Examining Factors of Speaking Anxiety among Chinese EFL Students in Higher Education

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Abstract. Many students will have speaking anxiety when they learn a foreign language. This study intends to look into the elements that lead to students' speaking anxiety in Chinese higher education English classrooms. The study included a total of 55 participants with various educational backgrounds and majors. The Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety Scale (FLSAS) has been adopted to gather quantitative data and in particular, measure speaking anxiety. Other questions related to online learning and students' self-rated anxiety-affecting elements were also added to the questionnaire. This study discovered three major elements that contribute to students' speaking anxiety, communication comprehension, exam anxiety, and fear of unfavorable evaluation. Furthermore, the findings demonstrate that online speaking sessions might help students relax. In students' self-evaluation, self-confidence is the most prominent factor affecting oral anxiety. According to the findings, the improvement measures that can be taken to help students reduce their level of speaking anxiety in teaching practice are discussed in the article.

Keywords: Speaking anxiety, second language acquisition, Chinese learners, and university students.

1. Introduction

Many students who are studying a foreign language encounter the multidimensional psychological condition known as foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA). In the past decades speaking anxiety has been taken into the consideration in second language learning. This phenomenon, according to research, negatively affects language learning and is a poor indicator of language proficiency [1-4]. Being nervous also impact students' behavior in some specific sessions of the class, and even makes students afraid of or hate speaking English [5].

The pandemic's four-year spread shifted the learning paradigm from in-person instruction to online instruction. Almost 1.575 billion children, or 91.3% of all students registered worldwide, were affected by countrywide school suspensions that had been implemented by 191 countries as of April 20, 2020, Beijing time, according to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization's monitoring [6]. The mode of learning language has changed during online classes, but the speaking anxiety learners faced still stays nearly at the same level when it comes to students with high English proficiency, and the oral anxiety faced by beginners or intermediate English learners has become relatively smaller [7].

Studies examining students' speaking anxiety in second language education have also been conducted in recent years. Rajitha and Alamelu have conducted research on the FLSA of college students and have found the reasons for the anxiety of second language learners from both external and internal [8]. The researchers believe that the external causes of speaking anxiety come from language, grammar, pronunciation and peer pressure, while the internal reasons come from students' stage fear, lack of self-confidence and shyness. Another study also believes that anxiety comes from the fear of communication, exams and other people's evaluation [9]. Miskam and Saidalvi have found that the anxiety of learners with medium and high anxiety comes from the fear of communication, while the anxiety of learners with lower anxiety comes from exams [10].

Vural has focused on whether learner personality and oral anxiety were related [11]. According to the study's findings, speaking anxiety and learner personality are significantly correlated. Bashori, Hout, Strik, and Cucchiarini have compared learners' anxiety levels with online automatic speech

recognition websites and offline oral English learning [12]. According to the study's findings, learners gave the website more favorable comments and thought that this method of instruction could lessen anxiety. With online courses becoming the mainstream form of teaching, is the oral anxiety of students in online classrooms different from that in offline classrooms? Where do these speaking anxieties come from? The exploration of these issues can have a positive guiding effect on online oral English courses.

To get a more comprehensive view of the subject, the participants in this study will get the FLSAS and other pertinent questions. As a result, the goal of this research is to look into the elements that contribute to university students' speaking anxiety in English classes. The researcher wants to address the following issues more specifically:

What factors cause speaking anxiety in university English classes?

What possible adjustments can be applied to the teaching practices to help students release speaking anxiety?

The study will ideally help the students by identifying the causes of their anxiety as well as the triggers for that anxiety. Students might then assess the effectiveness of the method they employed to deal with their speaking nervousness. Additionally, students would enhance their expression to be the greater one once they were aware of their own issues. Additionally, this study should help English teachers enhance their teaching methods by incorporating engaging and innovative learning in English-speaking classes.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

There are a total of 55 participants in this study, of whom 28 are studying or have graduated from universities in mainland China, and 27 are studying or have graduated from universities in Hong Kong or overseas. In order to avoid the possibility of different degrees of anxiety caused by different departments, questionnaires were distributed to students from different majors, including business English, education, computer science and chemistry, etc. The highest education qualifications of the participants also varied, with 28 holding a bachelor's degree, 24 holding a master's degree and three holding a doctorate.

