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Struggling with EFL Speaking: The Experience of Mainland Chinese Students in a Bachelor of Education Programme in Hong Kong

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Abstract

In recent years there has been a significant increase in the number of universities offering English-medium curriculum in Asian countries where English is traditionally considered a foreign language. With such a growing presence of non-English background students in English-medium university classrooms, it is important to recognize that the linguistic demands of academic contents learning and the subsequent professional employment in the workplace pose challenges that are not being effectively addressed in many content curricula. Motivating this qualitative longitudinal study was the need for research to examine how university EFL content curriculum might afford opportunities for students' English language improvement, oral language development in particular. Data were collected through two rounds of in-depth semi-structured interviews with twelve fourth-year ethnic mainland Chinese students who were undertaking a Bachelor of Education (BEd) programme at a Hong Kong university preparing them to become secondary English teachers in Hong Kong schools. Results showed that in most of the BEd courses, lecturers had no language-related goals for their classes. The responsibility for expanding the students' spoken English skills appeared to be borne solely by the students themselves. Implications of the results for changes in the curriculum to better facilitate students' oral language development are discussed.

Keywords: EFL, oral language development, content subject learning and second language development

1. Introduction

In spite of the fact that the ability to speak a foreign language is without doubt the most highly prized language skill (Lado, 1961), ESL or EFL speaking has not been recognized as a research area as readily as have reading, writing, or listening (Bygate, 1998). For example, as Bygate (1998) noticed, the 25th anniversary volume of *TESOL Quarterly* had papers on reading, writing, and listening but not a single

paper on speaking. Lynch's (2011) calculation of the topics addressed in the *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* (volumes 1–9) reveals that out of the 147 articles, only 6 addressed speaking/spoken genres, whereas 79 articles addressed expert or novice writing. According to Lynch, one major reason for the low profile of speaking research could be the inherent complexity of speaking and speaking research. Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000) also pointed out that speaking in a second or foreign language is often considered the most complex skill to acquire as it requires command of speech production sub-skills like vocabulary retrieval and choice of grammatical patterns, and sociocultural competence.

In the past two decades, there has been a significant increase in the number of universities offering English-medium curriculum in Asian countries where English is traditionally considered a foreign language (Harrington & Roche, 2014; Kirkpatrick, 2011). This growth of English-medium teaching in Asian universities appears to be partly associated with an expectation that studying in an English-medium university should automatically result in a significant improvement in students' English proficiency (O'Loughlin & Arkoudis, 2009). With a growing presence of non-English background students in English-medium university classrooms, it is important to recognize that the linguistic demands of disciplinary learning and the subsequent professional employment in the workplace pose challenges that are not being effectively addressed in many classrooms (Lynch, 2011). For example, Ferris and Tagg (1998) observed that the range of listening and speaking tasks required of students in American university classrooms tends to be very broad: students may be asked to participate in large- and small-group discussions, to take part in debates, to work collaboratively on class projects or assigned course materials. This may constitute a daunting challenge for non-English background students learning academic content subjects through English while still developing proficiency in English.

In English medium-universities in Hong Kong, mainland Chinese students are a growing demographic in recent years. It is widely believed that these students, due to lack of experience of studying content subjects in English, will face considerable challenge while coping with the difficulties associated with smooth transition to and successful progression through English-medium degree programme. Inevitably, they will be confronted with the dual aims of learning the knowledge of the content area and simultaneously expanding their English language proficiency. Although it is often claimed that content second or foreign language curriculum is useful to developing second or foreign language competence, research suggests that it is not necessarily the case that all such curricula will be successful in those dual aims (Yip et al., 2003).

Given the fact that language development in the context of subject content knowledge instruction is not fully understood and has not been widely researched (Polio & Zyzik, 2009), particularly insofar as the EFL content instruction takes place in a Cantonese-dominant institution and society, the goal of the present longitudinal case study is to provide a contextualized illustration of how the English-medium teacher-education content curriculum learning may afford a group of mainland Chinese students opportunities for linguistic development, with a particular focus on the speaking opportunities and speaking-related difficulties they encountered while they were studying in a Bachelor of Education programme at a university in Hong Kong. It is believed that the results of this study will help us better understand the conditions in which growth in both language proficiency and content knowledge may occur, as well as understand how to achieve this most efficiently. Specifically, the following research questions guided the design of the study:

RQ1: What EFL speaking difficulties and speaking opportunities did a group of mainland Chinese students perceive they encountered while studying in a Bachelor of Education programme in Hong Kong?

RQ2: In light of the results of this study, how may tertiary EFL content curriculum teaching facilitate students' oral English language development?

2. Theoretical Perspectives on Oral Language Development in Second Language Acquisition

Of particular relevance to the present study are some important theoretical perspectives on oral language development in second language acquisition.

