

The Effectiveness of Language Learning Through Native English Teachers' Online Synchronous Class

Jialu Tan ¹, Shengyuan Tan ², and Ki-Hyung Bae ^{3,*}

¹ Sejong University, Korea, Ph.D. Student; karentan132@163.com

² University of California, San Diego, USA, Undergraduate Student; s4tan@ucsd.edu

³ Sejong university, Korea, Professor; baekh@sejong.ac.kr

* Correspondence

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Abstract: *The advancement of Internet technologies has provided a new and effective way to cultivate international talents. To investigate the effect of native English teachers' online synchronous classes on Chinese primary school students' oral English improvement, an 18-month quasi-experimental study was conducted on 300 primary school students in China. The experiment and control groups were provided biweekly synchronous online classes with native and non-native English teachers. SPSS was used to conduct Paired Sample T-Tests and analyze performance differentials. The results showed that online classes taught by native English teachers perform better than non-native English teachers in three areas: vocabulary accuracy, average sentence length, and phonological intonation.*

Keywords: Online Language Learning; Native English Teacher; Spoken English; Quasi-Experimental Study; Artificial Intelligence

1. Introduction

English, as a second language learned by Chinese students, has long been valued by the state as a compulsory course since primary school. However, most schools mainly evaluate students' English levels on paper-and-pencil test scores, making students weak in English communication [1]. However, the main goal of studying a language is to be able to communicate with others and mastering oral expression is a strong indicator of successful language acquisition. Research has shown that language learners who start learning a language at an early age can master a language better than learners who start at an older age. Age 0~12 is usually considered the critical period for language learning. Afterward, it becomes challenging to learn a new language [2]. Therefore, learning English in primary school is crucial for mastering the language.

For a long time, Chinese primary students' spoken English capabilities mainly depended on their teachers' teaching level. Although the majority of English teachers in primary schools have relatively solid English teaching capability and standardized phonological intonation, it cannot be denied that some English teachers are not qualified in terms of their professional skills [3]. Cai suggested that some elementary school English teachers have an unbalanced English teaching skill set with an accent in teaching spoken English. As a result, some non-native English teachers are limited to using simple phrases and teach mainly in Chinese [4]. Therefore, there is a gap between the current level of English teachers and the needs of English teaching in the 21st century. With the rapid development of internet technologies, schools can employ native English teachers online and create an immersive native language learning environment for learners.

Online education is an innovative way of teaching and is embraced by many schools due to Covid-19. Online learning saves time, reduces costs, offers multimedia learning experiences, enables students to learn anywhere and anytime, overcomes faculty shortages, and supports active student-centered learning rather than passive teacher-centered learning [5-7]. Therefore, it has become an essential educational strategy in most higher education institutions [8]. According to Parsazadeh et al., factors influencing the success of online learning include ease of access for students and teachers, students' satisfaction and the availability of online tools [9]. Other factors include teachers' expertise in online teaching, students' readiness to adopt online learning

and the quality of online content and design. Political, cultural and economic factors also influence the success of online learning [10]. However, more research is required to identify the key drivers of success. According to "China Online Market Data 2020", China's online education market has reached RMB 346.8 billion by 2020, with 342 million online education users. The rapid boom and development of online education have made it possible for learners to embrace a wide range of teaching resources and participate in native English teachers' classes. Native English teachers' online courses create an immersive language environment where students can interact with native English speakers directly and rapidly develop their listening and speaking skills [11]. When communicating with native English teachers, students are in a natural language environment. Students who complete communication assignments with native English teachers can also quickly build their self-confidence in English learning [3].

Therefore, this study aims to analyze the effect of native English teachers' synchronous online courses on primary school students' spoken English improvement through a quasi-experiment. In this study, 300 students from an elementary school in Changchun, China, were selected as the experiment and control groups, respectively, and paired sample t-tests were conducted using SPSS to evaluate the pre-and post-test of students' performance on speaking test scores.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Online Language Learning

