

Exploring the Studies on Speaking Anxiety in Second/Foreign Language Learning

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Abstract. Emotions have been attracting researchers' attention for a long time, especially anxiety, which is a negative emotion that has an adverse effect on second language/foreign language (SL/FL) studies and the results obtained. One of the most well-researched emotional elements in SL/FL is the FL/SL speaking anxiety. This paper reviews the previous theories and empirical studies focusing on SL/FL speaking anxiety. Scholars agree that SL/FL speaking anxiety mostly hinders the learning process, speaking performance, and outcomes. According to previous empirical studies, researchers employed instruments such as diaries, interviews, and questionnaires and discovered that many FL/SL learners are suffering from moderate to severe levels of anxiety when speaking an SL/FL. Their SL/FL speaking anxiety is a result of concerns about committing mistakes, fear of peers' mocking and being negatively assessed by teachers, inadequate vocabulary and grammar knowledge, concerns about examinations, insufficient exposure to FL outside of the classroom, lack of preparation, the inability to understand the interlocutors' words, and so on. Since it is important to enhance SL/FL learners' speaking skills, many scholars have come up with anxiety coping strategies to alleviate SL/FL learners' speaking anxiety.

Keywords: Second/foreign language speaking anxiety, causes of speaking anxiety, speaking performance and outcomes, anxiety coping strategies.

1. Introduction

Researchers have long begun studies on anxiety, its causes, and its influences. People are found to suffer from anxiety in various situations ranging from driving to sitting an examination [1]. Spielberger gave the definition of anxiety as "a feeling based on the perception of threat, which includes symbolic, anticipatory, and other ambiguous aspects [2]." It is agreed by most scholars that an excess of anxiety can have a negative influence on the activities that people are performing. Since the 1970s, there has been a growing interest in the emotional factors that influence the learning of a second or foreign language (FL/SL) as scholars realized that affective variables could influence an FL learner's performance when studying a new language [1, 3, 4, 5]. It is considered by many scholars that negative emotions have a debilitating effect on learning an SL/FL. Anxiety has been one of the most studied negative emotions that SL/FL learners encounter and has been a prominent concern for many researchers. In 1982, Krashen proposed that stressful classroom conditions could result in the formation of a "filter" that prevented the acquisition of the target foreign language [3]. He also pointed out that anxiety could act as a negative "affective filter," causing SL/FL learners to become less responsive to the input of FL. In 1986, Horwitz et al. first defined foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA) as a uniquely complex construct made up of one's own self-perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and actions concerning learning languages in a classroom that results from the unique features of the language learning process [4]. They believe foreign language anxiety (FLA) was situation-specific and was a unique type of anxiety experienced in the FL learning process that could negatively influence the FL learning outcomes. They developed the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) to measure communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation, namely the three components of FLCA divided by them.

Future scholars found that SL/FL anxiety can be further segmented into writing, speaking, reading, listening, classroom anxiety, and so on based on specific tasks [1]. Of all these SL/FL-related activities, speaking has been considered the situation that causes the greatest worry in the process of

learning an SL/FL, and the studies and research on SL/FL speaking anxiety have been flourishing over the years [4-10]. Scholars and researchers have reached a consensus that SL/FL speaking anxiety mostly has a negative effect on language learning outcomes and speaking performance and a considerable number of SL/FL learners are suffering from speaking anxiety [4, 6, 7]. Many researchers have done plenty of studies to determine what can cause SL/FL speaking anxiety and the corresponding coping strategies to alleviate it and thus enhance outcomes.

In this paper, the definition, frequently used measures, common causes, and consequences of SL/FL speaking anxiety are reviewed based on proposed theories and previous empirical research. The consequences include a negative influence on the speaking learning process and outcome. This paper aims to offer readers a systematic view of the important theories about SL/FL speaking anxiety, previous representative empirical studies, and the relevant implications.

2. Second/Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety

Anxiety incurred when speaking a second or foreign language has received a lot of attention. Speaking has been perceived as what causes SL/FL learners to worry the most in SL/FL classrooms [4, 7].

