

Chinese Students' Awareness of Functions in Their Learning of Spoken English

Qian Liu

School of Foreign Languages, Shandong Normal University, Jinan, China

Abstract—In the past decade, language functions have attracted increasing attention of Chinese secondary school English teachers. However, students seem not to have explicit knowledge in this aspect. This study investigated Chinese students' awareness of functions and explored the causes of the status quo. Based on the results achieved through a questionnaire survey, textbooks analyses and teaching analyses, suggestions are put forward for the building of students' awareness of functions in the teaching of speaking.

Index Terms—function, awareness, appropriacy, structure, spoken English, explicit teaching

I. INTRODUCTION

It is well recognized that the goal of learning a second or foreign language is the ability to use it in communication. Today, language students are considered successful if they can communicate effectively in their second or foreign language, whereas before the 1970s the accuracy of the language produced would most likely be the major criterion contributing to the judgment of a student's success or lack of success (Riggenback & Lazaraton, 1991). Since the emergence of the communicative language teaching theory, the focus of foreign or second language teaching has shifted from the accuracy of language form to the fluency and appropriacy of expression. According to the communicative approach, the content of a language course will include semantic notions and social functions, not just linguistic structures (Celce-Murcia, 1991). The knowledge of functions contributes to the appropriacy of language use.

In China, the Ministry of Education issued *The English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education and Senior High schools (Experimental Edition)* in 2001 which states that the goal of the English course is overall language ability. The development of this ability is based on language skills, language knowledge, cross-cultural awareness, affect, and learning strategies. Each of the five areas includes several components. In terms of language knowledge, there are five components: phonetics, vocabulary, grammar, function, and topic. Function is viewed as an important part of English learning because the knowledge of it will be beneficial to the appropriate use of language. In the past decade, functions have drawn increasing attention of teachers in the teaching of spoken English at secondary schools. However, it seems that students hardly know the concept of function and its role in language use and consequently they lack an awareness of appropriacy. Based on this hypothesis, this study intended to explore the awareness of functions in Chinese English learners, find out the causes of the status quo, and suggest ways of building students' awareness of functions.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Definition of Function

Function is also called language function (Harmer, 1983), speech function (Stern, 1999), and communicative function (Widdowson, 1999). According to Harmer (1983, p22) the idea of a language function is that it describes what is done with the language. He also gives a much clearer definition: a language function is a purpose you wish to achieve when you say or write something (Harmer, 2000, p48). For example, when we say "Would you like to come to the cinema?" we are performing the function of inviting. Ur (2000, p92) defines function as some kind of communicative act: it is the use of language to achieve a purpose, usually involving interaction between at least two people. He distinguishes functions into two types: binary functions and unitary functions. He points out that very often functions are binary: the performance of one implies a certain response or set of responses which take the form of another. Examples are suggestions which are followed by acceptance or rejection and greeting by acknowledgement or further greeting. Unitary functions may occur without a necessary response.

B. Functions, Communicative Competence and Communicative Efficiency

Function is closely related with communicative competence. The concept of communicative competence was put forward in 1972 by Hymes, who was concerned with the social and cultural knowledge which speakers need in order to understand and use linguistic forms (Hedge, 2002). This idea has had great influence in the field of language teaching. Language educators and researchers increasingly realize that grammatical accuracy alone cannot lead to effective language use and that communicative competence is what learners need to acquire. Riggenbach and Lazaraton (1991) state that communicative competence entails not solely grammatical accuracy but also a knowledge of sociocultural

rules of appropriateness, discourse norms, and strategies for ensuring that a communication is understood. Hedge (2002) employs the term *communicative ability* in stead of communicative competence and defines it as comprising five components: linguistic competence, pragmatic competence, discourse competence, strategic competence, and fluency. Linguistic competence is the ability to produce grammatically accurate sentences. Discourse competence is the ability to create coherent discourse. Strategic competence refers to the ability to make oneself understood when lacking the resources for production in communication. Fluency is the ability to link units of speech together without strain or inappropriate slowness, or undue hesitation. As for pragmatic competence, Hedge (ibid, p49) gives the following explanation:

...one element of pragmatic competence is knowing how to perform a particular function or express an intention clearly. In order for communication to be successful, however, spoken or written messages must also be appropriate to the social context in which they are produced. Learners need to know the appropriate social conventions.

From the quotation we can see that communicative competence is based on knowledge of functions.

