The Cause Analysis and Teaching Countermeasures of English-Speaking Anxiety Among Chinese University Students in The Context of Educational Psychology

Xiangnan Feng*

School of Education, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK

* Corresponding Author Email: 2630023f@student.gla.ac.uk

Abstract. Chinese university students often approach the English language learning process from a test-taking perspective and lack speaking skills. English-speaking anxiety is an issue that cannot be ignored when it comes to developing students' English-speaking skills. This paper investigates the speaking anxiety of 51 Chinese university students through a questionnaire and analyses the current situation and causes of speaking among Chinese university students in relation to three theories of educational psychology: behaviorism theory, cognitivism theory, and constructivism theory, and offers teaching countermeasures and suggestions. This paper has come up with two points. The first point is that in the current state of speaking anxiety, the greater the degree of English proficiency, the lower the level of speaking anxiety among Chinese university students. The second point is that peer pressure, their own language skills, the pressure to speak alone in speaking courses, and the pressure on instructors' attitudes in class all contribute to Chinese university students' speaking fear.

Keywords: English speaking anxiety; English language learning.

1. Introduction

1.1. Brief Introduction to the Study

The number of people learning English in China is increasing for a variety of purposes. Fluency in spoken English is particularly important for university students, and those who are more fluent are likely to be more comfortable in the workplace in the future. *The Guide to Teaching English at University (2020 Edition)* states that English teaching at a university should be instrumental and humanistic, and it should be effective in promoting the comprehensive development of the abilities, knowledge, and quality of non-foreign language students [1]. *The Guide to Teaching English at the University* sets the following basic objectives for the oral expression of non-foreign language students: to be able to communicate with others on topical issues or topics of daily life; to be able to talk in English with others about their major after a little organization; to express themselves clearly in English, and to be able to express themselves in English. The basic objectives are to be able to communicate with others on topical issues or topics of daily life; to be able to converse with others in English on topics related to one's major after some organization; to be able to express oneself clearly and to use basic conversation skills. However, most Chinese universities attach importance to written examinations and ignore the importance of spoken English for students, resulting in silence in English classes in most universities. As a result, students are reluctant to open their mouths to speak English, they lack awareness of English communication, and their English communication skills are relatively low. This situation is still far from meeting the requirements of the country and society, and it is imperative to find ways to improve the oral expression skills of university students.

1.2. Objective of the Study

Many students who are faced with a situation where they need to 'speak English' know how to express themselves but are too nervous to speak. In such cases, the psychological problem known as 'anxiety' in language output arises. The lack of English-speaking ability among students in China's universities is due to two factors: on the one hand, it is due to objective reasons, such as the lack of

teachers due to the continuous expansion of universities and the inadequacy of multimedia teaching equipment; on the other hand, emotional factors are a crucial part of language output, and "multiple factors are intertwined to work together". Using a questionnaire and literature review, the paper is to discuss the main theories of educational psychology and analyze the problem of English-speaking anxiety, trying to combine educational psychology with college oral English teaching in an organic way, and provide some suggestions and opinions to deal with the problem of English-speaking anxiety among college students.

1.3. Significance of the Study

Theoretically, this study will provide some insights for future research. Although there have been many studies on English self-concept and English-speaking anxiety, two affective factors that influence second language acquisition, there have been few studies on the relationship between the two at the speaking level, especially among English majors and non-English majors. Therefore, this study will help to enrich the theory of English self-concept, especially the theory of English-speaking self-concept, and provide theoretical insights for future research.

Practically, this study uses data analysis to understand the correlation between English-speaking concepts and English-speaking anxiety among non-foreign language undergraduates, as well as the influence of gender and major on the relationship between the two, and the results of the study can provide effective suggestions for teachers and students. For teachers, English teachers can strengthen the training and learning of students' speaking in future English teaching and pay attention to developing students' positive self-concept of spoken English in their daily teaching in order to improve their English-speaking skills. At the same time, teachers should always pay attention to students' learning status in the classroom, adopt effective teaching methods to improve the current situation of speaking apprehension in the classroom, and provide more encouragement and support so that students are no longer afraid to speak English in the classroom. For students, it is important that students purposefully change their learning attitudes and form a positive self-concept of speaking English in order to avoid speaking anxiety in the English classroom.

2. Theoretical Foundation

Educational psychology is a sub-discipline of psychology, or it can be said that educational psychology is a cross-discipline between education and psychology [2]. Its object of study is people in learning and teaching situations (the teacher and the recipient), mainly studying the various psychological phenomena and their changes in the process of education and teaching, revealing the psychological laws of learning and mastering knowledge, skills, developing intelligence and personality of the educated under the influence of education and teaching, as well as the mutual relationship between education and psychological development. Behaviorism focuses on the objective, measurable behavior of the individual and denies the individual's own internal mind, i.e. the unobservable activity. Learning is motivated by external stimuli, and the process of learning is a continuous process of reinforcing and establishing a link between stimulus and response, with the ultimate 'response' being learning. The significance of behaviorism for language teaching lies in its emphasis on the importance of external 'stimuli' and motivation, which requires that learners have adequate stimuli and language environments in the target language. Rod Ellis argues that 'stimulus' and 'response' are the most important factors in language acquisition and language learning [3]. Brown argues that such 'stimulation' for language learners should be 'programmed instruction', which facilitates learning in a pre-determined, step-by-step manner [4].