2.1 Components of Spoken English

As a medium, language expresses thought in terms of inner speech; and as a mediating tool, language is used to organize thought and knowledge systems (Nelson, 1996). However, for less-than proficient speakers, speaking in a language other than one's own is anything but simple (Bailey, 2005). Drawing on van Lier's (1995) research work, Bailey (2005) summarizes the major components of spoken English as comprising text, utterance, clause, word, phoneme, and syllable. A spoken text refers to stretches of language of an undetermined length; a spoken utterance may not always be a full sentence, as it would be if written; a clause is two or more words that contain a verb marked for tense and a grammatical subject; a word is a unit of language that can stand on its own and convey meaning; a phoneme is a unit of sound that distinguishes meaning; and a syllable can consist of a morpheme or simply one or

more phonemes. Bailey emphasizes that the ability to use these components to produce and understand language is known as linguistic competence, which is at the core of the spoken English skills. Hilton's (2008) research further provides empirical evidence showing that automatic access to appropriate linguistic knowledge is crucial for spoken production in a foreign language. It is very hard for an individual to engage in meaning construction if learners are not equipped with an adequate command of lexical, morpho-syntactic, phonological, and grammatical knowledge of a foreign language (Hilton, 2007).

It has also been recognized that speaking not only requires mastering the sound system of a language and developing knowledge of the grammar and vocabulary of the language, but also entails knowing how to produce language according to the proper social setting, audience, situation and subject matter, and organize their thoughts in a meaningful and logical sequence (Goh & Burns, 2012). In other words, learning to speak a foreign language means both gaining progressive control over the systems of options (i.e., spoken structures, grammar features, and lexis) in the new language, and learning which options to select to make which meanings in which contexts (Derewianka, 2003).

2.2 Second Language Oral Production: The Role of Cognitive Processing and Conversational Interaction

Levelt's (1989) model was originally developed to portray a speech production process in a first language. De Bot (1992) moderated and extended Levelt's model so that it applies to bilingual speech production situations to account for speaking in a second language. This model has thus been widely used to illustrate the three cognitive processes that oral production is assumed to involve: conceptualization, formulation, and articulation. A process of conceptualization is construed as conceptualizing the message, i.e., planning the message content and generating the message. A process of formulation is then responsible for formulating the language presentation, i.e., giving grammatical and phonological shape to the message. The formulation process also prepares the sound patterns of the words to be used (Bygate, 2001). The articulation process is then represented as articulating the language, i.e., retrieving chunks of internal speech and executing the message. The articulation process practically involves the motor control of the articulatory organs. Drawing on Levelt's model, Skehan (2001) hypothesized that performing in an underdeveloped interlanguage tends to impose a large burden on the learner's attention and cause the learner to make choices: to prioritize one aspect of performance, such as being

accurate, over another, such as being fluent or suitably complex, as attention to one area of task performance may reduce their attention for other areas.

Other researchers such as Long (1996), Gass (1997) and Swain (2000) suggest that conversational interaction is essential for second language oral development as interaction necessarily involves trying to understand and make oneself understood. Long (as cited in Lightbown & Spada, 2012) emphasizes that when communication is difficult, interlocutors must negotiate for meaning, and this negotiation is seen as the opportunity for language development. Through these negotiations, interlocutors figure out what they need to do to keep the conversation going and have their linguistic impasses resolved.

In response to Krashen's comprehensible input hypothesis, Swain (2001) proposed that it is when learners must produce language that their interlocutor can understand that they are most likely to see the limits of their second language speaking ability and the need to find better ways to express their meaning. Swain hypothesized that the production of language pushes learners to process language more deeply. In other words, the demands of producing comprehensive output tend to push learners ahead in their second language development. Drawing on their early observation that second language immersion students tended to be much weaker in their oral and writing skills than in their reading and listening skills, Swain and Lapkin (2002) argued for adequate opportunities for second language learners to engage in verbal production to promote their language development. Similarly, Fillmore & Snow (2003) observed that learners who are successful in acquiring English interact directly and frequently with people who know the language well. As Fillmore and Snow pointed out, such expert speakers not only provide access to the language, they also provide clues as to how to combine and communicate ideas, information, and intentions.

2.3 Content Subject Learning and Second Language Development

In second language content teaching and learning, the second language is both a target and a medium of education. In other words, the second language is the vehicle for teaching and learning, and the students' second language development is also a learning outcome. It has been recognized that meaningful second language learning occurs in contexts where students are required to communicate (speak, listen, read and write) about content learning and co-construct academic products (van Lier & Walqui, 2010). There is thus a common expectation that second language content area teaching and learning promotes dual goals: the learning of the subject matter and the development of the target language skills.

As students use their emerging target language to engage in the learning of content subject, the challenge is then to ensure that teachers are able to help students notice language and unpack it as needed for the students to enter into the content, develop their understanding, and develop their second language simultaneously (Hakuta, Butler, & Witt, 2000). Lucas, Villegas, and Freedson-Gonzalez (2008) outlined three types of pedagogical expertise needed to assist students in extending their second language proficiency: familiarity with the students' linguistic and academic backgrounds; an understanding of the language demands inherent in the learning tasks that students are expected to carry out in class; and skills for using appropriate scaffolding so that learners can participate successfully in those learning tasks. Cummins and Man (2007) and Lucas et al. (2008) also emphasized the importance of the following pedagogical practices in helping students acquire content knowledge and simultaneously develop their target second or foreign language proficiency:

1. Making the language demands and practices of the content-area classroom explicit helps teachers support language learning in the service of content-area learning.
2. Making content learning input comprehensible helps students understand what is going on in the classroom, and absorb large quantity of verbal materials. Students thus need systematic scaffolding and instruction to deal with longer texts, structurally more complex sentences, more subject-specific new vocabulary, and more creative and critical higher-order thinking skills.
3. Students will learn and take ownership of a language to the extent that it opens up opportunities for them to communicate, either orally or in written form, their ideas, feelings, imaginations, and identities to others who matter to them.