Important as communicative competence is, is it the goal we want our EFL students to achieve? Harmer (1983) gives the answer by putting forward a term “communicative efficiency”. He argues that a native speaker knows about the grammar of that language and knows which form is appropriate in certain situations. However, not all native speakers have this competence. For foreign language learners who do not live in the target language environment, communicative competence may be not only an impossible goal, but also an unnecessary one in the classroom, because the classroom may be far from the target language community and it is doubtful whether we can give this knowledge. A realistic goal may be communicative efficiency: students are able to express what it is they want to say. We can teach them how to convey their thoughts and purposes efficiently. Here Harmer means that we cannot expect our students to achieve communicative competence, but we can teach them how to perform functions efficiently.

Every language develops a set of patterned, routinized utterances that speakers use regularly to perform a variety of functions (Olshtain & Cohen, 1991). If speakers translate a function from their mother tongue into another language, the result might be an inappropriate utterance. Olshtain and Cohen (ibid) have illustrated this by giving an example of a European stewardess misusing the request *Coffee, please!* as an offer to the passengers, thus breaking the sociolinguistic rule of appropriateness. Widdowson (1999, p60) points out that to understand language as use, we have to recognize the communicative function of the sentences we hear, we have to recognize what acts of communication they realize. Therefore, foreign language learners need to learn communicative functions of the target language if they want to become successful users of that language.

C. Functions and Language Forms

Traditionally, foreign language teaching focuses on language forms, and the goal of language learning is grammatical accuracy. Typical of traditional teaching is the grammar-translation approach which usually results in an inability on the part of the student to use language for communication (Celce-Murcia, 1991). Different from it is the communicative approach, according to which the goal of language teaching is learner ability to communicate in the target language (ibid). In order to achieve that goal, a language course should include not only language structures but also social functions. Form and function are interrelated in communication.

One language form can express a variety of functions, the converse is also true. A function can often be expressed in a variety of ways (Hedge, 2002, p49). What function a language form expresses depends on the context in which it is used. The statement *It's freezing outside*, for example, can be giving information about the whether, and it might also be an expression of unwillingness to run an errand. In the same way, for the function of apologizing there are various forms: *I'm really sorry about that, I need to apologize to you, Excuse me for interrupting you, etc.* For a specific function, which form to choose also depends on the context or situation.

To learn functions learners must learn grammar. In the same way, to learn grammar learners need to learn functions. When emphasizing the importance of grammar, Harmer (1983, p23) points out: functions are expressed through the use of grammatically based language: without some understanding of grammar students would not be able to do anything more than utter separate items of language for separate functions. The expression of functional language is only possible through the use of the grammar of the language. He suggests that both grammatical items and functional realizations should be taught side by side.

III. METHODOLOGY

Both qualitative and quantitative approaches were taken in this study.

A. Objectives of the Study

This study aimed at finding out the degree of students' awareness of functions and its influence on their learning of spoken English, hoping to make suggestions for teaching. The degree of students' awareness of functions is closely related with the textbooks and classroom teaching, so textbooks analyses and teaching analyses were part of the study.

Research questions:

1. How is the content of functions presented in the textbooks for secondary school students?
2. How have teachers taught functions in secondary school classrooms in recent years?

3. Do the newly enrolled university students have an awareness of functions? How did they learn spoken English in secondary schools?

B. Subjects

Thirteen teachers were observed in the video recordings of their teaching at the 8th National Forum of Middle School English Teaching Observation in April 2010. They were the winners at the National Teaching Competition, which is held once every two years. The winners' teaching is usually viewed as models, which can reflect the trend of English teaching in China. As a matter of fact, there were altogether 16 teachers delivering lessons at the forum. Three of them gave reading lessons. The other 13 teachers had different focuses in their teaching, but all involving speaking and structures. So they were selected as subjects for analysis.

A class of 44 newly enrolled students in the English Department of Shandong Normal University was investigated for the information of their awareness of functions and ways of learning spoken English. They are from 23 cities of different parts of China and can be seen as typical of Chinese English learners. They were studying in secondary schools from August 2010 to June 2015.

C. Instruments for Data Collection

Three textbook series were analyzed to find out how the content of functions is presented in them.

Videoed lessons of 13 teachers with accompanying lesson plans (published by Xueyuan Audio-Video Publishing House in 2010) were analyzed for the information of their dealing with language functions in terms of teaching objectives and classroom activities.

A questionnaire was employed to investigate the students' awareness of functions and ways of learning spoken English.

D. Research Procedure

The first step was to analyze the textbooks to see how the content of functions is presented. I selected three series of textbooks which have been widely used in secondary schools. They are *Go for it!* published by People's Education Press, *New Standard English* by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, and *Interchange Third Edition* by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press and Cambridge University Press. I examined the contents of each series and then the parts related with functions to determine whether functions are presented implicitly or explicitly.

The next step was to watch the video recordings of the 13 teachers' lessons and analyze their teaching plans to find out how many of them saw function as one of their teaching aims and how they taught functions.