One of the most important instruments to measure FLCA is the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), which is a questionnaire with 33 statements contributed by Howitz et al. [4]. Scholars in the future generations have confirmed its effectiveness and viability [5]. FLCAS is comprised of 33 statements, 24 of which are put positively while the rest of the 9 items are negative sentences. Each of these items is measured by the Likert scale and has a score with a range from 1 point, indicating strong agreement, to 5 points, indicating strong disagreement. It has been a reliable instrument widely employed by many researchers to measure participants' FLCA levels. Furthermore, researchers have shown an interest in adapting the questionnaire to assess different language skills in terms of anxiety, which means the adapted questionnaire can measure the anxiety specifically generated in such areas as FL speaking, writing, and reading processes. For instance, Liu modified the FLCAS in their studies to specifically measure SL/FL speaking anxiety [7]. One of the adaptations in the measure of Liu is that, for instance, only items in FLCAS indicating bodily symptoms of anxiety, nervousness, and lack of confidence were chosen and included in the English-Speaking Class Anxiety Scale [7]. The new instrument to measure SL/FL speaking anxiety, named the English-Speaking Class Anxiety Scale, is a 15-item questionnaire.

An adapted FLCAS is one of the most frequently used instruments for measuring speaking anxiety in studies. More often than not, mixed methods are adopted in one research to measure SL/FL speaking anxiety levels. Besides an adapted FLCAS, such mixed methods include reflective journals and diaries, teacher observations, video-recorded observations, and interviews, which are also common instruments. Some scholars developed their own instruments to measure speaking anxiety. For instance, McCroskey created the 34-item Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety (PRPSA) scale to assess people's level of anxiety when making oral presentations and speaking in front of groups of people [11].

3. Empirical Research on SL/FL Speaking Anxiety

Quite a few scholars have conducted experiments to study whether SL/FL learners are experiencing anxiety when speaking a foreign language. They are also curious, if so, what causes SL/FL learners' speaking anxiety and what are the consequences of suffering from it. Their speaking outcomes have been proven to be adversely impacted by SL/FL speaking anxiety. Speaking is one of the most anxiety-incurring activities [9]. Bashori et al. conducted a study about SL/FL speaking anxiety, in which they compared the mean scores of SL/FL speaking anxiety and Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) [6]. The result shows that SL/FL learners appear to have a greater degree

of SL/FL speaking anxiety than FLCA, suggesting that they are more worried when speaking is the major learning activity in the classroom.

3.1. SL/FL Learners' Speaking Anxiety Levels

Previous studies mostly agree that SL/FL learners generally have a moderate to high level of anxiety related to speaking and view speaking as a daunting experience [8]. In 2006, the statements in the FLCAS in Liu's study can reflect students' speaking anxiety. Over one-third of the participants supported 20 of the 36 statements and more than 50% of them supported the rest six items [12]. Over 70% of the participants, despite their English proficiency, reported nervous feelings when they were required to speak English in class in their reflective journals. Likewise, Miskam and Saidalvi used an adapted FLSAS in their research and discovered that 76% of the Malaysian undergraduates who were surveyed reported a moderate level of speaking anxiety and 12% reported a high level of speaking anxiety [8]. Only 12% of the participants showed low speaking anxiety levels.

3.2. Causes of SL/FL Learners' Speaking Anxiety

In the previous empirical studies, the most mentioned causes of SL/FL speaking anxiety include fears of making mistakes, worry about peer mocking and negative evaluation from teachers, high difficulty of the speaking task, inadequate exposure to FL outside of the classroom, competitiveness in tests, lack of practice, as well as incomprehensible input [5, 9, 10].

Firstly, employing a descriptive qualitative methodology, Wahyuningsih and Afandi analyzed the data collected from semi-structured interviews with 30 Indonesian students from different grades in the English department and 4 English-speaking teachers, classroom observations focusing on students' participation and problems, as well as focus group discussion involving 50 students, 5 teachers, and 3 language experts [10]. According to their discovery, FL learners often find that they are not equipped with enough appropriate vocabulary to express their ideas in FL and that they are prone to committing grammatical errors because when speaking, the reaction time is too short for them to come up with sentences with the right grammatical structures. This is especially the case when FL learners are singled out to do an impromptu performance in front of other students.

Secondly, the uneasy feelings derived from being tested are one of the major causes of FLSA. This is supported by a study by Liu in 2018, in which she researched Chinese middle school students who are learning English by using an adapted FLCAS developed by Horwitz et al. [4, 7]. Liu also interviewed 8 respondents to find out their feelings when speaking English and why they feel that way. To measure students' English-speaking ability, she referred to the marks of the final-term speaking test in an English course, which is comprised of a teacher-student conversation in English and a recitation of an English text. Part of the reason why many of those young FL learners from 7th- to 9th grade do not feel FLSA is that spoken English is not imposed by any large-scale or official English examinations.