3. The Study

3.1 Settings and Participants

This study is part of a larger research project concerning post-secondary L2 development that draws on the learning experiences of a cohort of 126 Hong Kong ESL trainee teachers. The study reported in this paper focuses on twelve of these 126 students. These twelve students were selected for analysis, as they were unanimously seen by the project team to exemplify what typical speaking difficulties ESL students encountered in their content studies. In addition, the twelve participants were invited to take part in this study as they came from different parts of mainland China. As such, they generally represented the wide mainland Chinese student population at the

university. Pseudonyms are used for these twelve ESL students to ensure participant anonymity.

The twelve participants in this study were fourth-year ethnic Chinese students who, at the time of this study, were undertaking a Bachelor of Education (BEd) (English Language) programme at a Hong Kong university. The programme aims to prepare Chinese-speaking students to become secondary teachers of English as a foreign language and must therefore cover the equivalent curriculum of a BA in English as well as provide pedagogical training. The major content courses on the BEd programme include 'Contemporary Multicultural Literature', 'Introduction to Linguistics', 'Lexis, Morphology, and Semantics', 'Phonology', 'Grammar Studies', 'First and Second Language Acquisition', 'English Language Curriculum', "Practical Skills for ELT" etc. In addition, the participants also needed to take some general education courses. All the participants were female, and spoke Mandarin as their mother tongue. They all completed their primary and secondary education on the Chinese mainland. In their third year in the BEd programme, the participants undertook a one-semester international experience – typically referred to as 'immersion' sponsored by the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government (HKSAR) – at an overseas university. Like other students on the BEd programme, they were also required to undertake eight-week teaching practice in their third and fourth year respectively. As an exit English proficiency test set by the Hong Kong government, they were required to take the Language Proficiency Assessment for Teachers of English (LPATE) before their graduation.

Participants were assured that all interview data they provided would be kept confidential, and that pseudonyms are used in this article.

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

This study was designed as an interview-based, 'collective case study' (Stake, 2000), which is understood here as a number of parallel case studies conducted in order to inquire into a particular phenomenon (Benson, 2010). The justification for the case study is that although case study research is habitually faced with criticisms concerning problems in generalizing its findings, the richness and depth of data they can generate is invaluable in leading to a full and thorough knowledge of the particular phenomenon (Stake, 2000).

In this study, two in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of the twelve participants. The first interview was conducted in the second semester of the participants' second year in the BEd programme. The second interview was conducted in the second semester of their final year in the BEd

programme. Each interview which was conducted in the participants' first language, i.e., Mandarin, lasted approximately one hour. In each interview, each participant was asked to report what speaking opportunities were afforded in different courses they had taken in the BEd programme, what speaking opportunities they appropriated outside the classroom, what speaking difficulties they experienced and what they thought were the major causes of the difficulties, and how they coped with LPATE Speaking Test. In the second interview, each participant was also asked what speaking opportunities they experienced during the one-semester immersion abroad and what impact they thought the immersion experience had on their speaking proficiency. A list of main interview questions appears in Appendix A. The development of these interview questions was based on careful reading of the relevant research studies in the literature. These questions were also piloted on a group of students the author was teaching at the time when this study was conducted. All the interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and further translated into English in their entirety. In addition, follow-up email correspondence with the participants was also used to probe further some points that emerged while the interviews were being transcribed and translated and analyzed.

The analysis of the interview data involved repeated reading and using a constant comparative method (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). This process of analytic induction started with an objective review, editing and organizing of the data without a theory imposed on them (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This initial analysis of the data was immediately followed by the following procedures: 1) First, each interview transcript was read in its entirety to gain an overview assessment; 2) Secondly, we did a line-by-line review within each transcript and made notes or marginal remarks, i.e., annotating the transcripts with comments and specific descriptive phrases, a process that Merriam (2009, p. 179) calls ''open coding'' ; 3) We then began to unitize the data by circling, underlining, and highlighting any units of data that emerged as indicating themes and patterns (Albert & Carnes, 2006). Consequently, the following four themes were salient in our data: 1) Struggling with linguistic obstacles, 2) Lack of attention to language, and lack of oral output in class; 3) Students' efforts in oral language development outside class; 4) The one-semester study abroad experience. In this way, we allowed the data to reveal their own naturally occurring patterns in an inductive manner rather than impose a priori categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This process of analytic induction and themes identification was done 'manually' by a research assistant who was proficient trilingually in English, Cantonese and Mandarin. To ensure the validity and reliability of the categorization of themes, the whole process of segmenting the data and identifying themes was thoroughly checked

by the author. When issues of ambiguity arose, the research assistant and the author discussed until consensus was reached.