2.2. Data Collection Instrument

By choosing 18 components from the 33 items of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) created by Horwitz et al. [2, 13], Ozturk and Gurbuz created the FLSAS. These 18 items are clearly linked to FLSA, according to Saltan's research [14]. According to the English proficiency and thinking patterns of Chinese students, the researchers made appropriate adjustments to the expressions of the questions in the scale

In addition to these 18 items, the questionnaire of this study also included three questions to collect personal information, aiming to understand the participants' schools, educational backgrounds and majors. Questions about participants' attitudes towards online classes and their judgments about factors affecting their own foreign language speaking anxiety were also added to the questionnaire. Participants are required to score each item on a 5-point Likert scale in accordance with their own circumstances in addition to the question about gathering personal information. The participants were given the questionnaire via WeChat, and the data collection period lasted 9 days.

3. Findings and Discussion

Only 10 items from the FLSAS with an average score of more than 3 points were chosen for investigation since the goal of this study is to comprehend the factors that contribute to learners' anxiety when speaking in a foreign language. Three significant anxiety-affecting elements, according to Horwitz et al., include communication comprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation

[2]. These 10 questions will be classified according to the above three scopes. In order to facilitate the subsequent analysis, the data in Tables 1, 2, and 3 are arranged in descending order.

3.1. Communication Comprehension

Communication comprehension is how people learn and understand information during verbal communication. It is also a form of shyness marked by nervousness and fear when speaking to others [9]. For the three statements in Table 1, the researcher attributes them to teachers' teaching methods and practices. Item 3 indicates that some students' vocabulary during the learning process may not be able to support them to understand the teacher's words. This can quickly intimidate students, leading to blank minds when they need to answer questions and affecting the communication process. The students must absorb every word the teacher says in order to fully understand the learning process [15]. During the teaching process, teachers can slow down their speaking speed or use simple substitutions to help students understand the teaching material or content. Oral interaction can be added in the classroom as much as possible so that students can gradually adapt to the communication process.

When students experience fear or anxiety due to their inability to understand the teacher speaking in a foreign language, mistakes are simple to make. After the students make mistakes, the teacher will give corresponding guidance or correction. In this questionnaire, item 2 is the main cause of communication comprehension anxiety. 35 of the 55 participants chose either "Agree" or "Strongly Agree". It can go horribly wrong if the person making the errors believes they are the only ones who don't understand the grammar or vocabulary and feels denigrated by the procedure [16]. Therefore, when students make mistakes, providing feedback will help them improve rather than correcting them. Hinting is a quick way to remind students that they have made a mistake, and also gives the students a chance to think alone by not directly providing the right answer. For example, use countable nouns to remind students that they may have misused singular and plural nouns in their previous expressions. Echoing is a way for teachers to provide feedback by repeating the student's statement and emphasizing the wrong part in a different tone. For example, when a student says, "I go to school yesterday", the teacher could repeat the sentence like "I GO to school yesterday" with a questioning intonation.

Table 1. Frequencies and Percentages of Communication Comprehension Factor.

Items 1, 2, 3	SD	D	N	A	SA	A+SA
I become frustrated when I don't comprehend what the teacher is correcting.						
F	7	9	11	21	7	28
%	12.73%	16.36%	20%	38.18%	12.73%	50.91%
I become worried when I can't grasp what the teacher is saying in English.						
F	5	15	11	15	9	26
%	9.09%	27.27%	20%	27.27%	16.36%	43.63%
When I don't comprehend all my English teacher says, I get anxious.						
F	6	12	14	17	6	23
%	10.91%	21.82%	25.45%	30.91%	10.91%	41.82%
*SD = Strongly Disagree; D = Disagree; N = Not Sure; A = Agree; SA = Strongly Agree						

3.2. Test Anxiety

According to Horwitz, et al., test anxiety is a form of performance anxiety brought on by a fear of failing, particularly in oral communication [2]. The factors contributing to test anxiety can vary from person to person and situation to situation, including perfectionism, a lack of preparation, a history of failing tests, and a fear of failure. Nonetheless, language learners tend to believe that all methods of acquiring a foreign language are included in testing [9].