Thirdly, according to many scholars such as Liu and Price, incomprehensible input is another major source of SL/FL speaking anxiety [5, 9]. Their experiments show that students feel anxiety when they can't understand teachers' questions or can't follow other speakers. Some students believe they must understand every word other people say and would become anxious if they cannot do so. In her study in 2006, Liu adapted the FLCAS by Horwitz et al. and tested it on 547 Chinese undergraduates. 44.8% of the participants agree that they will feel upset if they fail to understand the teacher's correction; 28.9% of them reported that they would experience nervousness unless they could comprehend every English word that was spoken by the teacher. It frightens 21.4% of the participants if they can't understand the teachers' words in English [12].

Fourthly, students will feel more anxious if the speaking task is highly difficult. SL/FL learners are under much pressure when they are required to deliver an oral presentation individually and spontaneously within the allotted time in front of the whole class [9]. This is confirmed by the students' reflective journals and teachers' observations of students in class in Liu's study. In contrast, when students are speaking FL with peers or doing pair work with their classmates, especially those with a

similar FL proficiency to theirs, they feel much less anxious [5]. In some cases, they do not even feel anxious at all. According to the reflective journals in another study by Liu in 2006, when doing pair work or speaking in a group, up to 80% of the participants did not suffer from nervous feelings [12]. Students reported notably lower anxiety levels when speaking FL because they did not fear their classmates in the groups. However, a few students also pointed out in their reflective journals that if the group members demonstrate a significantly better FL performance, they will feel speaking anxiety again. According to a study by Liu on Chinese students, students will feel anxious if they are not familiar with their partners, but if students know their group members quite well, they won't feel much anxiety when speaking to each other [5].

Finally, SL/FL learners with a higher FL proficiency and more previous experiences of using the target language are proven to have a lower speaking anxiety level and conversely, lower language abilities and less speaking practice result in increased anxiety [6, 10, 12]. A study conducted by Liu confirmed this relationship between proficiency and speaking anxiety [1]. Her results show that Chinese students with lower English proficiency are significantly more anxious when speaking English. However, the conditions for learning and practicing speaking are not ideal for many learners, especially FL learners. Many of them suffer from insufficient language input and inadequate speaking practice opportunities in their home countries, as the languages they use in their daily lives outside the classroom are their native language rather than the target languages they are learning [10]. This can greatly challenge their language learning outcomes [13]. Likewise, Liu also found that an enormous number of English learners in China lack practice and exposure to English [5]. The time in English classes is limited and sometimes the class size is too big for English teachers to communicate with each Chinese student in English.

3.3. Consequences of SL/FL Speaking Anxiety

It is agreed by most scholars that speaking anxiety has a negative influence on SL/FL performance and outcomes. Students generally feel uncomfortable when speaking exercises are included as part of the classroom activities. It is observed that students may perspire, stutter, palpitate, and do strange bodily movements such as head-scratching and leg-shaking [4]. Their mind may go blank; they may prefer to remain silent to avoid speaking up; they may even feel inferior to other speakers and suffer from lower self-esteem and self-confidence [6]. For instance, in a study conducted by Liu in 2006, 51% of the participants who filled in the adapted FLCAS agreed or strongly agreed that when they were about to be called on to speak in English in class, they could feel their hearts beating [12].

Many empirical studies have discovered that high speaking anxiety can result in low speaking performance and learning outcomes. On the contrary, SL/FL learners with lower speaking anxiety generally report relatively better speaking achievements. Al-Khotaba et al. confirmed this negative relationship between speaking anxiety and outcomes [14]. In their study, 100 Saudi Arabian university students completed questionnaires with 5 Likert scales and took oral tests. Based on the analysis in SPSS version 25, if anxiety increases by 1%, FL learners' English-speaking performance will decrease by 88.8%. In other words, if students speak with reduced anxiety and worry, they can enjoy significantly higher marks on a speaking achievement test.

Additionally, speaking anxiety can negatively influence SL/FL learners' speaking strategy use. According to Liu's data analysis, students with low levels of speaking anxiety were more likely to employ more efficient ways to better complete an oral task, such as eye contact with the listener, filler words when they don't know what to say, natural body language as well as facial expressions [1, 4]. Students who experienced high levels of anxiety tended to employ fewer or less frequent effective speaking facilitation tactics. Instead, they tend to adopt simple oral expressions.

Furthermore, speaking anxiety in learning an SL/FL can also negatively influence SL/FL learners' learning process. For instance, in their empirical research, Liu and Jackson used the Unwillingness to Communicate Scale (UCS) and an adapted FLCAS to find that the more anxious a student feels, the less willing he or she is to actively practice speaking [15]. This unwillingness and reluctance to speak can further reduce SL/FL learners' motivation to speak English, and in turn, they will make little

progress in language learning due to inadequate practice [5]. For example, instead of contributing to the speaking activities in class, highly anxious students spend more time listening or thinking about what they should say.

