

Teaching Academic Oracy Program for First-Year Chinese Students in Australian Tertiary Education

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Abstract: Mastering academic skills is essential for Chinese students to complete their studies, as these skills affect their understanding of course content and critical thinking. This article discusses the integration of oracy exercises into the TESOL curriculum. Part 1 highlights the importance of teaching academic oracy to Chinese students, focusing on their specific needs and the challenges of incorporating speaking practice in Australian universities. Part 2 outlines a lesson plan based on the Oracy Skills Framework, evaluating its pros and cons, and suggests solutions to improve the instructional program's effectiveness.

Keywords: Academic Oracy, Chinese Students, Australian Higher Education, TESOL.

1. Introduction

Chinese students represent over half of Australia's international student population (1). However, many of these students frequently encounter difficulties in engaging in classroom discussions and oral communication (4). Mastering essential academic skills is vital for Chinese students to successfully complete their studies, as these skills play a significant role in their comprehension of course content and the cultivation of critical thinking abilities.

This article examines the integration of oracy exercises into the TESOL academic curriculum, organised into two main sections. Part 1 underscores the significance of teaching academic oracy to Chinese students by examining their specific needs and the challenges of incorporating speaking practice into subject classes within Australian universities. Part 2 presents a lesson plan developed following the Oracy Skills Framework and assesses its advantages and disadvantages. Furthermore, the article provides solutions to address the shortcomings of the instructional program to enhance its overall effectiveness.

2. Part 1: The Significance of Teaching Academic Oracy

2.1. The Necessity of Chinese Students in Australian Universities

The term 'oracy', introduced by Wilkinson, describes the oral skills of speaking and listening and their interrelation in verbal communication (4). Mah (2016) asserts that oracy is just as essential for students as literacy and numeracy. For Chinese students who are new to Australian higher education, developing oracy skills is crucial for adapting to educational norms, effectively communicating with English speakers, and grasping the subject matter (4, 5, 14).

2.1.1. Adapting to Different Educational Norms

In contrast to certain educational environments in China that focus on rote memorisation and written assessments, Australia's higher education culture places a strong emphasis on interaction and engagement through student discussions in lectures, seminars, and tutorials (4, 14). Although many Chinese students come to Australia with preparation from English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses at tertiary

institutions, they still often feel anxious and unfamiliar with the presentation styles commonly used in group discussions or seminars. Consequently, they may remain silent during classroom activities (7). This prolonged silence can hinder their academic development, as teachers and peers are unable to provide the necessary support for their academic challenges. Therefore, it is essential for newly enrolled Chinese students to enhance their oral communication skills to adapt to the differing educational norms successfully.

2.1.2. Building Confidence in English Communication

Confidence is a crucial factor influencing students' motivation to engage in class discussions actively. Interview findings reported by Heron (2018) suggest that many students struggle with confidence due to challenges in comprehending the discussed topic. Respondents indicated that their level of familiarity and understanding of the subject matter significantly impacted their willingness to participate in oral interactions in class. When students are unsure about their grasp of the topic, they hesitate to contribute, fearing their responses may not be accurate.

The second factor that influences confidence is anxiety related to language resources. Heron (2018) notes that students learning English as an additional language (EAL) often need more time to consider questions like 'which words should I use?' and 'how should I structure my language?' before articulating their ideas. Although many of these students clearly understand what they want to convey, they find it challenging to express their thoughts in English.

Furthermore, pronunciation issues can diminish the confidence of some Chinese students, as it may impede others' understanding of crucial information in their communication (6). Consequently, newly enrolled Chinese students should prioritise building their confidence in English communication through studying and practising academic oracy.

2.1.3. Improving Academic Performance

Australian tertiary institutions often emphasise the importance of critical thinking, particularly in the humanities and social sciences, requiring students to engage deeply with theories and issues in their fields of study. However, the lack of active classroom participation among Chinese students hampers both educational effectiveness and academic achievement. The cultural and linguistic backgrounds of these students shape an academic mindset that diverges markedly from the expectations of Australian tertiary education.