Cognitivism is represented by Bruner’s 'cognitive-discovery theory', which is based on perfect psychology [5]. Bruner's cognitive learning theory assumes that learners are active participants in the learning process and actively remember and transform knowledge, rather than being passively stimulated or passively receiving it. Bruner emphasizes that the transmitter of knowledge should actively use a variety of factors and tools to help the learner grow and develop. He also emphasized

the importance of curriculum and materials that are designed to enable educators to learn in a way that makes meaningful connections between the parts and elements of knowledge based on the learner's understanding of the basic structure of the knowledge being learned.

Constructivist theory can be described as a fusion of Jean Piaget's theory of 'cognitive development of the child' and Vygotsky's theory of 'social construction'. Constructivism assumes that learners already construct their own perceptions of the external world in their everyday lives, and that the process of learning is about reconstructing and reorganizing known perceptions through the knowledge taught by educators [6]. In other words, the learner is guided and assisted by others in a certain social context, using the tools available to him or her and through his or her own learning. In other words, learners acquire knowledge in a social context, through the guidance and assistance of others and through their own construction, using existing learning tools.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Question

The aim of this study is to investigate the level of anxiety in the foreign language classroom among university students majoring in finance and economics, to understand the impact of anxiety on students' speaking performance, to identify the sources of students' anxiety and to suggest a range of strategies to reduce anxiety and improve their speaking ability. The study aims to answer the following questions:

(1) Is English speaking anxiety related to English proficiency?

(2) What is the source of students' anxiety about speaking English?

(3) Combining educational psychology theories, what can teachers do to reduce students' anxiety about speaking English?

3.2. Participants

Participants in the research are all students in their junior year or above at Chinese universities, including 35 non-English major students and 16 English major students. The non-English major students had all passed the College English Test Band 4 (CET 4) test and the English major students had all gained the certificate of Test for English Majors-Band 8 (TEM-8).

3.3. Research Methodology

3.3.1 Literature Research Method

By reviewing the relevant literature on foreign language learning anxiety, foreign language speaking anxiety and English-speaking teaching for Chinese university students, the research can fully understand the current situation and development trend of English-speaking anxiety research, apply the existing theoretical basis, relevant research findings and results to guide this paper, and at the same time pay attention to the shortcomings of relevant research and make improvements.

3.3.2 Questionnaire

As the most widely used questionnaire method in empirical research, it is easy and quick to use, especially nowadays the common electronic questionnaire. It saves time and economic costs in terms of human and material resources, makes data collection easier and the data results will be more accurate. 51 copies of this questionnaire were sent out and 51 were returned with no missing answers in each questionnaire, with a 100% return rate.

This questionnaire is adapted from the 33-item Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) designed by Horwitz. This study focuses on English-speaking anxiety and adapts it to fit the Chinese university student population. Also, the 20 questions in this questionnaire are based on the Liter-type Scale, which is a five-point scale with five levels: Level 1 is score 1 for totally disagree; 2 for disagree; 3 for unclear; 4 for agree; and 5 for strongly agree. Students choose to fill in the scale according to their situation. Questions 8, 9, 15, 16, 17 and 18 are reversed questions and are scored

in the opposite way, while the others are all positive questions, so the higher the total score, the more anxious the student is about speaking.

4. Result

4.1. English Speaking Anxiety and Language Proficiency

The first three questions in the questionnaire explore the current situation of speaking anxiety among Chinese university students. The three descriptive questions are: "I am always unconfident when speaking English in English classes", "I always feel that other students speak English better than I do" and "I feel uncomfortable speaking English in front of other peers". In these three questions, the mean scores of English majors were 2.5, 2.75 and 2.5 respectively, while the mean scores of non-English majors were 2.97, 3.29 and 3.06. According to the above descriptions, the higher the score the higher the anxiety, for which this result of the score shows that in this study, the higher the English level of Chinese university students the less severe their speaking anxiety is, which is a result that stands on the same side as many experiments [7, 8].

4.2. The Reason of Students English Speaking Anxiety

According to Oxford and Burry-Stock's Liter-type Scale, a score greater than or equal to 3.5 is considered high anxiety, between 2.5 and 3.4 is considered moderate anxiety, and below or equal to 2.4 is considered low anxiety [9]. In this study, the causes of speaking anxiety among Chinese university students are mainly peer pressure, their own language proficiency, the pressure to speak alone in speaking classes and the pressure on teachers' attitudes in class. Among them, the teacher's attitude in class had the greatest impact on English majors and non-English majors. Similar to Hanifa's results, the average scores of English majors and non-English majors were 3.44 and 3.51 respectively for the question "I am more nervous when the teacher looks serious in speaking class" [10].