Globally, online education and training are becoming more popular because they provide a new level of convenience, with an economic advantage over conventional education. Online learning refers to learning educational resources available through a digital interface [12]. Stein & Wanstreet stated that meaningful online learning is a good quality of the learning experience and high overall satisfaction from the learners [13]. The other main reason for embracing online education is qualified and cost-effective education [14]. Asynchronous and synchronous settings are the primary delivery methods for online learning [15]. Online classrooms help connect students to native-language teachers of any desired language, which helps students work on their multi-language skills. The main advantages of online classrooms are their flexibility, interaction and assistance for those with limited mobility or lack of teacher resources [16,17]. The functionalities of online classroom systems, particularly the video, chat, and text features, give students the chance to communicate directly, increasing their engagement and sense of community [18]. There are many platforms for online synchronous learning, such as Google Classroom, Moodle, Edmodo, Schoology, Ed Link or online video conferences such as Zoom, Skype, Google Meeting, Live YouTube and self-hosted solutions. A good English teacher must be able to teach English and optimize the teaching-learning process through the online classroom [19].

Sandberg indicated that students are motivated to use the application in their spare time, which benefits their learning experience. He found that formal school learning can be augmented by learning in an informal context away from school [20]. Wu found that converting WeChat public platform into English teaching tools greatly improves the flexibility of college English teaching and promotes the formation of college students' autonomous learning and cooperative learning atmosphere [21]. Rogers and Weatherby completed research based on Little bridge, an English language learning platform for students aged 6–12 years, within which learners acquire English vocabulary and skills and can apply what they have learned in real conversations with other English learners around the world. Findings suggested that Little Bridge users, who are the most active participants in the platform's social network, also completed more learning activities and achieved better results than those with lower social participation rates [22]. Adeyeye et al. examined the effectiveness of online learning platforms (Zoom and Moodle) and their effect on the academic performance of Covenant University, Ota, Nigeria, students studying practical-related courses during COVID-19 [23]. Results show that because of the effectiveness of the platforms (Zoom and Moodle) and the positive communication between lecturers and students, students would like to see online learning continually adopted after the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings further show that students had no difficulties using these platforms. Due to the sheer adaptability of the online learning platforms used during the pandemic, the usage of Zoom and Moodle had a favorable impact on students' academic achievement in practical-related courses. The study concludes that distance learning is a future direction in teaching practical-related courses because of the flexible nature of the platforms.

2.2 Native English Teachers' Class and Students' Spoken English Improvement

Chomsky introduced the concept of "linguistic competence" [24]. In the 1970s, Hymes stated that "linguistic competence" is an essential component of "communicative competence" [25]. Afterward, Canal and Swain systematically proposed three components of language competence based on their previous theories: grammatical competence, sociolinguistics competence, and strategic competence [26]. Kanak added discourse competence as the fourth component [27]. According to Shi, generally speaking, English speaking competence includes language reading competence, language organization competence and oral expression competence [28]. According to Zheng, students will form a correct sentence through imitation, and teachers should encourage children to express it boldly [29]. Long-term training can make students transform deep structured knowledge into structured oral expression and improve communication skills.

Zhou has found that the phenomenon of "Mute English" exists in the English learning process of elementary school students, which is worrying [30]. Cheng found that some students do not have the intention to communicate actively in English during dialogue practice. In contrast, others can cooperate but can not express their thoughts accurately, affecting the development of elementary school students' overall English ability [31]. Yang and Li also realized that many primary school students nowadays are in a state where they can only write answers but not speak them out [32,33]. In their research, Liu and Shi pointed out that English oral communication skills have become necessary for high-quality talents in today's society. The Internet has shortened the distance globally, making effective communication possible [34,35]. Primary school students are at the first stage of studying English, and the purpose of learning English should be able to communicate in English fluently.

Some researchers have studied the role of native English teachers in facilitating the development of elementary school students' oral communication skills. Wang considered that learning a language must be based on its culture and environment [36]. The process of learning a foreign language is the process of getting to know another culture. The introduction of native English teachers is more conducive to the development of student's English speaking skills. In a survey by Li, 56% of teachers gave feedback that compared to Chinese English teachers, native English teachers are better at explaining difficult words and sentences in a simple and easy-to-understand way and answering questions about vocabulary knowledge that students tend to misunderstand [37]. Liu's study concluded that native English teachers conducting online courses help create an immersive environment [38]. Unlike the traditional English classroom, the lively atmosphere of native English teachers' class makes students willing to speak, express and communicate. Native English teachers are able to recreate authentic language environments for students and arouse their interest in learning. The online native English teacher's course further improves the school's English-speaking learning atmosphere. It provides students with more opportunities to speak and use English so that they can apply what they have learned during class to real life. The increasing number of native English teachers has changed China's current English teaching situation. Native English teachers have brought in immersive teaching concepts and given students the opportunity to experience authentic English environments [39]. Chinese domestic experts have carried out research on language teaching for native English teachers for a long time, such as Zhang and Wang's research on the application of English communicative teaching methods and Mei and Cao's comparative research on native English teachers' oral classroom teaching modes [11,40].

