

Addressing Challenges and Enhancing Strategies for English Listening and Speaking Courses in the AIGC Era: A Tertiary Education Perspective

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Abstract: A questionnaire conducted at the beginning of this semester revealed that over half of the English major students at our college felt that the viewing-listening-speaking course in 2023 focused more on developing listening skills than integrating both listening and speaking skills dynamically. The students attributed this imbalance to large class sizes, time constraints, and a lack of opportunities for discussion. As a result, this semester, our teaching team's focus has shifted toward enhancing students' oral skills, which not only involve language proficiency but also critical thinking, logical reasoning, and effective communication. The effective use of teaching materials and innovative participation methods in class are key to achieving this goal. Specifically, students are encouraged to actively co-create a language environment with the help of AI tools. This paper discusses how to utilize textbooks to promote oral learning, how to guide students in producing oral texts and engaging in interactive classroom activities, and how to shift the traditional listening-focused course towards an integrated approach of listening and speaking. The following aspects will be explored: the application of teaching materials, AI dialogue platforms, and the evolving role of teachers in facilitating oral skills.

Keywords: Oral skills; Listening and speaking integration; AI tools; Teaching materials; Classroom participation; Language proficiency; Teaching innovation; English language teaching

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1.Select Teaching Materials Wisely

Though some textbooks may be thought-provoking, the lack of guidance on oral skills can lead to an inadequate focus on speaking during the teaching process. 'Speaking' gradually has become a 'supporting character' rather than the main role in the viewing-listening-speaking course. Therefore, it is of great importance to select teaching materials that encompass innovative discoveries aligned with the evolution of technology and life. These materials should include the latest or most engaging topics, which can encourage students to think critically and creatively, bridge the gap between the known and the unknown, and provide scaffolding by breaking down complex topics into sub-skills, thereby facilitating their oral learning.

(1) Introduction of the NNS series

Taking the New National Standard (NNS) Core English Major Textbooks as an example, the book adapts educational materials produced by National Geographic Learning and integrates TED Talks into the curriculum, emphasizing the dissemination of brilliant and novel ideas. In this book, six skills are integrated within one topic in each unit, which are: listening skills, note-taking skills, speaking skills, critical thinking, pronunciation skills, and

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presentation skills.

(2) Building bridge between listening and speaking

Through the interconnected unit module, students can accumulate expressions and logical connectors during the listening and viewing. Each listening task helps to prepare for the upcoming oral task. In Unit 5, ‘Stress: Friend or Foe,’ for instance, the listening part requires learners to complete the flow chart below(chart1), from which they can discern the specific cause-and-effect relationships between each blank. Specifically, they need to understand what the ‘arrows’ represent when discussing causes of acute and chronic stress and the effects of them. They must turn the arrows into signal words such as ‘as a result,’ ‘be caused by,’ ‘lead to,’ ‘affect,’ and ‘the effect of.’ In this way, they can consciously pay attention to cause and effect when engaged in the oral task.

Specifically, in Section G of this unit (the ‘Think Critically’ section), students are required to interpret an infographic(image1) titled ‘What causes stress?’ In this part, when they attempt to relate ‘stress’ to topics in the image 1 such as deadlines, speaking in public, job reviews, grades, relocation, or marriage, they need to use connectors to show the cause and effect. This transition can help those who struggle to speak logically organize the information coherently by completing logic tests in the previous listening section (chart 1).

To conclude, learners are able to gather the clues piece by piece from each listening task. When requested to interpret the unit’s infographic, they can generally apply what they have accumulated and develop their ability to extract information from pictures, thereby enhancing their analytical and critical thinking skills.

