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Speak English: A Collaborative Language Learning System
Using Design Thinking in Second Language Education

An exegesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Design
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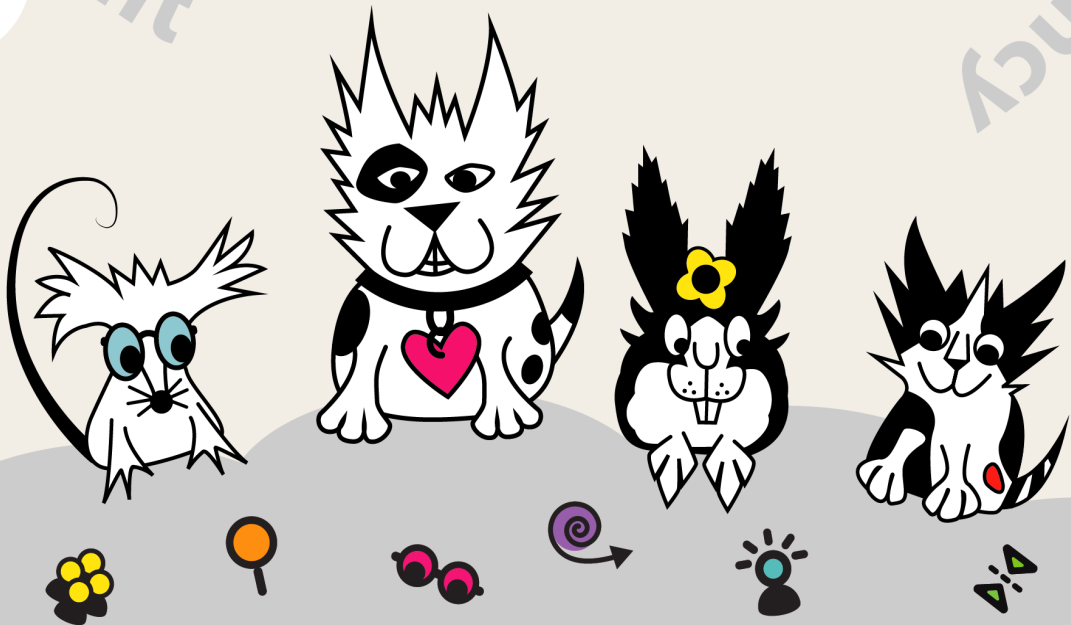
social
collaboration

communication

Speak
English

engagement

fluency



Abstract

The desire to communicate and converse in a second language is often hampered by students' lack of confidence, low motivation, passivity, unwillingness to take risks and/or over-reliance on contrived teacher-directed activities. This aim of this project, therefore, is to design a learning system that addresses these difficulties and thus helps English language learners improve fluency.

The project highlights a clear connection between design thinking and cooperative language learning, with both pedagogies promoting collaborative, real-life, team-based approaches. This, in turn, suggests that incorporating design thinking into educational design can help learners overcome the obstacles identified above and thereby become more fluent and confident when conversing.

Given this, the project involves designing and prototyping a cooperative language learning system drawing on the pedagogies of design thinking and design thinking for education. This *Speak English* system is based on a process of 'problem framing' that aims to improve communicative English competence through the motivational, risk-taking, ideational and iterative aspects of design thinking .

The final design system consists of prototyped examples of instructional language learning materials, including an app, a learners' booklet and worksheets. An accompanying explanatory poster and an animated overview of *Speak English* illustrate how the system works and how communicational language learning activities are initiated. As it stands, the initial *Speak English* system provides the basis for future integration of design thinking concepts (such as problem framing) into language learning pedagogy and materials design.

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“Jiamin. Tell me why you chose this website.”

We are in a design workshop at a university in China and I am teaching design theory in English to a class of Chinese students.

Jiamin looks at me in startled horror but does not reply. She turns to her friend Xin who translates my request into Chinese. Jiamin answers in Chinese without looking at me. Finally, Xin turns and gives me Jiamin’s response in English.

Later, I return to the pair and ask Xin a question in English. The earlier scenario is repeated, only this time Xin retreats in panic into Chinese while Jiamin translates and answers in English. And this is not unique to this pair; time and again, students avoid directly conversing in English, relying instead on the intermediary of a friend.

As I discover first hand, despite all Chinese tertiary students studying English at school and at university, communicating readily in English during lessons is almost impossible.

This standard classroom behaviour, though, contrasts markedly with a rare English-speaking encounter with Chinese students on a train journey.

“How come your English is so good?” I ask one of my friendly interlocutors.

“Me and a group of friends practice every day before class,” he replies.

If students like Jiamin and Xin could be encouraged to overcome their fears and practice speaking like this, then they too would be able to communicate more freely in English.



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