According to a survey conducted by Zhang et al. (2023), many Chinese universities do not adequately acknowledge the significance of critical thinking, nor do they integrate it into their higher education talent development systems. As a result, numerous new Chinese students arrive with a limited grasp of fundamental critical thinking concepts, including its definition, significance, and practical applications. Additionally, these students struggle to participate in oral communication activities in the classroom. It causes them to miss valuable opportunities for external support and hinders their ability to grasp critical thinking in specific contexts. Such disengagement ultimately contributes to subpar academic performance. Therefore, it is vital to prioritise critical thinking in the education of Chinese students, particularly during their foundational year, to enhance their overall performance.

2.2. The Teaching Challenges in Australian Universities

While language teachers around the world recognise the significance of speaking skills, many English teachers find themselves prioritising other aspects of their teaching due to constraints in their professional training and the examination systems in place (10). Likewise, some subject lecturers maintain that the responsibility for offering language support to students lies primarily with language teachers. Furthermore, incorporating oral skills practice within subject classrooms can prove to be both time-consuming and labour-intensive, leading to the argument that this responsibility should be managed by specialised language institutions (7).

However, Mah (2016) argues the significance of collaboration between English teachers and subject teachers in schools or institutions to enhance students' academic oracy skills. By comparing and analysing spoken and body language's diverse applications across various professional subjects, educators can create oral tasks that effectively enable students to apply their learning in real-world contexts (10). Given the vital role that academic oracy plays in every facet of a student's education, all teachers must engage in efforts to improve their students' speaking proficiency.

Additionally, the challenges associated with teaching academic oracy in Australian higher education encompass various specific factors beyond the previously mentioned differences in teacher perceptions. These challenges include the need for more appropriate language resources, obstacles in assessing oral proficiency and difficulties in transferring oral proficiency skills in the learning process (3, 4, 5).

2.2.1. Lack of Appropriate Language Resources

Heron (2018) points out that Chinese students often encounter difficulties in grasping pre-class material, which can impede their engagement in oral communication activities in the classroom. As previously noted, some students refrain from attending seminars due to concerns about potentially misunderstanding the information presented. However, in Australia's diverse international classrooms, locating language resources that are suitable for all student levels proves to be a challenge. On the one hand, these resources must align with the language proficiency of EAL learners to ensure comprehension. On the other hand, these resources must also provide sufficient depth in the subject matter to aid students in comprehending the content effectively. Heron (2018) emphasises that students must possess a solid academic foundation to engage in meaningful discussions. As a result, teachers face difficulties in

determining the suitability of various language resources.

2.2.2. Transitioning from EAP Courses to Disciplinary Studies

Dippold et al. (2022) explicitly indicate that 'transition is viewed as a transfer of learning from one learning context to another'. The EAP course serves as an academic literacy support program aimed at assisting EAL students in transitioning to higher education within an English-speaking environment. However, many participants in the EAP course indicate that they struggle to effectively apply the academic oracy skills they acquired in their disciplinary studies (3). In other words, the relationship between EAP courses, which concentrate on language skills, and subject learning, which highlights academic content, presents difficulties for both language teachers and subject instructors. It is because the limited academic vocabulary of these students restricts their opportunities to practice academic oracy skills, further hindering their progress in subject learning and ultimately fostering a detrimental cycle of academic challenges (3).

2.2.3. Assessing Oral Proficiency

The challenges teachers face in oral assessment can be summarised as insufficient reliability of assessment results and a lack of meaningful feedback during the assessment process. According to Doherty et al. (2011), while oracy tasks are evaluated based on detailed criteria, achieving consistent results remains a challenge. Furthermore, the subjective nature of evaluations by individual tutors can undermine the reliability of the assessment outcomes.

Another significant challenge in oral assessments at the higher education level is the limited feedback provided. Due to the ephemeral nature of speaking and the restricted number of students who can be assessed simultaneously, the oracy component in achievement assessment programs is often integrated with written assignments. This approach complicates teachers' ability to evaluate academic oracy skills thoroughly, a challenge also highlighted by Doherty et al. (2011).

