

Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety among Chinese English Majors: Causes, Effects and Strategies

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Abstract. Language anxiety is becoming an important issue of research in our profession, especially speaking anxiety. The study aims to explore the affective factors, effects and coping strategies of speaking anxiety among Chinese English majors. A mixed approach was used: survey, and interview. In total, 123 English majors answered the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), other basic questionnaires, they participated oral English test hold by school teachers. Two teachers and three students with varying degrees of anxiety were interviewed. The results were: (1) According to the survey, half of the students have oral anxiety, though most of them are moderately nervous; (2) Speaking anxiety negatively impacted how well students' oral performance, which was further confirmed by the statistical analysis; (3) A variety of factors was revealed to cause the students' speaking anxiety; (4) When faced with speaking anxiety, there are some effective solutions from the perspective of both students and teachers. This paper contributes to making teachers realize the existence of oral anxiety in students English learning, its impact on English learning, and to better adjusting teaching strategies.

Keywords: Speaking Anxiety; Anxiety-Provoking Factors; Effects of Speaking Anxiety; Coping Strategies; Chinese English Majors.

1. Introduction

The study of affective variables in FL/SL acquisition and instruction has drawn more interest since the 1970s. Language educators have long understood that learning FL/SL is more than just memorization of words and following grammatical rules. Learners also need to deal with the difficulties and uncertainties that come with communicating in a foreign culture. One of the most commonly studied negative emotions in FL/SL learning is anxiety.

Foreign language anxiety actually exists in and is related to all aspects of FL/SL learning. But other types of related anxiety have not been adequately researched. Compared to other language abilities, speaking anxiety was the one that language learners expressed the most [1-2]. Given the significance of spoken English and the prevalence of anxiety, further research is required to understand how anxiety affects language learning and to find coping methods that can assist students in learning spoken English [3]. Depending on the situation, the intensity and causes of anxiety may change. The present study was prompted by the need to examine FL/SL anxiety in broader contexts with various learner groups.

The current study, focusing on Chinese undergraduate English majors' oral English classes performance, aimed to investigate the level of students' anxiety and determine whether it has an impact on their speaking performance, as well as to investigate the causes of anxiety and coping mechanisms used by neither students nor teachers in EFL classrooms.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Foreign Language Learning Anxiety

Many researchers have studied anxiety, but it was not until the 1970s that foreign language anxiety is distinct from other types of anxiety [1-2]. FLA is paid attention to by researchers. Horwitz et al. specifically defined the FLA and then introduced of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale

(FLCAS) as a tool to gauge the level of anxiety [1]. This scale has received widespread endorsement from language researchers [3-4].

2.2 Speaking Anxiety

Speaking has received the most attention from SL/FL anxiety experts when compared to other language abilities. Students commonly report that speaking in a foreign language is their most terrifying experience. When compared to other language skills, speaking was the one that caused the most concern among language learners. Language learners rated speaking-focused activities as more stressful than any other in-class activity [1-2]. Anxiety among students is most commonly caused by their use of English in class [5]. The FLCAS, self-developed interviews, observations and/or diaries have all been used frequently to measure SL/FL speaking anxiety [1, 3, 6]. According to studies, anxiety impairs students' FL learning, and a consistent negative correlation between students' (test) performance and the FLA has been confirmed [7]. The study also discovered that different factors may be linked to FL/SL speaking anxiety such as learning strategies [5]; attitude toward making mistakes [5-6]; teaching style [5-6]; confidence and self-esteem [3]; foreign language proficiency [6]; peer pressure [8]. Many academic sources offer theoretical suggestions to assist language learners in lessening, reducing, or coping with their nervous in the classroom, such as learner's characteristics [9]; learner's beliefs [8]; teacher's attitude [7, 10]; classroom atmosphere [3], and other sources. This study aims to examine the degree of oral anxiety, the relationship between oral anxiety and oral performance, to explore the causes of oral anxiety, and solutions.

A triangulated approach was used to accomplish this goal, and the research questions were put forth:

1. To what extent do students experience speaking anxiety?
2. How does speaking anxiety affect students speaking performance?
3. What causes the students' speaking anxiety?
4. What solutions can be employed to deal with speaking anxiety?

3. Methodology

To explore students' speaking anxiety in English language classes, both quantitative and qualitative methods was adopted, including survey, and interview.

3.1 Participants

A group of 123 second-year or third-year students from a university in Dalian are participated in this research. The participants were 24 males and 99 females ranging from 17 to 22, with a 20.07 average age. They are all English majors.

3.2 Instruments

The following methods were used to collect the research data, as below for detailed.