4.3. The Perception of Students towards Teachers to Reduce the English-speaking Anxiety

In descriptive question 11 of this questionnaire, "Encouragement and reassurance from teachers would help to alleviate my speaking anxiety", both English and non-English majors scored an average of 4 out of 5, which shows the students' desire for encouragement and reassurance to alleviate their speaking anxiety. Furthermore, in the final open-ended question, "What measures or changes would you like teachers to make to alleviate your speaking anxiety?", students also mentioned that they would like teachers to provide more opportunities for students to practice speaking and give feedback in a timely manner, or to make speaking practice more interesting in class.

5. Discussion

5.1. The Source of Students' Anxiety about Speaking English

Students' level of speaking anxiety can be said to be correlated with their level of English, and this is confirmed by the fact that the average score of non-English majors in this research was higher than that of English majors on almost every question. Moreover, there are many factors that influence students' speaking anxiety other than their English proficiency.

In the questionnaire, it can be concluded that the reasons for students' speaking anxiety also include environment, peers, teachers and teaching methods. Among the questions about teachers and teaching methods, the mean scores were high for both English and non-English majors; in other words, teachers and teaching methods had the greatest impact on students' speaking anxiety. Teachers should therefore be aware of the existence of speaking anxiety and help students to identify the causes of their personal speaking anxiety and guide them to overcome it and improve their English-speaking skills. It is the teacher's responsibility to create a safe classroom environment, reduce students' language anxiety, and actively explore student-friendly teaching methods.

5.2. Suggestions and Strategies

College students are a special group and have their own unique learning characteristics. Firstly, unlike the teacher-centered teaching methods of primary and secondary schools, university students are more autonomous in their learning and have a variety of teaching styles. Secondly, the psychological development of university students is complex and varied as their physiology becomes more adult, and their independence of thought and the depth and breadth of their thinking tend to mature. Therefore, when considering the issue of oral anxiety, it is important to take into account the psychological characteristics of this group of students, as for which, the three main theories of educational psychology: behaviorism, cognitivism and constructivism can be applied in curriculum design, pedagogical improvement and motivation in college students' English oral classes.

The fundamental 'stimulus-response' principle of behaviorism is widely used in current English language teaching, whereby repeated mechanical practice is used to achieve the inertia of the learner in forming a 'conditioned reflex' for the language. Extensive reading is a fundamental way of improving the learner's spoken language, i.e., the input of the target language. In addition, auditory input is also part of the explicit input and enables the learner to develop a sense of the target language. In conjunction with this educational psychology theory, educators can reduce learners' blindness and anxiety in the process of selecting materials by selecting specific teaching materials and extended reading and by promoting continuous exposure to the target language for long periods of time, avoiding intermittent separation from the target language and anxiety when the need for oral expression arises again.

The constructivist view of learning is that the process of learning is an organic construction of the learner's existing cognition and experience with the knowledge being taught and that the teacher's role is to tutor and help the learner in the process of 'construction', with a large degree of autonomy for the student. The teacher must therefore have full confidence in the student's ability to learn independently, with only a certain degree of supervision or guidance. Addressing students' anxiety about improving their oral language skills is a slow process that requires careful tracking of students' progress. Some students are afraid to speak up because of their anxiety, so teachers need to be patient and lead students from silence to speech. Also, teachers can make full use of multimedia teaching tools to provide rich teaching resources and teaching formats, such as films, news and science education documentaries, and then ask students to retell the material through their own understanding, creating a target language environment for students and encouraging them to use the target language to communicate. Through meaningful experiential activities in a complete, authentic environment, students are able to actively construct new meanings.

Similarly, cognitivism emphasizes that the educator should be a helper and a leader for the learner, actively using a variety of factors and tools to stimulate students' initiative. Horwitz argues that a large part of students' speaking anxiety is due to a fear of 'negative evaluation', which includes the evaluation of the learner by self and others in both actual and virtual situations [11]. When learners have this fear of negative evaluation, their potential and motivation to learn are greatly hindered. Therefore, educators must try to encourage positive assessment and motivation in the learning process and maximize students' motivation from a psychological perspective. In addition, the cognitivist theory emphasizes the importance of students' independent thinking and the importance of teaching materials and systems. This requires educators to avoid indoctrination and to encourage students to think independently in the first instance when they encounter language problems and to lead rather than explain.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, the following conclusions are drawn from a survey of English and non-English majors after statistical analysis of the survey data. Firstly, the higher the level of English proficiency, the lower the speaking anxiety among Chinese university students in the current situation of speaking anxiety. Secondly, the reasons affecting Chinese university students' speaking anxiety mainly stem

from peer pressure, their own language proficiency, the pressure to speak alone in speaking classes and the pressure on teachers' attitudes in class.

Since speaking anxiety is a psychological phenomenon, educators should be flexible enough to combine the guidance of educational psychology in English language teaching to help students solve the problem of speaking anxiety and to help them develop in all aspects of their English learning process in order to adapt to the requirements of the international community and to enhance their competitiveness. In general, teachers need to move away from the traditional 'fill-in-the-bag' approach and remain a helper and leader in the teaching process. Repetitive and mechanical language practice should be replaced by continuous exposure to the target language, and teachers should use a variety of lively teaching techniques and encouragement to motivate students and reduce their anxiety about speaking, taking into account their prior knowledge and personal background.

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