3. Part 2: The Teaching Plan

3.1. Plan Overview

3.1.1. Participants' Initial English Level

This article's target group is Chinese students pursuing a master's degree or higher in Australia, particularly those in their first year of study without prior overseas experience. Given that language entry requirements at Australian universities differ by institution and program, focusing on a specific area of study is crucial. This paper aims to develop a teaching plan that integrates academic oral communication exercises into the TESOL curriculum, considering the strong relationship between TESOL and linguistics (9). For this major, the oral entry requirement at Australian universities is an IELTS speaking score of 6 or above or an equivalent standard. Consequently, the initial level of English-speaking proficiency for the Chinese students addressed in this paper is at least IELTS 6 or its equivalent.

3.1.2. Design Basis

The Oracy Skills Framework is the primary design basis of the teaching plan in this paper. It was developed by Mercer, Warwick and Ahmed (2017) at the University of Cambridge as both a reference point and a tool for analysis. The framework is founded on second language acquisition theory and delineates the speaking skills essential for students to

communicate effectively in diverse academic contexts (2, 6). The Oracy Skills Framework is adaptable to various cultural backgrounds and communication situations. It categorises speaking skills into four distinct domains, presented in the left column, while the right column explains each skill's components.

Table 1. The Oracy Skills Framework (12)

Physical <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Voice • Body language 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fluency and pace of speech, tonal variation, clarity of pronunciation, voice projection • Gesture and posture
Linguistic <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vocabulary • Language variety • Structure • Rhetorical techniques 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appropriate vocabulary choice • Register, grammar • Structure and organisation of talk • Metaphor, humour, irony, mimicry
Cognitive <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Content • Clarifying and summarising • Self-regulation • Reasoning • Audience awareness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choice of content, building on the views of others • Seeking information and clarification through questions, summarising • Maintaining focus on task, time-management • Giving reasons to support views, critically examining ideas • Taking into account level of audience
Social and emotional <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working with others • Listening and responding • Confidence in speaking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guiding or managing interactions, turn-taking • Listening actively and responding appropriately • Self-assurance, liveliness and flair

The four domains of oracy skills, as detailed in Table 1, consist of physical, linguistic, cognitive, and social and emotional aspects. These domains address the speaking needs of Chinese students, as mentioned previously. By utilising the Oracy Skills Framework to develop oral training tasks that are integrated into TESOL subject learning, we can effectively bridge the gap between academic oracy skills and practical subject learning. This approach ensures that the academic oral skills of Chinese students meaningfully enhance their overall academic experience.

Moreover, Heron (2019) notes that the Oracy Skills Framework is a valuable resource for teachers when preparing pre-task learning materials. It specifies the types, formats, and key knowledge points to consider when developing these resources. Additionally, the framework assists educators in highlighting essential elements during academic oral skills training. It also enables the flexible integration of various assessment tools and provides a helpful perspective for designing oral assessments.

The long-term objective of the Oracy Skills Framework is to enhance and cultivate speaking skills within the curriculum (6). This aim is consistent with the central mission of this paper. Given that the learning group discussed here consists of first-year students, the support program must have a lasting

and significant influence on their development of academic speaking skills. Additionally, the framework's effectiveness in improving students' oral abilities has been substantiated through its extensive application in compulsory education (6). For this reason, it serves as a scientific and credible reference for establishing speaking tasks. Overall, the Oracy Skills Framework provides the most suitable theoretical foundation for this lesson plan and rubric.

3.2. Specific Teaching Plans

As mentioned above, the primary objective of this program is to support Chinese students with an oral proficiency qualification in TESOL, enabling them to enrol in Australian universities and facilitating their sustainable academic oral development during their foundational year of study. This 10-week course operates alongside regular subject studies and consists of one-hour tutorials, one-hour lectures, and two-hour seminars held weekly. Tutorials and seminars typically accommodate between 15 to 30 students, while lectures can host up to 90 students. Students will complete weekly assignments and readings that align with TESOL subject content throughout the course. Various formative assessment methods will be employed to ensure students receive timely feedback on their progress.