Listening task:

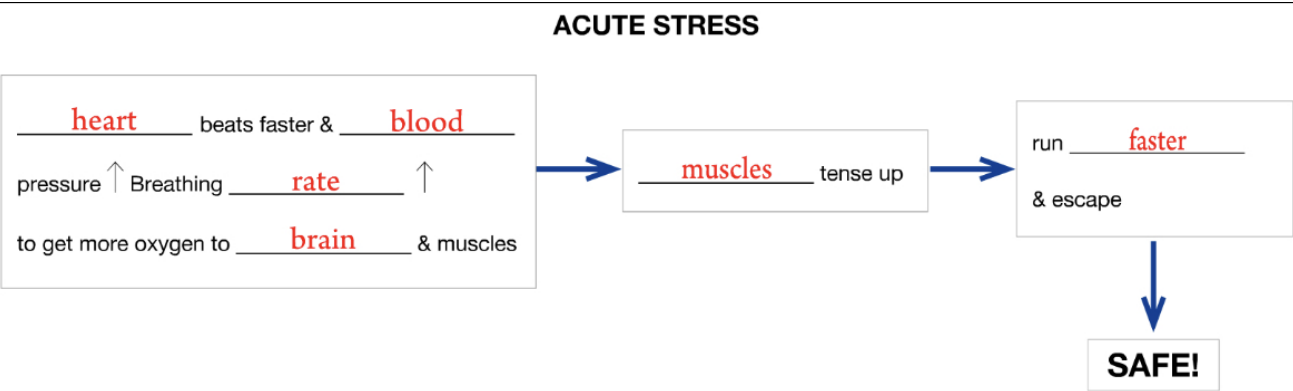


Chart1: flow chart from NNS textbook p108

Oral task:

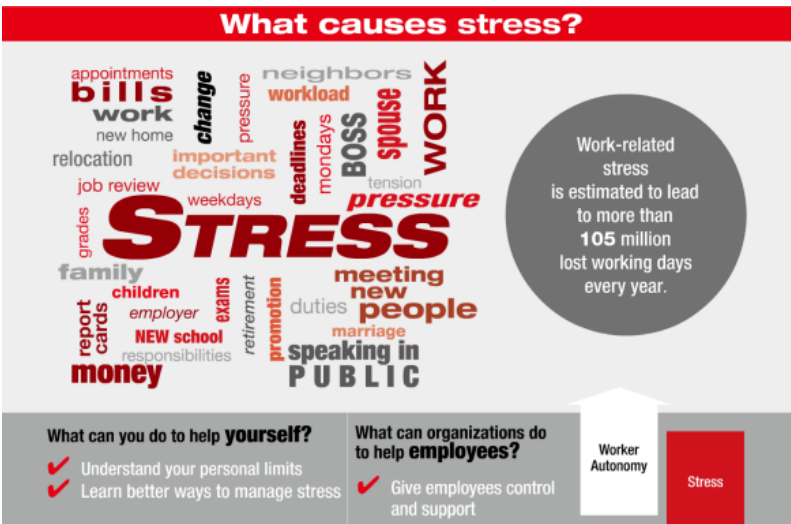


Image1: info-graphic from NNS Textbook p110(Source:OPP Ltd)

(3) From general theme to specific and engaging topic

Compared to previous textbooks, NNS introduces more high-definition pictures, facilitating visual learning by not only galvanizing students' interest in the short term but also by fully mobilizing their perception of the topic throughout the entire process. More impressively, each series of the NNS textbook never fail to resonate with the majority of students when introducing the topics. For example, the topic '*Small Actions, Big Results*' in Series1 discusses how to improve your smartphone battery life in daily life, which is an engaging and achievable speaking task because most of the students are more intrigued by saving the smartphone battery than some other abstract energy or resources. Another example is '*Treasured Places*' in Series 3, which shows the beauty or fragility of our environment in the listening and viewing part while the oral tasks shift the discussion from a general theme to a particular aspect, focusing on the 10 tips an individual can do to protect coral reefs: not touching coral reefs when scuba diving, not giving coral reefs as a present, choosing sustainable seafood, and so on. Thus, refining the conversation by moving from a wide-ranging topic to a more targeted subject can turn the speaking activity into a manageable and achievable assignment.

2. Communicate with AI

(1) Why does the AI has a role to play

UNESCO's report on AI literacy emphasizes the importance of developing AI literacy among teachers and students and constructs AI literacy around five core concepts: perception, natural interaction, representation, reasoning, learning, and the impact of AI. Moreover, '*From Virtual Tutors to Accessible Textbooks: 5 Ways AI is Transforming Education*,' released by the World Economic Forum, discovers that AI capabilities can foster more personalized learning approaches, which can contribute to the improvement of students' digital literacy, critical thinking, and creativity. Additionally, the '*AI in Education Report*' released by the Microsoft Education Blog on April 25, 2024, also supports the idea that exploring the potential of AI can improve educational experiences and learning outcomes. It argues that the rapid advancement of generative artificial intelligence has a transformative impact on educational practices. In particular, as AI technologies evolve, they will affect problem-solving, learning, and communication methodologies within schools, where much attention is paid to cultivating students' critical thinking and metacognitive skills.