A secondary data source was programme artifacts such as course outlines of content subject courses in the BEd programme that were obtained from instructors involved in the BEd programme. In this paper, discussion of these course outlines was incorporated into analysis of the interview data.

4. Results

Qualitative analysis of the interview data and programme artefacts revealed four main, interrelated sources of difficulties the participants reported they had encountered in the content learning context: 1) Struggling with Linguistic Obstacles; 2) Lack of Attention to Language, and Lack of Oral Output in Class; 3) Students' Efforts in Oral Language Development Outside Class; 4) The One-Semester Study Abroad Experience. These sources of difficulties are summarized in Table 1.

4.1 Struggling with Linguistic Obstacles

Krashen (1988) argued that target second language speaking can be seen as the end product of the learner's attention to linguistic form. Unlike the native speakers who rely on a subconscious knowledge or just use their feel for correctness, EFL learners' ability to produce utterances in a foreign language comes from a conscious and imperfectly learned knowledge serving as a monitor. In the case of the participants in this study, they also had the tendency to organize their thoughts in Chinese and translate these thoughts into English. When they were struggling to formulate their ideas orally in English, their speech tended to contain errors in grammar, vocabulary, or pronunciation.

Grammar

In this study, almost all the participants mentioned that 'grammar' figured as a problem associated with their speaking in English, and as a source of major anxiety particularly in some formal speaking situations:

> As I am preparing an English proficiency test, I found the speaking part is the most difficult part to prepare. I always forgot to pay attention to grammar when I am talking. So I still need to work hard on these aspects. (Esther)

	Linguistic obstacles			*Lack of attention to language*	*Efforts outside class*	*Immersion experience*
				Lack of oral output		
	Grammar	Vocabulary	Pronunciation			
Esther	√			√		
Christy	√			√		
Alice	√			√	√	√
Stella	√				√	√
Grace	√	√				√
Rosina	√	√		√	√	
Jane	√	√		√		√
Betty	√		√		√	
Ruby	√		√	√		
Elizabeth			√		√	√
Sally	√			√		√
Sara	√			√	√	√

Table 1. Sources of difficulties mentioned by the participants during the BEd programme in Hong Kong

Esther apparently attributed the occurrence of grammatical mistakes to lack of attention. Sometimes, this lack of attention to grammar was believed to be caused by a focus on fluency: "I tend to speak faster which leads to more mistakes." (Christy). One student suggested inevitability of occurrence of grammatical errors if one is focused on communication of meaning: "Even native speakers make grammatical errors, and reformulate their utterances. When I am aware of a grammatical error, I immediately correct it. But if I am not aware of it I will not reformulate" (Alice). The type of grammatical errors in speaking mentioned most frequently by these students was subject-verb agreement, use of third-person singular forms of verbs in particular. At least three participants reported conducting some kind of 'experiment' to resolve this problem. One student recalled that when she noticed this subject-verb agreement problem as the major problem with her spoken English, she started to deliberately attend to the 'subject' and 'verb' parts whenever she spoke English: "if the subject is a singular form, I think a moment, and have to be very careful with the verb that follows' (Stella). Although this affected her fluency, Stella said that after one semester's sustained practice, she developed a remarkably better control over both accuracy and fluency in her speaking.

Vocabulary

Besides grammar, vocabulary was also mentioned as a main obstacle during spoken interaction. All the participants in this study had never had any exposure to English-medium teaching of content subjects before their arrival in Hong Kong. Many of them commented that although they had developed a fairly good repertoire of English vocabulary knowledge by the time they arrived in university, they were largely only able to recognize these vocabulary words in printed materials, but had seldom heard them spoken in authentic oral communication. Grace reported carrying out a speaking practice 'experiment' in the second semester of her first year in the BEd programme: she and her roommate decided to speak in English whenever they talked to each other. After a short period of time, they found they were not able to continue the 'experiment' due to lack of readily available vocabulary words every time they attempted to communicate in English. Grace felt that she sometimes could not even understand some basic conversational language as she even did not know how to respond when someone said "how is it going"? Consequently, due to lack of a foundation in conversational language and being overwhelmed with a deluge of unfamiliar subject-specific vocabulary in academic coursework, the majority of these students experienced considerable difficulties in understanding lectures and speaking to their lecturers or peer classmates in tutorials in the first few semesters in the BEd program:

> I could only understand about 60% of the contents of some of the lectures in my first semester. I could not even understand words like 'presentation' and 'assignment' as the lecturer speaks fast. I thus had to spend lots of time studying the relevant subject-specific vocabulary ahead of lectures and tutorials. (Rosina)

> Sometimes, when my lecturer asked me questions I did not understand her questions, so I did not know how to answer those questions. Sometimes I understood her questions, but I did not know how to express my opinions due to lack of the vocabulary words. (Jane)