The course is structured into three key components: pre-tasks, while-tasks, and post-tasks. The pre-task phase is designed to enhance students' specialised vocabulary and deepen their subject knowledge through material artifacts. This method connects academic content with oral training, enabling students to grasp the subject matter more effectively and build confidence (5). In the while-task phase, seminars serve as a platform to facilitate students' learning transfer. It helps them understand that 'transition' is an ongoing process that develops alongside their subject learning rather than a discrete stage (3). The post-task phase assesses students' academic performance through group discussions and individual presentations. This evaluation includes mastery of academic vocabulary, reflection on concepts such as 'critical thinking', and proficiency in oral expression (4).

3.2.1. Pre-Task: Using Material Artefacts to Link Academic Content and Oral Training

The tutorial is structured to take place over one hour each week. The initial 20 minutes will be allocated for the teacher's instructional presentation, while the remaining 40 minutes will provide students with the opportunity for independent study and a question-and-answer session facilitated by the teacher. The lecturer will address effectively using the material artifacts for this week. These artifacts are intended to provide linguistic resources that inspire students to engage with the seminar topics and connect the subject matter to their experiences and viewpoints.

The artifacts can be divided into two types. The first type is a study guide that encompasses the academic vocabulary introduced this week and comprehension questions pertaining to the reading material. These questions are generally open-ended discussion prompts developed by the subject tutor based on the assigned readings. Moreover, the study guide includes a series of critical reflection questions to connect the content to the student's experiences. One such question might be, 'as an EAL student, how do you interpret the significance of academic oracy?' The second category of artefacts comprises worksheets, which contain questions designed for discussion during the seminar. These worksheets will include true/false questions, sequencing activities, and opinion

statements, facilitating an engaging and interactive learning experience. An example is 'the teacher should interrupt the student to correct the mistake'. Agree or Disagree.

Students will form groups of five to engage in collaborative learning, and they are encouraged to seek assistance from teachers whenever they encounter challenging or unclear questions during the process. Teachers may opt to provide a unified explanation for common inquiries raised by students.

3.2.2. While-Task: Implement Learning Transfers

The course is structured with weekly one-hour lectures complemented by two-hour seminars. The lectures feature experts and researchers in the field of TESOL, addressing the oral communication needs of EAL students, the challenges associated with teaching TESOL, and the theoretical foundations along with practical skills relevant to the industry. The primary aim of these lectures is to provide a comprehensive understanding of TESOL as a discipline and to explore its professional development trend. Coordinated by the subject tutor, the seminars delve into topics outlined in pre-task worksheets.

The seminars serve two essential purposes. First, they aim to enhance students' comprehension of the lecture material. The discussions that follow each lecture encourage students to reflect on the content and compare it with their prior knowledge through the worksheets, thereby improving their academic performance. Second, the seminars are designed to cultivate students' critical thinking skills. Critical thinking is an essential component of higher education in Australia, a skill that many Chinese students may find challenging to develop (14). These seminars create an invaluable opportunity for students to practice their academic speaking skills and critical thinking, particularly after receiving adequate language support. During the seminar, students engage in oral communication, receiving feedback on their ideas, which further nurtures their critical thinking abilities and assists them in adapting to the educational norms in Australia.

3.2.3. Post-Task: Formative Assessment

Formative assessments occur in seminars every two weeks. Each evaluation consists of a 20-minute group discussion and a 5-minute individual presentation. These assessments aim to bridge the gap between theory and practice, evaluate students' understanding and proficiency in the material, and offer timely feedback for enhancement.