In summary, they are some previous studies about the relationships between native English teachers' online courses and students' English speaking skills. Nevertheless, there are few statistical studies on improving the effectiveness of native English teachers' online synchronous courses on Chinese primary school students' English speaking skills. Therefore, a quasi-experiment to study the effectiveness of online synchronous native English teachers' classes on Chinese primary school students' spoken English improvement is necessary.

3. Research Design

3.1 Research Subject

The subjects of the study were two classes taught by the same Chinese English teacher in grades 4, 5, and 6 in a primary school in China, Changchun city, with a total of 300 students. The 300 students who did not have significant differences in oral English test scores were divided into an experimental group of 150 students ($n_1=150$) and a control group of 150 students ($n_2=150$). The only difference was that the students in the

experiment group had a synchronous online 25-minute class conversation with the native English teachers twice a week after school, and students in the control group had a synchronous online 25-minute class conversation with a non-native English teacher twice a week after school. The content of each lesson was the same. The class size is one teacher and 150 students in the same online classroom. Native English teachers in this paper refer to English teachers from the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia and Canada. They are native English speakers and have more than three years of experience teaching English to primary school students.

Table 1. Information of Experiment Participants (n=300)

Grade	No. of People	Years of English Study	No. of Boys	No. of Girls	Average Age
4	100	3	61	39	9.6
5	100	4	48	52	10.3
6	100	5	44	56	11.4

3.2 Speaking English Test Criteria and Methods

This study tested students' speaking ability at the start and end of the experiment to identify the effect of native English teachers and non-native English teachers' online courses on primary school students' spoken English improvement. Volle used three dimensions of clarity, accuracy and proficiency to measure the effect of distance learning courses on learners' speaking ability [41]. In Lys' study of distance learning courses on speaking learning effects, sentence length, fluency, syntactic complexity, and proficiency were used as four dimensions to measure speaking proficiency [42]. Mundo and Derwing used pronunciation and understandability as testing dimensions in their study of second language learners [43]. According to the previous proficiency test criteria and after a discussion with two school teachers, this experiment used three dimensions of vocabulary accuracy, average sentence length and phonological intonation as the measures of primary school students' English speaking proficiency. The specific test criterion is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Spoken English Test Criterion for Primary School Students

Dimensionality	Scoring Criterion	Scoring Principles
Vocabulary Accuracy	The vocabulary usage matches the content of the test picture.	The more words students know and use, the higher their scores. In total, 20 points.
Average Sentence Length	Each sentence describes the tested picture features properly, and the complexity of the sentence also matters.	For average sentence length, 20 points for 3-5 words; 40 points for 5-10 words; 60 points for more than 10 words.
Phonological Intonation	Clear pronunciation, natural intonation and fluent expression.	The better the pronunciation, the high the score. In total, 20 points.
Total Score		Sum of the scores of the three dimensions (out of 100 points).

The specific test procedures for the experiment were as follows. First, teachers prepared multiple speaking test pictures for the students, and students randomly selected one picture. After preparing for one minute, students should describe the content of the picture in English within three minutes. 5 Judges scored the speech according to the test criterion on the spot and took the average as the final score. The whole test was recorded, and students were graded on each indicator mentioned above.

3.3 Implementation and Data Collection

The experiment was conducted over 18 months (from January 2020 to July 2021). In the experiment group, the native English teacher conducted 25-minute online speaking lessons twice a week. In the control group, the non-native English teacher conducted 25-minute online speaking lessons twice a week. The lessons were held after school on weekdays, and the content of the two groups' lessons was the same. The video recordings of

each lesson were made with the consent of the students and the teacher. The background data and Audio (receiving) Signals are shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2.