Finally a questionnaire survey was conducted in September, 2015, on the first day the newly enrolled students started their university study. This was to see the effects of secondary school English teaching in terms of students' awareness of functions.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Results of Textbooks Analyses and Discussion

All three series of textbooks regard function as an integral part of the English course. *New Standard English*, in particular, claims in its preface that the writing of the series followed the principle of "topic-function-structure-task". In all the three series, although the items of content in each unit or module are different, they all include function. The items on the contents page in the three series are presented in TABLE I.

TABLE I.
CONTENTS IN THE TEXTBOOKS

Textbook	Contents
<i>New Standard English</i>	Topic and task, Grammar/Functions, Skill, Culture/Learning to learn, Vocabulary/Everyday English, Workbook
<i>Go for it!</i>	Topics, Functions, Structures, Target Language, Vocabulary, Recycling
<i>Interchange</i>	Titles/Topics, Speaking, Grammar, Pronunciation/Listening, Writing/Reading, Interchange Activities

Interchange does not have an item named function, but the item of speaking actually aims at functions. For example, the contents in the speaking item are functional sentences such as *asking about and describing people's appearance; identifying people*.

New Standard English groups grammar and function together, which indicates the close relationship between the two. The implication is that learning a grammatical structure needs to learn its function. *Interchange* lists functional sentences under the item of speaking, which suggests the connection between speaking and functions. It implies that learners need to know the appropriate form for effective oral communication.

Language functions are realized through grammatical structures. The relationship between function and grammar is presented both directly and indirectly in the textbooks. Whenever possible, the textbooks do it in a direct way. An example is the grammar focus of unit 12 in book one of *Interchange*. In presenting modal verbs, the textbook gives such instructions: *Modal verbs can, could, may for requests; suggestions*.

Textbooks usually reflect certain teaching methods. In terms of teaching communication, Stern (1999) makes a distinction between two approaches: analytic and non-analytic approaches. The former handles communication through the study of speech acts, discourse rules, and sociolinguistics, while the latter encourages the spontaneous use of language without drawing the student's attention to any particular aspect of language structure or function (ibid, p155). He also calls the analytic approach "functional analysis" and the non-analytic approach "experiential approach". Both of the two approaches are reflected in the textbooks. TEXTBOOK EXTRACT I is taken from *Go for it!* It is in *Unit 5 Do you have a soccer ball* of book 1 for grade 7.

TEXTBOOK EXTRACT I

3b PAIRWORK 结对活动
Make conversations with your partner. Talk about the pictures below. 与你的同伴做对话。谈论下面的图画。

A: Let's play soccer.
 B: I don't have a soccer ball.
 A: Well, let's play volleyball.
 B: That sounds good.

The language goals of the unit are "talk about ownership; make suggestions". The activity above actually aims at practicing the structures *Let's play soccer.* for suggestion and *I don't have a soccer ball.* for ownership. However, there is no mention of this in the directions. Instead, it just asks students to make conversations and talk about the pictures. While doing the activity, students are experiencing the use of language. The activity reflects the feature of non-analytic approach.

TEXTBOOK EXTRACT II is from *New Standard English*. It is in Module 3 of Book 1 for high schools. Before presenting the conversation, the textbook gives the subheading "Function: Being polite" to draw students' attention to the function they are going to learn next.

TEXTBOOK EXTRACT II

FUNCTION Being polite

① Read the conversation between a ticket inspector and a passenger on a train. Say what the ticket inspector wants.

Ticket inspector: Tickets.
 Passenger: Pardon?
 Ticket inspector: Tickets!
 Passenger: I'm sorry, I don't understand.
 Ticket inspector: I want to see your ticket.
 Passenger: Oh. Here you are.
 Ticket inspector: This is an old ticket.
 Passenger: Pardon?
 Ticket inspector: It's out of date. It's a month old.
 Passenger: Oh, sorry, that's the ticket I used last week.
 Ticket inspector: Where's your ticket?
 Passenger: Here it is.
 Ticket inspector: Right.

In the second activity (shown in TEXTBOOK EXTRACT III), students' attention is directed to the expression used by the ticket inspector: *I want to see your ticket.* This is to make them realize that different language forms have different effects in communication.

TEXTBOOK EXTRACT III

2 Discuss these questions.

- 1 What do you think of the ticket inspector's attitude?
- 2 What expressions could you use to change it?

3 Read the polite expressions. Use them in the conversation between the ticket inspector and the passenger.

Excuse me ...

Could I (see your ticket)?

Could I possibly (see your ticket)?

Would you mind (showing me your ticket)?