Pronunciation

The study participants commented that the English phonetics course they took in the first semester of their second year helped them notice their English pronunciation problems. Also, from this semester, they tended to start to take the LPATE Speaking Test which has a reading-aloud component. The phonetic knowledge they learned proved to be quite useful in preparing themselves for the test. Betty recalled that the phonetic knowledge learned in the phonetics course enabled her to realize that the way she pronounced many phonemes was in fact inaccurate. For example, 'th' should be pronounced as /θ/ or /ð/ but not /s/; 'work' and 'walk' contain different vowels. Another type of phonetic knowledge Betty learned in the phonology class relates to pronouncing combinations of individual letters like 'schwa'. To improve her pronunciation intonation in order to prepare for the LPATE Speaking Test, Betty also watched English movies to study how native speakers pronounce English words and imitate their pronunciation, stress and intonation. In spite of her efforts, Betty failed in her reading-aloud part the first time she took LPATE Speaking Test. She had to take the test again in her third year, and finally got a pass grade in the reading-aloud part of the test.

Another student, Ruby, had to undertake additional remedial English language enhancement training due to her English pronunciation problems. "At the beginning of the remedial training, I was very frustrated to learn that every word I said was wrongly pronounced, even the words like 'and', 'man' and 'on', after having learned English for so many years", she said. Her failure in LPATE speaking test twice resulted in a need to study a fifth year in the BEd programme.

As a result of their attention to and efforts in English pronunciation and intonation, many of the participants appeared to be more sensitive to English phonetic phonemes. For example, Elizabeth described that she once got stuck with an utterance '*I've seen the ice-show*' during a conversation with a native speaker, and then she asked for clarification. With the native-speaker's explanation, she understood what the native speaker was talking about. She later found out that her problem lay in her lack of knowledge of the tendency for native speakers to drop / s / before / ʃ /. In other words, the sound of / s / of 'ice' tends to be blended into the sound of / ʃ / of "show". "This phonological process is called assimilation, which is a common phonological process for natives", Elizabeth commented.

4.2 Lack of Attention to Language, and Lack of Oral Output in Class

There was no doubt that students in the BEd programme, particularly those from mainland China, need significant language development if they are to reach the government-stipulated proficiency level for qualified English language teachers in Hong Kong. An examination of course objectives of major courses in the BEd programme, however, reveals that there was no explicit mentioning of language-related goals or demands in course objectives of those major courses offered in the BEd programme. For example, below are the course objectives of the courses 'First and Second Language Acquisition' and 'Grammar Studies':

Course objectives of 'First and Second Language Acquisition':

1). Demonstrate an understanding of the development and relationship of language and thought;

2). Demonstrate an understanding of major theories of first and second language learning;

3). Demonstrate an understanding of how individual and contextual factors contribute to first and second language development.

Course objectives of 'Grammar Studies':

1). Demonstrate a sound understanding of key concepts in functional English grammar building on traditional formal concepts**;**

2). Understand and differentiate key grammatical phenomena, e.g. clause types; clause functions**;**

3). Apply grammatical and pedagogical knowledge, at a basic level, relevant to the second language learning and teaching context.

Based on the author's communication with some lecturers involved in teaching BEd courses, the main reason for failure to include language goals in the specific courses was the constraints of limited curriculum time and space, although the program designer was aware of the heavy language development demands on students. Obviously, the lack of explicit specification of language development goals in course objectives might result in lecturers focusing on covering the relevant content knowledge materials in class. The students in this study reported that even though lecturers might notice important weaknesses in their students' English language proficiency, they did not view themselves as language teachers. Hence they seldom provided any feedback on their student's language use in class. The students mentioned in each of the two interviews that their oral output and interaction tended to be very limited in most of the content classes as lecturers did most of the talking. In the case of 'First and Second Language Acquisition', the lecturer might occasionally organize some content-related discussion activities in class. As noted by some participants in this study, the amount of student oral production in these discussion activities tended to be minimal as a result of students' inadequate background reading and lack of necessary linguistic resources needed to make themselves understood. In courses such as 'Grammar Studies', although lecturers sometimes did draw students' attention to certain language forms, it was usually for the purpose of helping students to learn about language rather than language itself. Although such content knowledge was undoubtedly useful, it often proved extremely difficult for most of them to understand largely because of a deluge of special and technical grammatical terms. For example, Jane mentioned that she was still confused about the differences between six types of English verbs (i.e., material verbs, mental verbs, behavioural verbs, verbal verbs, existential verbs, and relational verbs) as her native English-speaking lecturer could not even explain them clearly. Christy also reported some form of frustration with special or technical terms such as 'Non-specific Deictics', a problem that often resulted in her loss of the thread of the lecturer's instruction. Consequently, linguistically and cognitively challenging language in content areas such as Grammar Studies might negatively affect both the students' learning of subject content knowledge and English language development.

Apparently, the programme's implicit focus on assimilation of disciplinary knowledge led to a few critical comments, as in: "except a few courses in which some kind of group discussion was frequently organized, we mainly listened to the lectures in other courses" (Esther). This inadequate provision of speaking opportunities was further compounded by

some students' unwillingness to speak when occasionally they were indeed given chances to speak. "Even when the lecturer asked us questions in class, I was reluctant to speak as I lacked confidence to speak and I was not sure whether I would get the answer correct" (Sally). Another student recalled that in the first year, when she asked her tutor a question, the tutor replied with 'I don't know what you are talking about', and then she no long dared to ask the tutor questions.