(2) Natural interaction

Although communicating with classmates can be rewarding, inevitably, from time to time, some students either cannot form groups with others due to unfamiliarity, or, on the contrary, may become distracted by being too familiar with each other. They might start chatting randomly or discuss topics irrelevant to the subject, slowing down the progress of oral tasks. What's more, due to a lack of confidence, many students show anxiety during one-on-one oral communication with their teachers. Regardless of whether the teacher is nice or cool, learners will still, more or less, be afraid of making mistakes in front of the class or being judged in some way. The third issue is the lack of feedback; it is nearly impossible to provide timely feedback for every student in each lecture, making it challenging for them to understand their language problems without putting them under too much stress.

1) A 'Friendly Teacher'

By comparison, an AI agent is capable of addressing the issues mentioned above. First and most, obviously, AI can interact with students in a relaxing atmosphere, without exerting excessive conversational pressure, while simultaneously giving feedback to the students. The majority of students find communication with AI less anxiety-inducing and more encouraging. On some instant AI language dialogue platforms, students can also talk to AI through voice message and hear the voice response from AI agent, thereby seamlessly combining listening and

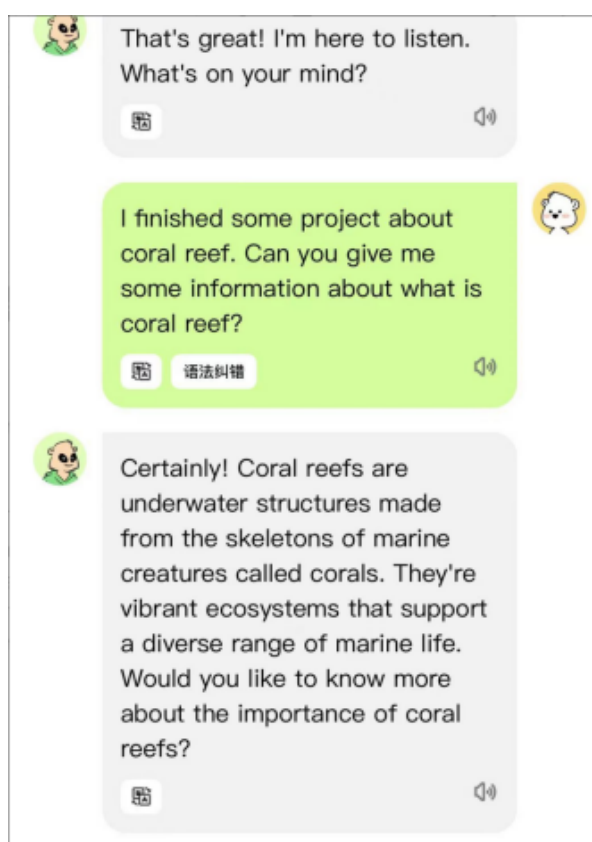
speaking together in one task. Furthermore, due to the voice recognition capabilities, AI agents are generally less sensitive to different accents, making the communication process smooth and coherent, plus the quick response of AI can also give students the experience of communicating with real people.

2) A vivid dialogue experience

On the LangMind platform, which provides different characters to choose from in a dialogue, students can interact with various personas, including an English teacher named Ruth; Jason, a writer who loves helping people with self-learning; Amanda, a fashion blogger and stylist, a cultural critic named Meiying, and a storyteller who is also a 'tiger' from the glorious Dreamshire, England, etc. With names and identities, the agent becomes less lifeless to students. When they open the dialogue, it allows them to talk to the agent as if talking to a real person.