Would you mind (if I saw your ticket)?

I'm very sorry but (this is an old ticket).

The fact is that (it's out of date).

Now work in pairs. Practise the conversation.

Finally in the third activity, a range of polite expressions are listed, and students are required to practice using them in conversations. This sequence of activities is helpful to the building of students' awareness of functions and to the development of their ability to use language appropriately.

B. Results of Teaching Analyses and Discussion

The video recordings of 13 teachers' teaching and their lesson plans were analyzed to see how the teachers dealt with functions. In setting up teaching objectives, ten of them (76.9%) connected structures with functions. They were clear about the relationship between structure and function. Here are some examples:

Language focus: students will be able to use proper structures in the situation of arguing and compromising, especially the following ones from the video clip: "It's...for...to...", "...is/are...than...", "...could..."

Students can talk about their own plans and arrangement, and ask about others' plans and arrangement with the structure "be going to".

Students can correctly use modal verbs should and could to make suggestions.

Those statements of teaching objectives show that most teachers had a strong awareness of functions and were clear that functions are realized through grammatical structures. But how did they achieve those teaching objectives? The videos of their teaching were analyzed, with special attention to the teaching of structures and speaking.

All the thirteen teachers employed situations to teach new structures and functions. They presented new structures in situations and guided students to practice in situations. Five of them (38%) took the analytic approach. They made it clear to students that a certain structure is used to express a specific function. They directed students' attention to the function and structure either before or after presenting the structure. Some sentences they used are:

When we make suggestions, what sentence patterns do we use?

We use "You should..." or "You could..." to make suggestions.

We use "be going to do" to talk about our future plans.

Eight teachers (62%) took the non-analytic experiential approach. In stead of telling students explicitly the function of a specific structure, they gave examples of using it in situations and then had students practice the structure in other similar situations.

The effects of the two approaches were observed as such: under the analytic approach students could express functions more fluently. Students under the experiential approach sometimes were not very sure what structure to use to express their intention.

C. Results of the Questionnaire Survey and Discussion

The aim of the questionnaire survey was to know if the students had an awareness of functions and how they learned spoken English. Forty-four students participated in the survey. There were 16 questions altogether, nine concerning awareness of functions and seven concerning ways of learning spoken English. Questions 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 13, 14, 15 belong to the former, questions 1, 2, 9, 10, 11, 12, 16 the latter. The results of students' awareness of functions are to be discussed first.

Question 3: What are your criteria for judging one's spoken English?

Answers: intonation, tone, pronunciation, fluency, appropriateness of words, intelligibility, use of advanced vocabulary and structures, gesture, facial expression, confidence, cohesion, emotion, content, accuracy and completeness of sentences, pause, speed, variety of vocabulary. Among them the most frequent answers are presented in TABLE II.

TABLE II.
STUDENTS' CRITERIA FOR JUDGING SPOKEN ENGLISH

Criterion	Fluency	Pronunciation	Intelligibility	Use of advanced vocabulary and structures	Confidence	Accuracy and completeness of sentences	Variety of vocabulary	Intonation
Frequency of answers	31	24	8	6	6	6	6	5
Percentage	70%	55%	18%	14%	14%	14%	14%	11%

It can be seen from TABLE II that fluency and pronunciation were viewed as major criteria for judging one's spoken English. Among the various answers by the 44 students, fluency was mentioned 31 times (which means that 70 percent of the students regarded it as a criterion) and pronunciation 24 times (55%). Appropriateness does not have an important position in their views. As a matter of fact, only two of them (4.5%) regarded appropriateness as one of the criteria for judging one's spoken English.

Question 4: Do you agree with the statement "In conversation, if you can express your ideas with correct grammar, you will achieve the communicative goal effectively.?" If not, why?

Thirty-two (73%) disagreed, twelve (27%) agreed.

Those who disagreed believed that effective communication included other elements. They were: emotion, elegant expression, appropriate choice of words in context, intelligibility, concise expression, intonation, body language, and tone. The most frequently mentioned elements are shown in TABLE III.

TABLE III.
STUDENTS' VIEWS ON EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION ELEMENTS

Element	Emotion	Elegant expression	Appropriate choice of words in context
Frequency of answers	9	7	5
Percentage	20%	16%	11%

TABLE III shows that 11 percent of students were aware of appropriateness in communication. But this awareness was just at the vocabulary level. They lacked an awareness of appropriateness of structures in communication.

Question 5: Do you know the concept of language function?

Answers to this question were 44 *Nos*. The students did not know this concept at all.

Question 6: What is the role of functional knowledge in language use?

Answers to this question revealed that none of the 44 students knew the role of functional knowledge in language use.