3.2.1 The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS)

To examine the students' anxiety levels in English language classes, a 33-item survey was translated into Chinese. Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) was given to the students [1]. The survey is a 5-point Likert scale, with each descriptor assigned a value between 1 and 5. The options ranging from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree."

3.2.2 Background Questionnaire

The background information questionnaire collected the student's name, gender, age, grade and major, in order to better obtain the information of participants.

3.2.3 Semi-structured Interview

In order to comprehend the reason behind the students' oral fear and how they cope. According to the degree of anxiety selected low, average, and high degree of anxiety of three students. To complement students' perceptions, two teachers will be interviewed. Students were asked questions about their educational experiences, personal experiences, engagement in speaking English and their degree of anxiety, their self-assessed English competence, causes of feeling anxiety, and when they felt anxiety what methods they took. Teachers were asked to confirm the students who were the most at ease or worried throughout various classroom activities, as well as to discuss possible causes and coping strategies. To ensure the accuracy of the data, the researchers will be the first time the data collected for transcription. The real names of the interviewees were withheld.

3.2.4 The oral English test

The oral English test is divided into two sections: two minutes of a dialogue between the teacher and the student, and 3 minutes of student interaction. The pairs of students must engage in conversation about a predetermined topic. The test results are divided into a pass and a fail to see the student's oral performance.

3.3 Procedures

The study was conducted during the 10-11 weeks of the 18-week semester when about 280 second-graders were asked to take an oral English test. The students took the oral test in pairs. While Students are required to fill in a questionnaire translated into Chinese after completing the test. Of the questionnaires collected, 124 are complete and available for further analysis.

3.4 Data analysis

Based on the survey results, using frequency analysis, and description analysis to calculate the data, to determine what extent of anxiety students feel in oral English class. Chi-square analysis was run to explore the effect of oral English anxiety on oral English performance. The interviews were transcribed and were subjected to a thematic analysis. Since the interviews for this study were carried out based on a certain set of purposes or fundamental inquiries, the best analysis can be done according to the subject unit.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 The Level of Speaking Anxiety

The FLCAS survey has been finished, and statistical analysis on it is regarded as valid. The results of the Cronbach α test for FLCAS is 0.926, suggesting that this scale has a high level reliability. The results of Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test for the FLCAS is 0.877, indicating that the scale has a high level of validity. The total scores of FLCAS can reflect students' anxiety level in English classes. Scores reflect the level of anxiety, high scores of participants, high levels of anxiety they felt. As FLCAS contains 33-items, the scores ranged from 33 to 165. In the oral English class, a total score between 130 and 155 denotes high anxiety, a score between 85 and 126 denotes moderate anxiety, and a score between 47 and 83 denotes low anxiety. The range of dividing participants' anxiety level are based on Marcos-Linás and Garau's paper in 33-item FLCAS [11]. According to Table I's statistical breakdown of the FLCAS results across levels, the participants primarily express moderate anxiety during oral English classes.

Table 1. Statistical Analyses of the FLCAS

Level	Number	Mean	Standard Deviation	Median	Mode	Mini-mum	Maxi-mum
Low	44	71.16	11.62	74.50	80	36	84
Intermediate	73	100.81	9.80	98.00	93	85	125
High	6	138.33	5.28	139.50	143	130	143

4.2 The Effect of Speaking Anxiety on Students' Oral English Test Performance

When interviewed the teacher interviewee whether the speaking anxiety had any positive effect or negative effect on students' oral performance, they said they were not sure. But all of them don't deny the negative effect on the oral performance. One high-level teacher said. "If a student has oral anxiety, he will not be active, even reluctant to speak English, and sometimes students will even ask, can I use Chinese to express my view? A high-level anxiety student interviewee described "Oral anxiety affects my oral performance because I always forget what to say because of worry and nervousness." Therefore, the majority of students and teachers believe that oral anxiety will have a negative effect on oral performance.

The correlation study of the students' FLCAS scores and performance scores further supports the detrimental impact of anxiety on students' spoken English performance. Two teachers evaluated the students' oral performances (i.e., an oral test). The oral exam assesses students' capacity for communication.

The correlation was $-.383^{**}$ ($p < 0.01$), indicating that there was a notable inverse relationship between the FLCAS and the students' spoken English proficiency, as shown in Table 2. The students' performance in oral English in class declined as their FLCAS score increased.

Table 2. Effect of Anxiety on Students Performance in Spoken English

Oral Test		
FLCAS Points	Correlation	-0.383^{**}
	P Value	0.000
* $p < 0.005$ ** $p < 0.01$		

4.3 Causes for English Speaking Anxiety

The participants unanimously agreed that a range of reasons, including inadequate English proficiency, a lack of practice, a fear of ridicule, a lack of confidence, a fear of making mistakes, and imprecise feedback, contributed to students' nervousness during oral English sessions.