(3) Metacognitive skills

The AI agent can also correct their wording, vocabulary, and grammar when communicating with AI. Taking an authentic oral chat with AI as an example, in sample 1 below which provide a scenario where a student asks AI, 'What is coral reef?' And it can be seen that the AI responds go like: 'Coral reefs are underwater structures made from the skeletons of marine creatures...' From this response, students will reflect on their language output consciously and realize that 'reef' is a countable noun and should be paired with 'reefs' or used as 'a coral reef'. Without having their mistakes pointed out by others, students can learn mindfully from a natural dialogue. In this way, the ability to monitor thoughts and the cognitive aspect of learning can be developed by deliberate reflection, contributing to their communicative competence.

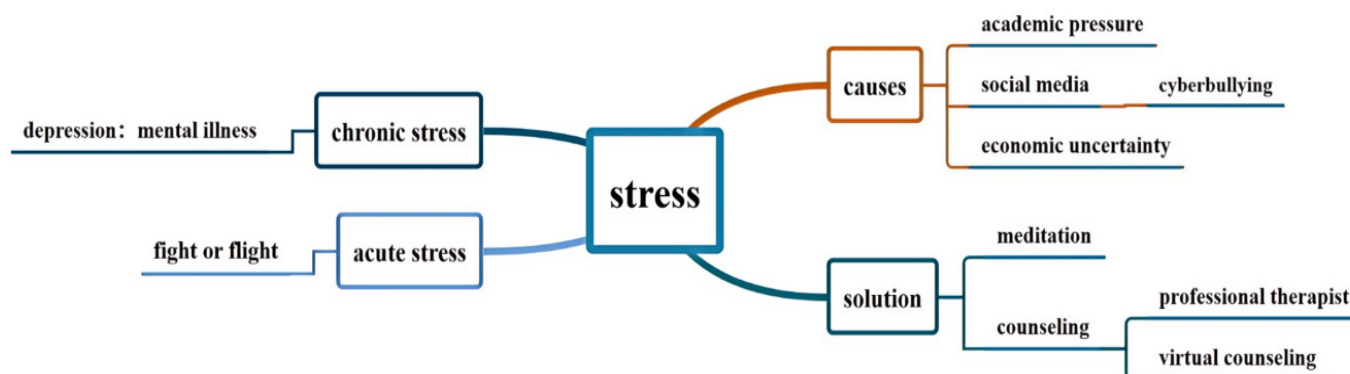


Sample 1: Interaction between AI and student to show how the AI help to correct a grammatical mistake in a subtle way(from TalkAI)

(4) Inspiration

Furthermore, students can continuously accumulate knowledge related to the topic and gain inspiration for

the next question in the communication. The AI agent, literally can always keep the conversation going around the topic. Taking 'stress' as a sample subject for an oral task, if one ask the AI agent what causes stress, the dialogue can progress from discussing causes such as academic pressure, social media, and economic uncertainty to exploring management strategies like virtual counseling or meditation. The responses generated by AI is much similar to brainstorming activity but in a more logical way like the mind-map below, thereby enriching the learners' vocabulary, completing their understanding of the theme and cultivating their creativity thinking.



Mind-map1:Visualization of the AI conversation

On the other hand, if students engage in conversations with their classmates, they may not explore the topic to such a deep degree if they are unfamiliar with it. Simply put, they might not step out of their comfort zone and learn something new. When talking to an AI agent, some students realize they have learned more than they would by just talking to their peers, as the AI keep pushing them to embrace new ideas. One student said he did not know the existence of artificial reefs until he started a discussion with AI on coral reefs which inspired him a lot.

To further illustrate, here's another example to show AI can generate more meaningful input and enhance the learning process. For instance, when students discuss the topic of coral reefs, AI will not only focus on marine life but also will mention relevant human activities such as diving, snorkeling, and regulating fishing methods. This approach obviously helps to build a network-like vocabulary, which can not only improve their linguistic competence but also enhance their divergent thinking. The vocabulary used by AI shows that coral reefs are neither something just about the nature, nor the Great Barrier Reef in their existing cognitive schema, but also is related to human activity as well. Additionally, diversified expression input, aids students in mastering the process of interacting with AI and developing effective questioning strategies.