For the group discussion, teachers provide students with specific dialogue scenarios and questions. Students are organised into groups of five to simulate the conversation and subsequently submit a feedback report based on the Oracy Skills Framework. Five students might engage in a dialogic teaching session emphasising academic oracy's significance. One student assumes the role of the teacher, while the others take on the roles of students. The student acting as the teacher is responsible for prompting the group, encouraging an engaging discussion, and facilitating the expansion of ideas. After the group discussion, the five students will provide feedback and evaluate one another's performances based on their observations. For example, 'how well did they use their gesture?' (physical) 'how well did they choose language/vocabulary to contribute?' (linguistic) 'how well did they give reasons to support views/critically examine ideas?' (cognitive) 'how well did they listen actively and respond appropriately?' (social/emotional)

For the individual presentation, students should articulate their comprehensive understanding of the knowledge and

skills acquired during the two-week period and self-assess their learning journey. For example, students can illustrate their mastery of specialised vocabulary and concepts by providing relevant examples from their learning or teaching experiences, thereby enhancing the persuasiveness of their presentation. In the self-assessment section, students should reference the Oracy Skills Framework and reflect on their experiences, highlighting both their strengths and areas for improvement.

3.3. Comments

3.3.1. Benefits

Current research strongly supports the integration of academic oracy exercises into the TESOL curriculum. By enhancing their academic vocabulary and communication skills, students can more effectively comprehend subject content and develop confidence in discussions. These oracy exercises can significantly boost the academic performance of first-year Chinese students (8). Moreover, Heron et al. (2021) advocate for the oracy skills framework as a valuable resource for mentors and students to share key terminology. When tutors apply this framework, they better understand students' reliance on language skills, which motivates students to learn and improves their overall learning efficiency. When tutors and students recognise the significance of language support in academic programs, the issue of students feeling unsupported is effectively resolved (4). Additionally, peer and self-assessment are beneficial, as they encourage learners to collaborate and work together effectively as team members.

Maxwell et al. (2015, p. 23)¹¹ articulated that the primary aim in developing the Oracy Skills Framework was to create a resource that is both easy to comprehend and practical for teachers in the field. It required a careful balance between the accuracy and complexity of the information and the need for clarity and practical application. Although the framework may not align with the stringent standards of academic linguists, it serves to aid TESOL students in achieving a clearer understanding of the skills necessary for effective spoken communication, bridging the gap between their academic knowledge and real-world practice. Furthermore, the Oracy Skills Framework is connected to higher-order thinking skills, such as critical thinking (12), which is particularly advantageous for Chinese students transitioning to the Australian higher education system. This evidence strongly endorses incorporating academic oracy exercises into the TESOL curriculum as a valuable initiative.

3.3.2. Limitations

Despite the plan's various benefits, it also has some limitations. One notable constraint is its limited promotional scope. It arises from the proposal in this paper to incorporate academic oracy exercises into the TESOL academic curriculum, a field closely intertwined with linguistics (9). In other words, TESOL tutors have the essential linguistic knowledge and skills required to fulfil the role of a language teacher. They typically have more time than tutors in other subjects to carefully select the materials and organisational assessments needed for their pre-tasks. Furthermore, considerable overlap exists between the expertise and skills applicable to the TESOL discipline and those found in linguistics (9). There is less resistance to integrating academic oracy skills in TESOL majors compared to other fields such as engineering, medicine, and music (13).

A viable solution is to improve communication and

collaboration between subject tutors and language instructors (7). By assessing students' language needs in each discipline and incorporating academic oracy exercises into subject-specific learning, subject tutors and language instructors can collaboratively develop various educational resources. Moreover, language instructors can evaluate teaching methods and provide timely linguistic support to subject tutors.

The accuracy of peer assessment and self-assessment can often be called into question. To enhance students' opportunities for practice and to ensure the reliability of assessments, this paper suggests moving away from reliance on a single teacher's evaluation, even though this may impact the overall accuracy and credibility of the assessments (4).

This issue can be effectively addressed by incorporating feedback from multiple teachers in the assessment process. When assessments include insights from at least two teachers, concerns regarding both accuracy and reliability are mitigated. Moreover, assessments that promote student reflection can offer more focused guidance to learners.

4. Conclusion

Embedding academic speaking training in academic programs can provide more effective language support for Chinese students in Foundation Year within a genuine academic environment. Integrating linguistic competence with academic content is crucial for addressing Chinese students' specific academic speaking needs in Australian higher education institutions. This dual approach enhances students' potential for academic success while also promoting their active engagement and contributions to the academic community.

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