Some of the BEd courses were delivered through lecturers and tutorials. Lectures were usually focused on imparting content academic knowledge. In some tutorials, the tutor organized some pair- or group-based discussion activities. For the most part, such pair or group work tended to result in word-, phrase- or sentence-level utterances rather than extended discourse that was indicative of in-depth enquiry, as illustrated in the following quotes:

> When discussing classwork, each individual group member might produce an utterance of a few individual words or one or two sentences. But as soon as the tutor has heard the group leader present their comments on behalf of the group, the discussion ends. (Sara)

> In some tutorial classes, when we were given a few minutes to discuss a question, we tended to speak in Chinese as we found this to be a more efficient way to understand and make ourselves understood (Alice).

> I took a classroom management course this semester. We occasionally had some case analysis in class. As such case analysis usually had no obvious connection with a real primary or secondary Hong Kong classroom, we did not have much to say. The lecturer was also somewhat unable to control the class, we generally felt lack of motivation to be involved in this type of discussion. (Esther)

It could be seen that the students lamented lack of opportunities for interaction and oral output in some content classes. Under such circumstances, inadequate command of spoken English among the BEd students was not just a concern for these students but should also be a concern for those involved in planning the BEd programme. Consequently, given the programme's traditional emphasis on assimilation of disciplinary knowledge, one significant challenge that faces everyone involved in the BEd programme is how best to integrate language-related goals into content instruction in the BEd programme.

4.3 Students' Efforts in Oral Language Development Outside Class

English is not used in everyday communication in Hong Kong (Kirkpatrick, 2011). Although each of the universities in Hong Kong claims having English as a medium of instruction, academic-related communication outside class, such as project and study-group discussions, is generally conducted in Cantonese. All the participants in this study commented that they seldom spoke in English outside class. "It sounds unnatural and weird if you speak in English when you are together with your peer classmates" (Alice). It is common on campus that Cantonese-speaking students tended to mingle with Cantonese-speaking students, whereas Mandarin-speaking students generally mingled with Mandarin-speaking students. With an increasing presence of mainland Chinese students in recent years,

the university had been promoting communication and understanding between the two student populations. One way to materialize this is to encourage sharing of hall flat between mainland and Hong Kong students. This was widely welcomed as it provided excellent opportunities for them to learn each other's first language.

Consequently, soon after these mainland Chinese students arrived in Hong Kong, they realized that Cantonese functions as a campus lingua franca, which somewhat imposed an interesting dilemma on them. On the one hand, English language development weighed heavily on their mind; on the other hand, the broad sociolinguistic context made them feel a strong need to learn to speak Cantonese, the dominant medium of communication not only on campus but also in the local society. Amazingly, most of these mainland Chinese had achieved a near-native fluency in Cantonese by the time they were in Year 4. When asked how she developed her Cantonese speaking fluency, Rosina who came from Shanghai and did not understand a single word in Cantonese when she first arrived in Hong Kong, highlighted both the benefit of watching Cantonese TV programmes and communicating with her Cantonese peer classmates. But the lingering question in her mind was that her spoken English was far from native-like.

While in the interviews all participants acknowledged a need to further their English speaking proficiency, most of them appeared not to be motivated to put forth deliberate efforts in this area except when they were coping with the LPATE Speaking Test. This speaking test preparation usually lasted around a few weeks, and largely involved studying past oral test papers. For example, Sara took LPATE for the first time in her second year and failed, and she took the speaking test again in her third year and attained a Level 3 (i.e., the lowest pass grade). She recalled that she had started to prepare herself by studying mock test papers one month ahead of the real test. Elizabeth obtained a Level 3 in her first LPAT speaking test, and re-took the test in the hope of attaining a higher score:

> After I passed the speaking test last year, I took it again this year. I had no stress at all so I felt relaxed during the whole test. I hoped I could get better grades this time, but the text of the reading-aloud part was difficult to understand this time, which was out of my expectation. Therefore, I didn't get better grades. (Elizabeth)

During the interviews, we were also interested to know how the students spent their time during semester breaks and summer holidays. The most frequently reported things include doing part-jobs to earn some money, going back to mainland China to stay with their family members; doing short-term-internship either in mainland China or in Hong Kong, participating in some volunteer activities in some Asian countries such as Vietnam, Cambodia and Nepal. When asked if there was any experience that afforded them good English speaking opportunities, one student said that she participated in a TOEFL spoken English class during her summer stay at home in Beijing at the end of her first year of study in the BEd programme, and felt both her listening and speaking skills improved as a result of a month's intensive practice of spoken English. Another student described that she was a Mandarin tutor for a native English-speaking school teenager, and had lots of English speaking opportunities with the teenager. She attributed this to her growth in speaking as a major factor during her undergraduate studies.

