y. (2004). Effects of literature-based instruction on language acquisition in EFL contexts. *Journal of English as a Foreign Language*, *14*(1), 1-17.

11. Carter, R., & Long, M. N. (1991). *Teaching literature.* Longman.

12. Hedge, T. (2000). *Teaching and learning in the language classroom.* Oxford University Press.

13. Nunan, D. (2004). *Task-based language teaching.* Cambridge University Press.

14. Nation, I. S. P. (2001). *Learning vocabulary in another language.* Cambridge University Press.

15. Littlewood, W. (2004). The task-based approach: Some questions and suggestions. *ELT Journal*, *58*(4), 319-326.

16. Ellis, R. (2003). *Task-based language learning and teaching.* Oxford University Press.

17. MacIntyre, P. D., & Gardner, R. C. (1994). The subtle effects of language anxiety on cognitive processing in the second language. *Language Learning*, *44*(2), 283-305.

18. Brown, H. D. (2007). *Teaching by principles: An interactive approach to language pedagogy* (3rd ed.). Pearson Education.

19. Richards, J. C., & Rodgers, T. S. (2014). *Approaches and methods in language teaching* (3rd ed.). Cambridge University Press.

20. Maley, A. (2001). Literature in the language classroom. In R. Carter & D. Nunan (Eds.), *The Cambridge guide to teaching English to speakers of other languages* (pp. 180-185). Cambridge University Press.