Question 7: Did you ever note the table of contents in your English textbooks?

To this question, 23 students (52%) answered *No*, and 21 (48%) *Yes*. Two students gave their reasons for doing that: to make a study plan, to study in an organized way.

Question 8: Do you remember the items on the contents pages of your English textbooks in secondary school?

Answers: title, grammar, vocabulary, page number, goals, exercises, text, introduction to the unit, listening exercises, listening and speaking, listening and writing, module, phonetic transcription, important points, topic. The most frequently mentioned items are presented in TABLE IV.

TABLE IV.
CONTENTS ITEMS REMEMBERED BY STUDENTS

Item	Title	Vocabulary	Grammar	Page number	Listening exercises
Frequency of answers	17	12	8	6	5
Percentage	39%	27%	18%	14%	11%

What drew more of students' attention were title, vocabulary and grammar, but no one mentioned function. This indicates that students never noticed function as an important area of English learning.

Question 13: Do you agree with the statement "In learning grammar, as long as you know the form of a grammatical item, you will be able to use it.?" If not, why?

Forty-one students (93%) disagreed with the statement. One (2%) agreed. Two students (4.5%) said they had no idea. Those who disagreed gave various reasons. The most frequent answers are as follows:

Nine students (20%) thought: *Learners need to learn to use grammar in sentences.*

Six students (14%) thought: *Learners need to learn to use grammar naturally.*

Four students (9%) thought: *Practice is necessary.*

The data indicate that some students knew that learning grammar needs to practice using it, but no one knew that to learn a grammatical item also needs to know in what circumstance it is used.

In questions 14 and 15, two structures were presented to check the students' knowledge of functions.

Question 14: Note the sentence:

Why don't you buy a computer?

Is it used to express query, suggestion or blame?

The result of answers is presented in TABLE V.

TABLE V.
STUDENTS' UNDERSTANDING OF "WHY DON'T YOU BUY A COMPUTER?"

Judgment of function	Suggestion	All possible, depending on context	Blame	Query	Not sure
Frequency of answers	31	6	4	2	1
Percentage	70%	14%	9%	5%	2%

From the table we can see that 70 percent of the students were clear about the function of the structure "Why don't you buy a computer?" Fourteen percent students had an awareness of context.

Question 15: The following is a dialogue between two people:

A: *It looks like rain, doesn't it?*

B: *Yes, it does. And I forgot my umbrella.*

Why does A use a tag question at the beginning?

Answers: to seek agreement, intend to start conversation, to add force, to express query, to comment on the fact, to relax, to ask for B's opinion, to make a guess, feel helpless. The most frequent answers are presented in TABLE VI.

TABLE VI.
STUDENTS' UNDERSTANDING OF THE USE OF TAG QUESTION

Judgment of reason	Intend to start conversation	Add force	Seek agreement	Express query	Ask for B's opinion
Frequency of answers	12	9	5	5	4
Percentage	27%	20%	11%	11%	9%

Only 27 percent of the students knew the function of the tag question in this context. The results of questions 14 and 15 indicate that some students knew structures are used to express certain intentions although they did not know the concept of function. In addition, most students were clear about the function of the more frequently used structure "Why don't you buy a computer?" but only a small number of students knew the function of tag question. We can see that the students knew the more frequently used structure better than the less frequently used one.

The above are the results of questions concerning students' awareness of functions. The following data will reveal how the students learned spoken English.

Questions 1: Do you learn texts of all types in the same way?

Twenty eight students (64%) answered *Yes*, sixteen students (36%) answered *No*. The purpose of this question was to see if students realized that different types of texts need to be learned for different purposes and in different ways. For example, learning a text of conversation should aim for the ability of oral communication and needs appropriate practice. The result shows that not all students had clear purposes for learning different types of text. This implies that some students did not have specific purposes in learning texts of conversation.

Question 2: How do you learn a text of conversation?

Answers: read aloud, underline words and phrases, talk with others, association, learn conversation in context, translate, read to understand, underline important sentences, recite important sentences, role play, listen, imitate, learn grammar, analyze the characters, recite the text, read aloud in roles. Some students employed more than one of these strategies. The most frequently applied strategies are presented in TABLE VII.

TABLE VII.
STUDENTS' STRATEGIES FOR LEARNING TEXTS OF CONVERSATION

Strategy	Underline words and phrases	Read aloud	Learn conversation in context	Find out important sentences	Recite important sentences	Listen
Frequency of answers	23	17	6	6	6	5
Percentage	52%	39%	14%	14%	14%	11%

From TABLE VII we can see that in learning the text of conversation, what most students focused on was isolated vocabulary and sentences. Only a small number (14%) knew the importance of context. Overlooking context suggests overlooking appropriate use of language. This can explain why only a small number of students (11%) (See TABLE III) regarded appropriate choice of words in context as an effective communicative element.