Panelist	Device	IP Address	Location	Network Type	Microphone	Speaker	Camera	Data Center	Connection Type	Join Time	Leave Time
Casey	Windows	113.213.18.59	(CN)	WiFi	(Realtek High Definition Audio)	(Realtek High Definition Audio)	Integrated Camera	TJ (T3p)	UDP	07:09 PM	08:07 PM
Michael	Android	117.8.92.102	Tianjin (CN)	WiFi				TJ (T3p)	UDP	07:25 PM	07:25 PM
James	Android	117.8.92.102	Tianjin (CN)	WiFi				TJ (T3p)	UDP	07:30 PM	07:37 PM
Elsa	Windows	119.53.66.79	Changchun (CN)	WiFi	(Conexant ISST Audio)	(Conexant ISST Audio)	HP HD Camera	TJ (T3p)	UDP	07:30 PM	07:37 PM
Lin	Windows	111.25.173.54	(CN)	Wired	(High Definition Audio)	(High Definition Audio)	USB2.0 PC CAMERA	TJ (T3p)	UDP	07:37 PM	07:40 PM
Harry	Windows	36.48.106.59	Changchun (LN)	WiFi	(Realtek Audio)	(Realtek Audio)	Integrated Webcam	TJ (T3p)	UDP	07:37 PM	07:46 PM
Apple	Android	223.88.61.3	Zhangzhou (CN)	WiFi				IJ (I3p)	UDP	07:40 PM	08:01 PM
Angela	Android	117.8.92.102	Tianjin (CN)	WiFi				TJ (T3p)	UDP	07:48 PM	07:55 PM

Figure 1. Background Data

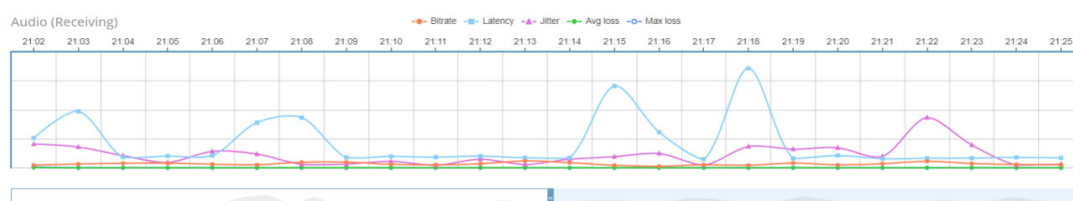


Figure 2. Audio (receiving) Signal

Through natural language processing and analysis of students' and teachers' conversations in each lesson, we can find out how well the students have mastered the new vocabulary in each lesson, whether they were able to use them appropriately, and whether the sentence length, tense, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs used in each lesson were right. Paired sample t-tests using SPSS were conducted to analyze the score performance of students in the experiment and control groups. The in-class Screenshot is shown in Figure 3. The conversations between the students and the teacher were translated into English texts by the AI system, as shown in Table 3.

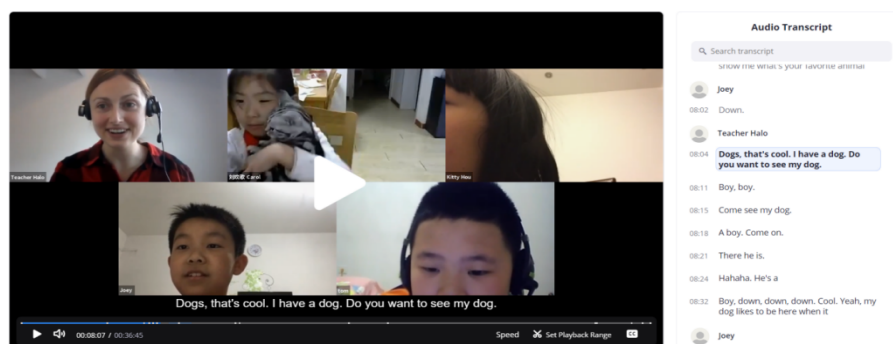


Figure 3. In-class Screenshot

Table 3. Real-time Conversation Converted to Texts by AI

Starting Time Point	→	Ending Time Point	Speaker	AI Translated Dialogue Contents
00:07:52:920	→	00:08:01:380	Teacher Halo	ah cool lizards. Okay, so let's go on, show me what's your favorite animal
00:08:02:730	→	00:08:03:210	Joey	Down.
00:08:04:470	→	00:08:09:060	Teacher Halo	Dogs, that's cool. I have a dog. Do you want to see my dog.
00:08:11:400	→	00:08:12:420	Teacher Halo	Boy, boy.
00:08:15:540	→	00:08:16:620	Teacher Halo	Come See my dog.
00:08:18:210	→	00:08:19:500	Teacher Halo	A boy. Come on.
00:08:21:960	→	00:08:23:160	Teacher Halo	There he is.
00:08:24:810	→	00:08:26:370	Teacher Halo	Hahaha. He's a
00:08:32:970	→	00:08:38:250	Teacher Halo	Boy, down, down, down. Cool. Yeah, my dog likes to be here when it is
00:08:41:760	→	00:08:42:060	Joey	It is