(5) Build up Intelligent Agent and Co-create Language Environment

Apart from using AI tool to start a dialogue directly in class, students can also use AI tool to generate the text for speaking task or personalize the oral task by themselves. As teachers, we don't have to provide the teaching materials for the students all the time. Students can absolutely produce the text with the assistance of AI. At first, teachers can introduce some intelligent agents for the student to choose, or, they can build up their own agent via a free app, Coze, generating responses based on the large language models (LLMs), allowing users to define the persona of their own AI chatbot, which involves writing prompts that are related to what a customized agent can do. When students input a description of the bot's identity and objectives, Coze can automatically optimize prompts to structure them more effectively. But how can the oral class benefit from this function of such an app? Above all, students are able to generate personalized responses for their specific purpose, either to accumulate expressions for oral tasks or to collect useful information to discuss with their team members. In Coze, the bot will store all the responses instead of functioning as a single use agent, which is beneficial for the learners to reflect on their previous conversation. Also, the process we use the platform is a process to test and train the agent simultaneously to work

for us only. More importantly, students can change their persona when interacting with the AI agent, which helps them think from different perspectives. When discussing subjects like stress and depression, for example, they can shift their role from someone who is struggling to someone who can provide counseling or other help, and thus, they can change their character from a learner to a provider of learning materials. This is a sensible way to develop their critical thinking skills.

Indeed, at this application level, scenario-based practices of using AI with purpose involve engaging students in activities where they use AI tools to purposefully practice their speaking skills and foster their inquiry-based learning, higher-order thinking, and creativity.

In conclusion, the students can benefit from co-creating the personalized and inspirational oral text for use between partners in class or they can literally talk to the AI in a relaxing and mindful way without being controlled by the passive feedback. As educators, we should encourage students to actively use AI tools, create an environment for students to use AI for learning, and encourage students to acquire learning resources through generative artificial intelligence thereby creating a learning environment with AI. We should welcome the integration of AI in educational curricula, highlighting its significance in enhancing educational efficiency, personalizing learning experiences, and preparing students for future workplaces where AI will play a pivotal role.

3. The Role of Teachers

(1) Counter AI hallucinations

Even though AI is a useful and valuable tool for practicing oral English and accessing learning resources, as teachers, we should not completely hand over everything to AI, especially since AI has several pitfalls. One of these is 'AI hallucinations,' which refers to erroneous or misleading outputs. This can occur when AI makes incorrect inferences based on insufficient, biased, or misinterpreted data. Therefore, we should not always trust AI due to its potential misperception of reality. Educators need to guide students in thinking critically about whether the AI-generated text is applicable or reasonable—if so, how; and if not, why.

(2) Scenario construction and topic guidance

Secondly, we should establish relevant scenarios based on unit themes or self-defined themes. If we do not restrict the theme and allow students to communicate freely with AI, they may lack comparability and topic relevance in their discussions with group members or classmates. Once the oral task ends, they might only gain experience in random talking, but if we set a shared and thought-provoking topic while controlling the process, different questioning methods from students can elicit different responses. Consequently, they can receive various feedback during the communication process. After all, hearing different voices on the same topic gives learners the opportunity to compare their discussions with those of other students, enabling them to gain a more comprehensive and diverse dialogue experience.

(3) Question guide and reflection organizer

The function of teachers is also reflected in helping students master the skills to ask questions in English, improve their prompts when interacting with AI, extract key information from AI generative content, and ask subsequent questions that are more relevant to the topic and context. In addition, after each oral task, we can ask students to reflect on their conversations with AI, construct a topic network, and reconsider the prompts they gave to AI and the responses they received from these prompts, as well as the insights they gained when talking with AI. Otherwise, without systematic reflection, students can only engage in a simple questioning process, lacking the organization of information clues and deep-thinking that leads to real improvement in their metacognitive skills.

(4) Improvement

In subsequent listening-speaking-viewing-oral course, we can consider combining interpersonal interaction with communication between human and AI agent in the class, so that students can gain a more comprehensive dialogue experience from the synchronous processes of human-to-human and human-to-AI interactions. In this way, students can apply what they have learned from AI to the dialogue with human right away, plus the human-to-human interaction can discern the AI hallucination efficiently. Teacher, as an organizer in class, can leverage the two ways of communication and serve them as complementary learning methods to cater to diverse student needs.

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