Question 9: What do you expect to learn from the text of conversation?

Answers: tones of talking in conversation, ways of expressing feelings, accuracy, intonation and rhythm, pronunciation, grammar, words and phrases, native-like communicative structures, culture, style, linking words, collocations, etiquette, way of thinking, common oral expressions, conversation skills. The most frequent answers are presented in TABLE VIII.

TABLE VIII.
STUDENTS' EXPECTED LEARNING ASPECTS FROM TEXTS OF CONVERSATION

Aspect	Words and phrases	Native-like communicative patterns	Structures	Tones of talking in conversation	Conversation skills	pronunciation	Intonation and rhythm
Frequency of answers	21	18	16	12	9	6	5
Percentage	48%	41%	36%	27%	20%	14%	11%

Words and phrases, native-like communicative patterns, and structures rank top in the table, which shows again that lexical items and structures were considered by the students as the most important aspects of language learning. Forty-one percent of them expected to learn native-like communicative patterns, which shows that they learned structures in the text of conversation for the sake of communication rather than language form alone. TABLE VIII also indicates that some students expected to learn the formal aspects of speaking: tones, pronunciation, intonation and rhythm. Twenty percent of them wanted to learn communication skills. From the data we can see that the students expected to learn the aspects from texts of conversation for both accuracy and appropriateness, with more focus on accuracy.

Question 10: What is your aim of learning the texts of conversation?

Answers: to learn vocabulary, to get familiar with various contexts, to develop communicative ability, to learn appropriate expressions, to learn grammar, to learn the form of dialogue, to learn culture, to improve writing ability, for exams, to learn native English speakers' way of thinking, to widen horizon, to enrich knowledge, to improve oral expression ability, to develop the ability of using English in daily life, to learn concise and accurate expressions, to learn the tones of speaking English, to learn the intonation of English, to improve English, to practice oral English. One student said no idea. The most frequent answers are presented in TABLE IX.

TABLE IX.
STUDENTS' AIMS OF LEARNING TEXTS OF CONVERSATION

Aim	Communicative ability	Oral expression ability	Vocabulary	Grammar	English use ability in daily life
Frequency of answers	16	9	6	5	5
Percentage	36%	20%	14%	11%	11%

Among the various aims of learning texts of conversation, apart from vocabulary and grammar, the most frequent answers were the abilities of oral communication. However, the proportions of such answers were not high, with 36 percent at top and 5 percent at bottom.

Question 11: How do you practice spoken English?

Answers: read the text aloud, follow the recording, listen to the recording of the text, see English movies, listen and read aloud, listen to English songs, imitate native speakers, practice with APP, read, recite the text, self-talk. Six students (14%) said they seldom practiced spoken English. The most frequent strategies are presented in TABLE X.

TABLE X.
STUDENTS' STRATEGIES FOR PRACTICING SPOKEN ENGLISH

Strategy	Listen and read aloud	Listen to recording	Read the text	Watch movies	Follow the recording	Imitate native speakers	Practice speaking with APP	Listen to songs
Frequency of answers	16	14	14	13	7	6	6	5
Percentage	36%	32%	32%	30%	20%	14%	14%	11%

The results of Question 11 show that the students employed various strategies to practice spoken English. Most of them, however, were controlled practice focusing on language form. They were not practicing speaking actually. Speaking should be practiced in situations. Among the students' strategies, watching movies was the only one helpful to learning speaking because they could observe how English is used in situations.

Question 12: What do you think of the role of situations in learning conversation?

Answers: consolidating memorization, helpful to understanding the conversation, helpful to natural use of language, helpful to learning language, helpful to determining the meanings of sentences in context, getting students into situations, helpful to expressing feelings, improving students' ability of adaption. The most frequent answers are presented in TABLE XI.

TABLE XI.
STUDENTS' VIEWS ON SITUATIONS IN LEARNING CONVERSATION

View	Helpful to understanding conversation	Getting students into situations	Helpful to determining the meanings of sentences in context	Helpful to natural use of language
Frequency of answers	13	7	5	5
Percentage	30%	16%	11%	11%

The data of question 12 show that generally the students had appropriate understanding of the role of situations in learning conversation. However, when we compare the data with those of question 11 we can find that in practice the students rarely employed situations to improve their spoken English. There was a distance between understanding and doing.

Question 16: Do you conscientiously learn polite expressions in English?