4.4 The One-Semester Study Abroad Experience

The participants in this study had a one-semester immersion in English speaking countries in the first semester of their third year in the BEd programme. In most cases, students are assigned to each of the three universities in three different countries according to the need of their own BEd program. However, a student's preference of participating in the immersion program in one particular university together with his or her friend(s) is also an important country selection criterion. In the first round of interviews that took place before the students' immersion abroad, almost everyone seemed to expect that they would make tangible progress in speaking during immersion abroad. However, when they were back from the immersion abroad, they appeared to realize that this was not realistic. They agreed that the most useful part of their immersion experience was home-stay interactions which offered good opportunities to speak English. The following quotes seem representative of the students' views:

> During the time with my host family, we would always have conversations during dinner or on the way to school or when we were out for weekends. I learnt lots of different names of food. Besides, sometimes I did not know how to contact local organizations, how to take a bus to another city, my host mom would help me with that. (Sally)

> My host parents were retired professors who were very supportive and very willing to talk to me. We talked a lot every day, and had a lot of outside-door activities together. I learned a lot of American idiomatic expressions from them. (Elizabeth)

A few students, however, appeared to be less satisfied with their interaction with their host families. Jane reported that a couple of other international students were also staying in her host family, and her host mother was so occupied with daily routines and taking care of her own children that she often got no time to talk to her. She then had to go to a local church to find someone to talk to in order to practise speaking. Another participant in this study, Sara, described that her host parents were quite old and that they did not seem to have much in common to talk about. She thus used to end up staying in her own room most of the time in the evening. One further interesting experience was that of Stella who mentioned that she had very good English speaking opportunities during her immersion in an Australian university. But returning from her immersion in Australia, she went back to China and stayed one month with her own parents. "When I am back here in Hong Kong, I found my spoken English has declined as I never said a word in English with my own parents for one whole month", Stella commented.

But the major limitation most of the students were cognizant of about this one-semester immersion abroad was that they could not fully immerse themselves in a native English-speaking environment due to the presence of their Chinese-speaking classmates. The following quote from Grace illustrates this point rather well:

> I think immersion did not give me a rich language environment as I had expected, because we went to each overseas university as a group; so, most of the time, I was speaking Chinese rather than English with my classmates. (Grace)

5. Discussion

Cummins and Man (2007) proposed that language proficiency contains three distinctive dimensions: conversational fluency, discrete language skills, academic language proficiency. According to Cummins and Man, each of the three dimensions follows a different developmental path among both first and second language students and each responds differently to particular kinds of instructional practices. Cummins (2000) also wrote that minority immigrant students in North America can quickly acquire considerable conversational fluency in the target language when they are exposed to it in the environment, but it takes a much longer time for them to become fluent in academic language. The population in the present study was obviously a far more complicated case than the one in Cummins's work. The students in this study had basically no exposure to conversational English environment before arriving in Hong Kong to study in the BEd programme. In terms of English language development, all of them faced the dual tasks of developing both conversational and academic English proficiency while studying in the BEd programme. The challenge in upgrading their speaking skills was further compounded in a learning context where an indigenous language predominated, and where oral language was felt to be peripheral while written assignments were the main means by which learning was demonstrated and assessed.

The interview data suggest that some of the students might not be linguistically ready for studying the target language content courses in BEd programme in their first year when they were adapting to the English-medium learning environment. As Ruby commented, "the BEd courses are offered in a way that assumes we come here with the appropriate level of English proficiency. But we are not ready yet". Undoubtedly, these students needed to further their English language proficiency while learning content knowledge. Even in their fourth year, a couple of students still failed to get the lowest pass grade in the LPATE Speaking Test set by the Hong Kong Government. Because their grammatical abilities and phonological knowledge were still developing, there were features in their speech that might not be typical of standard English. For example, they reported that some formal and cognitively demanding situations could trigger noticeable errors in pronunciation, grammar, or vocabulary. They also acknowledged that they sometimes found it difficult to discuss ideas at a complex level, or had difficulties in getting the meaning across or keeping the conversation going. These results suggest that the participants in this study may still need significant development with regard to spoken English skills required to function effectively as a secondary level English teacher.

As revealed in this study, there were pedagogical practices inherent in the BEd programme that appeared to be not conducive to the students' English language development, their spoken English skills in particular.

The first point to note is that language learning or development was neither a goal nor a focus of evaluation in most of BEd course syllabuses. There was a unitary emphasis on content subjects learning. Polio and Zyzik (2009) observed that planned language activities that target advanced speaking functions such as narrating events, providing opinions and arguments, making hypothetical statements were incorporated in upper-level undergraduate literature classes in some American universities. In this study, we did not observe any instances of such planned language activities taking place in the content courses in the BEd programme. Although the students reported some discussion activities in some classes, their participation in these activities tended to be limited to word-, or sentence-level utterances. Under such circumstances, functional oral communication abilities may not develop in

students as a result of mere exposure to content knowledge instruction in content classes (Fillmore, 1997). In fact, there was a pervasive feeling among the students that lecturers were mainly concerned with transmitting academic content knowledge, and were generally oblivious to their language needs and problems. Lecturers might feel that it was not their responsibility for helping students to understand the language associated with the content and providing them with oral language development opportunities. A corollary of lecturers' lack of pedagogical attention to upgrading students' language skills might be that students would not actively make efforts to expand their oral skills outside class even though they recognized problems with their spoken English. Consequently, some of the students might feel a need to improve their speaking proficiency only when they had to cope with the LPAT Speaking Test.