From the students' perspective, there are two main reasons. One reason is that most of them think they are low English proficiency. According to the interviews, the majority of the students at the middle school, which was heavily exam-focused, did not practice speaking English. The majority of them got used to putting a lot of effort into reading comprehension and writing proficiency while putting spoken English at a minimum in order to excel on written exams. It was inevitable that they would experience anxiety when they spoken English in class at the university, especially since they were English majors. The English majors need higher oral English ability. The difference in oral ability between the students also made them feel anxious and lack confidence. As a low-level anxiety student described: as his speaking ability improves, his speaking anxiety will relieve. The majority of the participants agreed with this viewpoint. Another reason is that students fear of making mistakes, especially in the classroom. The classroom is a specific language environment, the participants think it will make them more anxious to speak English. If they make a mistake, they will be more afraid of the teachers' correction and the classmates' laughs. According to high-level anxiety, the student said, the fear of making mistakes in class made him even less motivated to speak English.

From the teachers' perspective, language environment and lack of vocabulary are the main causes of anxiety. English is a second language, it cannot be used as the mother tongue. In addition, communication in a setting where only English is spoken is uncommon. Of the lack of an English language environment, students can't get better oral practice. The majority of English majors aimed to speak and write English as naturally or flawlessly as a native speakers. Only then did they believe they had mastered the language and could speak it fluently in a school setting. This quest for perfection may also be the source of their anxiety. Another major impediment was the students' poor vocabulary, which caused them to halt when speaking English in class. One of the teachers said, "Students struggle with finding their own forms of expression, particularly those that are culturally

specific. They lack the vocabulary and cultural understanding necessary to articulate their ideas ". Even worse, the students' lack of vocabulary made them more anxious.

4.4 Strategies Adopted to Cope With Speaking Anxiety

As mentioned above, many students experienced anxiety during oral English sessions and believed that this nervousness had a detrimental impact on their oral performance. Some strategies are provided in order to help the students feel more at ease in the classroom.

From the perspective of students, all of the participants shared the opinion, feel confident when speaking English, they need practice more, be better prepared, and not be afraid of making mistakes. The first is pre-class preparation. When students master more knowledge, the self-confidence is more stronger, and they will be more willing to speak and express their views. Meanwhile, improving English skills also help to increase students' self-confidence. One mid-level anxiety participant indicates, "In my freshman year, I improved my speaking skills through voice acting and oral practice, and I became more confidence". The second is to increase the opportunity to communicate in English, whether it is with foreigners, teachers and classmates. These interactive is an effective way to improve oral English. Third is in a rational view to consider making mistakes. Everyone errs occasionally. Do not feel embarrassed if you make a mistake in your speech; simply correct it and continue.

From the perspective of teachers, they think teachers play an important role in relieving students' speaking anxiety. To assist the students get along with each other and practice speaking English, they purposefully set more additional time for pair work. They also presented conversational skills to the class in the first lesson and suggested learning strategies. In the meanwhile, when the students erred, they made an effort to minimize their embarrassment. Instead, they tried to assist them in a friendly manner. They often give encouragement to students when they answer questions. The teacher who was interviewed stated, "I typically didn't interrupt him if he made a mistake in his speaking. To encourage the students to speak English in class, I instead commented on that after he ended his speech.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, the findings have several implications for speaking anxiety in Chinese English majors. During spoken English sessions, at least half of the students reported feeling worried, while the majority felt just mildly uneasy. Because of this unsettling feeling, several students were hesitant to volunteer to speak in English during class.

The majority of participants in the study who discussed the effect of anxiety on students' oral performance in the class agreed that it had a negative impact. The further results of the students' FLCAS scores and their oral test performance scores provided more evidence for this conclusion. Most students believed that the students who were more self-assured would speak English more fluently. According to research, anxiety can be caused by a wide range of factors, including poor English skills, a lack of practice, a limited vocabulary, a language environment, students' personalities, a fear of negative evaluations. However, neither the teachers nor the students appeared to have useful coping strategies when faced with anxiety. Students who practice their oral English more tend to get relief from their speaking nervousness. The professors suggested more practice to boost self-confidence and created a friendly classroom environment to encourage the children to become less nervous.

The results of this study demonstrate that speaking anxiety among Chinese English majors is a significant problem that is still seldom solved by EFL teachers and students. In order to make students speak English more confidently, teachers must be aware of nervousness in English classrooms and educate their students about it.

This study proves the existence of oral anxiety among Chinese English majors and it has negative effects on English-speaking learning. Additionally, it offers some coping strategies while identifying the reasons for anxiety. Additional research is required to examine this issue, especially the coping

strategies. In order to make students more confident to speak English, ultimately promote their oral English learning.

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