To this question 34 students (77%) answered *Yes*, seven students (16%) answered *No*, and three students (7%) said they did but not really conscientiously. Politeness is universally valued in all cultures. It was reasonable that most students learned polite expressions conscientiously. A small portion of students, however, did not have this awareness when learning another language. This suggests their lack of awareness of appropriacy in learning spoken English.

D. Findings

In response to the research questions, findings are achieved based on the results and discussion above.

The textbooks of secondary school English all regard functions as an integral part of the English course and present it explicitly either with structures or speaking. Textbooks reflect certain teaching methods. In the designing of speaking activities, the textbooks take both analytic and experiential approaches. The former directly turns students' attention to the function of a specific structure. The latter involves students in activities of using specific structures to express their intentions.

Through analyzing the model lessons presented at the 2010 National Forum of Middle School English Teaching Observation, we can assume that in recent years, teachers have formed a strong awareness of functions. They set functions as one of the teaching aims in teaching speaking and grammar. In the teaching process, most teachers relate structures with functions in an implicit way. They design communicative activities for students to practice using target structures. Some teachers relate structures with functions explicitly. They tell students how to express a certain intention with a specific structure. It is common practice of teachers to create situations for students to practice speaking. However, the concept of function is not introduced to students.

The results of the questionnaire survey indicate that newly enrolled university students generally have a weak awareness of language functions. They do not know the concept of function. In some circumstances, however, they know what structures are for what intentions. This indicates that they have some implicit knowledge of functions. The lack of explicit knowledge of functions has resulted in their lack of awareness of appropriateness in learning spoken English. In learning texts of conversation, most students primarily focused on vocabulary and grammar. Only a small portion of students noted the appropriate expressions in different contexts. The effect of teaching on learning is seen here: the general implicit teaching of functions has resulted in the implicit knowledge of functions on the part of students.

V. SUGGESTIONS

Generally, the students have a weak awareness of functions, whereas their awareness of structures is very strong. This is because for decades, grammar has been taught explicitly in the English classrooms in China. If we expect our students to develop an ability of using language not only accurately but also appropriately, we should take measures to build their awareness of functions. Teaching functions explicitly would be an alternative approach. Here are some suggestions.

Introducing the knowledge of functions

Teachers can introduce the concept of function and relevant knowledge. Students need to know that in different social contexts we should use different structures to express our intentions. Expressing our intention in the right form will sound appropriate and make communication effective. One structure can express a range of functions, and one function can be realized by a variety of structures. The choice of structure for a specific function depends on the context in which it is used.

Introducing basic knowledge of conversation

In real communication, the interlocutors use language in social contexts. In foreign language programs, textbooks usually present social contexts via texts of conversation. Therefore, it is a good way to build students' awareness of functions in the process of teaching speaking. Richards (2002) has classified the approaches to the teaching of conversation in second language programs into two types: indirect approach and direct approach. The indirect approach sees conversational competence as the product of engaging learners in conversational interaction. In practical terms, this leads to the pair-work and group-work activities that require learner-to-learner interaction and negotiation (p78). The direct approach focuses explicitly on the processes and strategies involved in casual conversation. The teaching of conversation addresses such aspects as strategies for turn-taking, topic control, and repair; conversational routines; fluency; pronunciation; and differences between formal and casual conversational styles (p79). In secondary school English classrooms, teachers take the indirect approach to texts of conversation. Although it is important to take the direct approach to the teaching of conversation at tertiary level, especially to English majors, it is not necessary to teach conversation explicitly to secondary school students. An eclectic approach would be realistic, that is, apart from designing speaking tasks, teachers can introduce some basic knowledge of conversation, such as openings, turn taking, and closings. Keller and Warner (1988, cited in Hedge, 2002, p272) in their book *Conversation Gambits* point out that a

speaker who does not use gambits can appear rude, over-direct, or abrupt. The knowledge of turn taking is also important because conversation is interactive communication between interlocutors. Silence or long pauses are considered awkward and embarrassing (Richards, 2002, p68). In dealing with texts of conversation, teachers could provide some activities of conversation analysis: situation, relationship between interlocutors, functions of important sentences, etc. This might contribute to the students' understanding of some conversation rules in social contexts. Another strategy is to encourage students to use fixed expressions in speaking. Fixed expressions or "routines" often have specific functions in conversation (ibid, p74). Using some conversational routines will sound more native-like and help reduce pragmatic failure in communication.

Adopting teaching strategies according to the intention of the material

What and how to teach is based on the analyses of materials and students. If the textbook contains the content of introducing the knowledge of functions, the teacher had better make good use of such resources. It is important to analyze the intention of the material, take account of class time and students' present English level before making decisions on instruction. For example, in *New Standard English* there is a section called Everyday English and Function, the purpose of which is claimed as such: "The focus is on understanding everyday English rather than on inviting the learners to use it in their own speech." In dealing with this part, the teacher must make sure the students understand the functions of those everyday English sentences. The follow-up activities can be getting students to make their own conversation using the target sentences. The aim here is to consolidate their understanding. Students are not necessarily required to use them in their own conversation as fluently as native speakers.