The data of this study also suggest that BEd courses which were taught in English tended to differ in terms of the extent to which the contents of the courses were comprehensible to the students. Consequently, the provision of meaningful and comprehensible input in some content classes might be in question. For example, the participants in this study found Grammar Studies to be the most difficult course to understand. Such content input was thus unlikely to push them to higher levels of proficiency or to help them gain control over specific L2 forms as successful second language learning requires comprehensible input that actively engages the learners' attention (Krashen, 1988). Fillmore and Snow (2003) also emphasized that second language knowledge can only be developed from oral and written input, provided that the text is comprehensible to the learner. Seen in this light, content teachers' use of sheltering strategies such as providing systematic scaffolding plays a vital role in promoting students' content comprehension and learning that will also result in language development.

Somewhat in contrast to a common assumption that immersion abroad can result in students developing proficiency in the target language, Magnan and Back (2007) found that 40% of the students in their study maintained the same proficiency level after a one semester-abroad experience. In the current study, although the students' assessment of their overseas immersion experience appeared to be quite positive, some of them had the feeling that one semester immersion abroad did not result in notable improvement in their English speaking proficiency as they had expected, somewhat echoing Magnan and Back's findings. It became clear that spending a considerable amount of time with their peer Chinese-speaking classmates limited the chances for them to fully immerse themselves in the native English-speaking environment. Given this result, it is important to inform prospective immersion abroad students of the negative impact of falling into the habit of grouping and socializing together among peer classmates during the immersion period.

6. Conclusions and Implications

A much under-researched issue in higher education is the extent to which post-secondary English-medium course study helps students improve their English proficiency particularly in an Asian EFL context. This study has examined the opportunities and difficulties a group of mainland Chinese students experienced in EFL speaking while studying content curriculum in a BEd programme at a Hong Kong university. Although case study research generally seems to lack generalizability, the issues examined in this study are of central importance in other contexts around the world where second or foreign language learners are studying disciplinary content through the target second or foreign language.

Illuminating the students' struggling with EFL speaking, this study points to the critical need to strategically and systematically incorporate language development opportunities in the BEd content curriculum. Richards (2010) views English language proficiency as the most important skill among the ten core dimensions of expertise in English language teaching. Also, given the fact that English language teacher education students whose language background is not English need to perform adequately in English in all of its modes, especially speaking, in their future careers, it is important to ensure that oral language use commands a significant place in the current BEd curriculum. The present author believes that lecturers of EFL content courses have a critical role to play in ensuring that opportunities for elaborated discourse are provided in most courses in the BEd programme. Innovative instructional methods are thus required to incorporate explicit teaching of subject-specific vocabulary and complex language structures into the content teaching to help engage students in classroom discussions of subject matter that are sophisticated in form and content. The present author also concurs with Zyzik and Polio (2008) that second or foreign language content courses are the right setting for providing such language development support because content and language are inseparable (Schleppegrell et al., 2004), and because learning content knowledge and developing linguistic proficiency are not mutually exclusive goals. As suggested by Polio and Zyzik (2009) and Pica (2002), including a language focus in content courses does not necessarily mean that it would compete for class time with content instruction. For example, lecturers can assign language activities that can be done outside class, and that force students to take more responsibility for their own language learning. Redmann (2005) also suggested that students can be given background reading to do and comprehension and discussion questions to answer outside the classroom. This is likely to increase student oral output as they are more likely to speak in class because they have already done the reading and constructed written responses to the discussion questions and would probably feel more confident in contributing to class discussions (Polio & Zyzik, 2009).

Finally, in light of the students' perceptions of the one-semester immersion abroad, the author recommends against creating support systems that encourage students grouping and socializing together among themselves as this may impede their target language proficiency development. Meanwhile, students themselves must rise to the challenge by making the extra effort to expand their spoken English skills. These efforts might involve, among other things, actively seeking opportunities to speak English both inside and outside the classroom to practice their listening and speaking skills to achieve a high enough level of both academic and conversational English, and engaging in extensive reading which is crucial for development of the ability to interpret and produce increasingly complex oral and written language.

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Appendix A

Key questions asked in the interviews

1) When you began your study in the BEd programme, did you think your English was good enough to cope well with your studies in the current BEd programme in Hong Kong?
2) What classes that you have taken often provided oral communication activities?
3) During your study in the BEd programme, what happened outside the university to help you improve your spoken English skills?
4) Do you actively seek opportunities to speak English inside and outside class?
5) Which aspects of your English speaking do you think you have the most difficulty with?
6) Who do you often interact with outside class?
7) Was there a time when there were opportunities to speak English but you remained silent?
8) When you first arrived at university, which English language skills did you consider weaker ? And now?
9) What speaking opportunities did the immersion abroad provide?
10) Did you feel any notable progress in speaking after you came back from the immersion abroad?
11) What do you see the relationship between subject-matter learning and English language development?