4. Results

4.1 Experiment and Control Groups' Grade Performance Comparison

In order to study the difference between the two groups' improvement taught by the native English teachers and non-native teachers, the English language performance of the experiment and control groups in grades 4, 5 and 6 was examined at the start and end of the test. The pre and post-tests were at the same level of difficulty, and the grade data was analyzed by SPSS statistical software. The data are described in terms of sample size, mean, standard deviation and standard error of the mean, as shown in Table 4, and paired sample t-test results are shown in Table 5.

Table 4. Paired Sample T-Test Statistics

Test time	Grade	Group	Mean	No. of students	Standard Deviation	Standard Error of Mean
End	4	Experiment	90.74	50	3.973	0.562
		Control	86.6	50	3.912	0.553
	5	Experiment	86.04	50	3.849	0.544
		Control	81.08	50	4.115	0.582
	6	Experiment	81.48	50	6.677	0.944
		Control	77.14	50	6.553	0.927
Start	4	Experiment	81.68	50	3.633	0.514
		Control	80.82	50	3.963	0.56
	5	Experiment	81	50	4.616	0.653
		Control	79.52	50	4.263	0.603
	6	Experiment	77.34	50	8.196	1.159
		Control	77.02	50	6.536	0.924

Table 5. Paired Sample T-Test Statistics

Group No.	Test time	Grade	Group	Mean	Standard Deviation	Standard Error of Mean	t	p
1	Start	4	Experiment - Control	0.86	4.819	0.682	1.262	0.213
2	Start	5	Experiment - Control	1.48	5.779	0.817	1.811	0.076
3	Start	6	Experiment - Control	0.32	11.564	1.635	0.196	0.846
4	End	4	Experiment - Control	4.14	5.548	0.785	5.277	0
5	End	5	Experiment - Control	4.96	5.887	0.832	5.958	0
6	End	6	Experiment - Control	4.34	8.998	1.273	3.411	0.001

According to the paired sample t-test results in Table 5, in Group 1, the mean difference between the Grade 4 experiment group and control group is 0.86, the t-value is 1.262, and the p-value is 0.213, indicating that there is no significant difference between the performance of the two classes at the start of the test. In Group 2, the mean difference between the Grade 5 experiment group and the control group is 1.48, the t-value is 1.811, and the p-value is 0.076, indicating that there is no significant difference between the performance of the two classes at the start of the test. In Group 3, the mean difference between the Grade 6 experiment group and control group is 0.32, the t-value is 0.196, and the p-value is 0.846, indicating that there is no significant difference between the performance of the two classes at the start of the test; a control test can be conducted.

At the end of the test, in Group 4 Grade 4, the mean difference between the experiment group and control group is 4.14, the t-value is 5.277, and the p-value is 0, indicating that there is a significant difference between the two classes in the 4th grade at the end of the test, and the experiment group's mean score is 4.14 points higher than the control group. In Group 5 Grade 5, the mean difference between the experiment group and control group is 4.96, the t-value is 5.958, the p-value is 0, indicating that there is a significant difference between the performance of the two groups, and the mean score of the experiment group is 4.96 points higher than the control group. In group 6, grade 6, the mean difference between the experiment group and control

group is 4.34, the t-value is 3.411, and the p-value is 0.001, indicating that there is a significant difference between the performance of the two groups, and the mean score of the experiment group is 4.34 points higher than the control group. The results indicated that the experiment group who took the native English teacher's class had a higher performance score in grades 4, 5 and 6 than the control group who took the non-native English teacher's class, which is in line with expectations.

4.2 Groups Grade Comparison at the Start and End of Test

In order to compare students' spoken English improvement effects at the start and end of the research, the spoken English test of the experiment and control groups in grades 4, 5 and 6 were examined at the start and end of the test. The pre and post-tests were at the same level of difficulty, and grade data was analyzed by SPSS statistical software. The data are described in terms of sample size, mean, standard deviation and standard error of the mean, as shown in Table 6, and paired samples t-test results are shown in Table 7.