Consolidating experiential learning through drama

Drama is a popular activity in language programs. We can use drama to involve students in the use of English in simulated social contexts. Role-plays are like drama and are common activities in learning speaking. There are controlled and uncontrolled role-plays. In controlled role-plays the texts of conversation are used as scripts. In uncontrolled role-plays, the teacher introduces the situation, hands out role cards, and provides language support. Students themselves conceive the play and act it out. Whether in controlled or uncontrolled role-plays, the teacher can guide students to analyze the roles, their relations, their feelings, tones of talking, facial expressions, and gestures. The teacher can also encourage students to watch TV and films and observe native speakers' verbal and non-verbal expressions. All this would help improve the appropriacy of students' spoken English. It is necessary to let students know that role-play is not reciting texts. Saying "Nice to meet you" with a severe face without looking at the other interlocutor is reciting the text, while saying so and looking at the person with a smile is communication. The use of drama can help students experience the use of language rather than just recite the text.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study aimed at investigating Chinese students' awareness of functions and the ways they learn spoken English, with an attempt to find out the causes through textbooks analyses and teaching analyses. The subjects were 44 students from different parts of the country and 13 teachers from 13 provinces, so they can be viewed to some extent as typical of secondary school students and teachers of China. The findings have revealed that current Chinese students generally have a weak awareness of functions. In learning speaking, most students focus on accuracy rather than appropriacy. This is closely related with the textbooks and classroom teaching. Although textbooks regard functions as an integral part of the English course and present them explicitly in sections, the speaking activities sometimes relate to functions in an implicit way. Although teachers have a very strong awareness of functions, most of them teach functions implicitly. As a result, students understand the intentions expressed by some frequently used structures, but their knowledge of functions is implicit. Consequently they lack an awareness of appropriateness in their learning of spoken English. If we introduce the concept of function directly and teach functions more explicitly like we do with grammar, our students will have a better understanding of functions and improve their ability of speaking appropriately. Although they cannot behave verbally like native English speakers, at least they can better understand native speakers in social contexts.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to express my thanks to my students for their support to the questionnaire survey. I am also grateful to the 13 teachers for their excellent teaching, which provided valuable information for this study.

REFERENCES

- [1] Celce-Murcia, M. (1991). Language Teaching Approaches. In M. Celce-Murcia (ed.), *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle Publishers, 3–10.
- [2] Chen Lin & S. Greenall (2004). *New Standard English Book 1 (Student's Book)*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- [3] Hedge, T. (2002). *Teaching and Learning in the Language Classroom*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- [4] Harmer, J. (1983). *The Practice of English Language Teaching*. New York: Longman Inc.
- [5] Harmer, J. (2000). *How to Teach English*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.

- [6] Liu Daoyi, Zheng Wangquan & D. Nunan. (2013). *Got for it! Book 1 for Grade 7 (Student's Book)*. Beijing: People's Education Press.
- [7] Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. (2001). *The English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education and Senior High schools (Experimental Edition)*. Beijing: Beijing Normal University Press.
- [8] Olshtain, E. & A. D. Cohen. (1991). Teaching Speech Act Behavior to Nonnative Speakers. In M. Celce-Murcia (ed.), *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle Publishers, 154–165.
- [9] Richards, J. C. (2002). *The Language Teaching Matrix*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- [10] Richards, J. C., J. Hull & S. Proctor. (2007). *Interchange Third Edition (Student's Book 1)*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press; Cambridge University Press.
- [11] Riggienback, H. & A. Lazaraton. (1991). Promoting Oral Communication Skills. In M. Celce-Murcia (ed.), *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle Publishers, 125–135.
- [12] Stern, H. H. (1999). *Issues and Options in Language Teaching*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- [13] Ur, P. (2000). *A Course in Language Teaching: Practice and Theory*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, Cambridge University Press.
- [14] Widdowson, H. G. (1999). *Teaching Language as Communication*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.

Qian Liu was born in China in 1963. She received her Post-Graduate Diploma in English language and literature at Beijing University, China in 1987, and was admitted to the Degree of Master of Education in educational leadership and management at Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, Australia in 1997.

She has been teaching English for about 30 years and is currently employed as Professor at School of Foreign Languages, Shandong Normal University, China. Her research interests are in EFL teaching and teacher education. She has published books and articles in the areas of English teaching and professional development in China and overseas.