Previous studies have reached an agreement that the speaking anxiety in learning an SL/FL needs to be addressed immediately since it hinders the learning process, speaking performance, and outcomes as well as results in underdeveloped competence [4].

4. Implications

Based on the multiple previous empirical studies on speaking anxiety in learning an SL/FL, it can be concluded that speaking anxiety is mostly debilitating to SL/FL learners' learning process and speaking outcomes. Considering such affective factors, many scholars proposed various approaches to improving SL/FL learners' speaking performance by lessening their speaking anxiety.

Firstly, it is recommended by Liu that students should strive to study hard and make great efforts to enhance their FL proficiency [1]. They should actively seek more opportunities to speak the target language if there are not enough chances to practice speaking in class.

Secondly, SL/FL teachers should adopt a more gentle, amiable, and encouraging attitude toward students. They should be generous with their praise of students' speaking performance and be more amicable if students make mistakes when speaking. They should be conscious of the widespread existence of speaking anxiety during the FL/SL learning process [1, 5]. A relaxing and supportive classroom learning atmosphere is also important to make students feel comfortable speaking the target language in class [1, 5]. Interesting class activities and group work can be helpful to engage students in speaking more in class [1, 5].

Thirdly, to lessen SL/FL learners' speaking anxiety, it is suggested that teachers should expose students to the FL culture and community. FL movies, books, music, teachers' personal experiences in the country of the target language, and online communication with overseas students are all effective ways. Students are also encouraged to participate in various exchange programs in which they can have more opportunities to communicate with foreign communities and native speakers as well as experience foreign cultures personally. They may gain more knowledge of the cultures in other countries and would therefore be less foreign to the language [10]. If an FL student has previous experiences in the target country, their anxiety in the classroom would be notably reduced.

Lastly, with the advance of technological development, an increasing number of FL teachers and students have complemented the traditional class mode with multimedia equipment and online classes, especially after the pandemic, to make the learning process more engaging. Against this backdrop, some scholars have come up with pedagogical implications typical to the new learning environments. Wahyuningsih, Afandi, and Bashori et al. encouraged the use of media and/or technology to assist FL learners in FL learning, hence developing their speaking abilities [6, 10]. The findings of Bashori et al. revealed that students with a moderate-to-serious degree of speaking anxiety have a positive attitude toward learning websites and that they thought that online language learning websites and applications may help them overcome their speaking anxiety [6].

While reducing speaking anxiety helps improve FL learners' speaking skills, Liu points out that a certain amount of anxiety can be facilitative [1]. According to her, a certain amount of anxiety was needed if an FL learner wanted to perform better, as anxiety at the optimal level could increase learning motivation.

5. Conclusion

Speaking is regarded by many SL/FL learners as the most anxiety-provoking process when learning an SL/FL. A considerable number of SL/FL learners experience a moderate to high level of speaking anxiety when learning an SL/FL, the most common causes of which include worries about making mistakes and being laughed at by other people, lack of enough exposure and practice outside

of the classroom, pressure from competitive tests, and the high difficulty of the speaking task. Inadequate language proficiency can also lead to speaking anxiety, such as a small vocabulary base and insufficient grammar knowledge. Some students feel anxious when they can't understand what others are talking about or can't catch what the teacher asks.

Speaking anxiety and speaking outcomes are negatively correlated with each other in learning an SL/FL. Highly anxious students are observed to often suffer from mental blocks when required to speak in FL. They may perspire, stammer, tremble, and have a significantly faster heartbeat. On the contrary, students suffering from lower SL/FL speaking anxiety have better speaking performance and vice versa. They tend to use effective speaking strategies more frequently than their anxious counterparts. Speaking anxiety can also negatively interfere with students' learning process by dampening their confidence and reducing their motivation. Consequently, they avoid joining the speaking activities in class and have fewer practice chances, which can in turn exacerbate their speaking anxiety.

Many speaking anxiety coping strategies have been put forward to facilitate the SL/FL speaking learning process and improve speaking outcomes. SL/FL learners should take the initiative to practice speaking more often after class to enhance their speaking proficiency. SL/FL teachers are supposed to create a secure and supportive atmosphere where students feel more comfortable opening up about their opinions and even their errors. Teachers can achieve this by being more agreeable in class, establishing a closer teacher-student relationship, encouraging teamwork and collaborative learning among students, and praising students more often rather than criticizing them harshly in front of the whole class. SL/FL teachers can also arouse students' interest, boost their motivation, and expose them to foreign cultures by employing digital technology and the internet, such as YouTube videos and Facebook posts.

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