Table 6. Paired Sample T-Test Statistics

Grade	Test time	Group	Mean	No. of students	Standard Deviation	Standard Error of Mean
4	End	Control	86.6	50	3.912	0.553
	Start		80.82	50	3.963	0.56
5	End	Experiment	90.74	50	3.973	0.562
	Start		81.68	50	3.633	0.514
6	End	Control	81.08	50	4.115	0.582
	Start		79.52	50	4.263	0.603
4	End	Experiment	86.04	50	3.849	0.544
	Start		81	50	4.616	0.653
5	End	Control	77.14	50	6.553	0.927
	Start		77.02	50	6.536	0.924
6	End	Experiment	81.48	50	6.677	0.944
	Start		77.34	50	8.196	1.159

Table 7. Paired Sample T Test

Test time	Grade	Group	Mean	Standard Deviation	Standard Error of Mean	t	p
End-Start	4	Control	5.78	6.069	0.858	6.735	0
		Experiment	9.06	5.516	0.780	11.614	0
	5	Control	1.56	6.765	0.957	1.631	0.109
		Experiment	5.04	5.862	0.829	6.079	0
	6	Control	0.12	8.623	1.219	0.098	0.922
		Experiment	4.14	10.954	1.549	2.672	0.01

According to the paired sample t-test results of grades 4, 5 and 6 in Table 7, first, in Grade 4, it is clear that the mean score of the experiment group is 9.06 points higher at the end compared with the start, with a t value of 11.614 and a p-value of 0, which indicates the result is significant. The mean score of the control group increased by 5.78 points at the end compared with the start, with a t-value of 6.735 and a p-value of 0, indicating that the scores of the control group and the experiment group both improved significantly, but the experiment group's speaking test scores improved more than the control group.

Second, in Grade 5, the experiment group's mean score increased by 5.04 points at the end compared with the start, with a t-value of 6.079 and a p-value of 0. The control group's mean score increased by 1.56 points at the end compared with the start, with a t-value of 1.631 and a p-value of 0.109, indicating the results are insignificant for the control group. Only the experiment group's speaking test scores increased significantly at the end compared with the start.

Third, in Grade 6, the mean score of the experiment group increased by 4.14 points at the end compared with the start, with a t-value of 2.672 and a p-value of 0.01, which indicates the result is significant. The control group's mean score increased by 0.12 points at the end compared with the beginning, with a t-value of 0.098 and a p-value of 0.922, indicating that only the experiment group's scores improved significantly.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

5.1 Conclusions

Based on the above experiment analysis, this study found that the online synchronous native English teachers' course has a significant positive effect on primary school students' English oral expression improvement in vocabulary accuracy, average sentence length and phonological intonation aspects. There are several reasons to reach this conclusion.

First, practicing speaking with a native English teacher can effectively increase the use of English. In this study, elementary school students had conversations with their native English teachers to discuss what they were doing in their daily lives or at school, which deepened their impressions of learning, increased their oral output and curiosity about learning foreign cultures and prompted them to work harder at learning English. At the same time, in online courses, students can only communicate in English to the best of their capability, which would also reduce their native Chinese language usage. This can effectively reduce students' native language dependence, thus improving the teaching effect.

Secondly, the authentic language, relaxed atmosphere and rich vocabulary are all features of the native English teachers' online courses. To improve spoken English, it is important to listen and speak more. Online classes with native English teachers help students gradually acquire English by listening and communicating. In addition, the vocabulary used by native English teachers is much more diverse than non-native teachers, which can also expand students' oral vocabulary.

5.2 Limitations and Future Outlook

In this study case, practicing speaking conversations with a native English teacher is more effective than with a non-native teacher in improving students spoken English skills. However, there are some shortcomings in this experiment, such as the small number of study samples and the existence of uncontrollable factors in the experiment process. Since the current study is only conducted in one school and the research data is limited, in the future, it is expected to conduct research on multiple schools in different provinces so as to make further studies. More online native English teachers' courses should be carried out through different schools and programs in order to improve students' communication skills. Besides, Chinese teachers should also be provided communication opportunities with native English teachers and share teaching methods with each other.

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