In the questionnaire, four statements with an average score of more than 3 are presented in Table 2. For items 4 and 5, more than half of those who participated selected "Agree" or "Strongly agree". Students have something to express in their minds, but the unprepared situation makes them feel

extremely stressed and anxious in a short period of time, which affects their language output. Another reason that causes test anxiety is the self-consciousness of making a public speech. On the one hand, it is because public speaking, no matter which language is used, has a high requirement on the speaker's own language ability, psychological quality and on-the-spot response-ability. Unfamiliarity with foreign languages intensifies the tension among students in public speaking. On the other hand, complex grammatical structures and vocabulary will affect students' performance. Many students don't feel confident in their own language skills, which exacerbates anxiety levels. Twenty individuals disagreed with item 6 even though 21 people confessed they never felt completely confident speaking in English.

The following measures can be considered to alleviate students' test anxiety. Firstly, students should keep language conciseness when answering unprepared questions. This means avoiding long, complicated sentences and sticking to short, clear points. When too many complex sentences and words are used or the amount of information in a sentence is too large, it will cause student's own tension and confuse the listener. Secondly, they can use facial expressions, body language, and movements appropriately. Making eye contact with the audience to emphasize important points in the speech can help the audience better understand the content? The use of body language can help students relax and make the speaking process more dynamic. Thirdly, students need to clearly understand the purpose of the speech. Most of the time, spoken English requires less academic rigor than written English. Understanding this can help students overcome psychological barriers and connect spoken language with the state of daily communication. Finally, teachers should carefully observe the state of students during the teaching process. Students can be divided into groups so confident students can assist less confident students with emotional, social, or academic struggles.

Table 2. Frequencies and Percentages of Test Anxiety Factor.

Items 4, 5, 6, 7	SD	D	N	A	SA	A+SA
When the teacher asks me a question that I haven't planned ahead for, I get nervous.						
F	5	7	9	27	7	34
%	9.09%	12.73%	16.36%	49.09%	12.73%	61.82%
I start to become anxious when I have to speak in front of the class in English without any prior practice.						
F	5	14	6	18	12	30
%	9.09%	25.45%	10.91%	32.73%	21.82%	54.55%
I become nervous and embarrassed when I speak in front of my fellow classmates in English.						
F	7	14	12	14	8	22
%	12.73%	25.45%	21.82%	25.45%	14.55%	40%
Whenever I talk in English, I never feel completely confident in myself.						
F	3	17	14	15	6	21
%	5.45%	30.91%	25.45%	27.27%	10.91%	38.18%

3.3. Fear of Negative Evaluation

Watson and Friend claim that a person's fear of negative evaluation includes both worries about other people's opinions and their own as well as presumptions about how others will view them [17]. Once students develop this kind of fear in the early stage of foreign language learning, they are likely to try to avoid interacting with others or minimize their own output in the next learning stage.

The fear of making mistakes in English class was mentioned by 28 of the 55 participants. In response to question 10, 41% of participants felt ashamed to volunteer their responses in English lessons, which is equivalent to the fear of being judged by their teachers or their peers or of making mistakes. This fear of being evaluated negatively or making mistakes can cause students to fear speaking English in class, further missing out on opportunities to make progress in fluency and confidence.

The researcher attributes the main reason for the problem to the learning environment. This includes teaching methods and classroom atmosphere. Ineffective or wrong error correction methods

can lead students to view making mistakes in English as an obstacle to their progress, rather than a natural part of learning a new language. In fact, students need to deepen their understanding of knowledge in the process of making mistakes and correcting them. Consequently, teachers can adopt peer collaboration in the teaching process, so that students can learn together. In comparison to traditional teacher-centered methods, research demonstrates that children learn more effectively, retain information longer, and even like cooperative learning activities in the classroom [18]. In the process of learning from each other, students can correct mistakes in their own expressions by listening to what others say. This method can effectively reduce the burden of making mistakes for students. In addition, an inclusive classroom atmosphere is also important. Teachers should create a learning environment where students feel safe making mistakes. Moreover, teachers should not laugh at, belittle or criticize students for their mistakes, and timely stop students from laughing at others. Students can reduce their speaking anxiety and make progress while being relaxed and respected.

43% of the participants believed that other students had higher speaking skills. They may underestimate their own abilities, and this contributes to their anxiety in the classroom. Previous research shows that the level of less-proficient students is higher than proficient students when speaking English [19]. As anxiety levels rise, these less-proficient students realize that their performance in speaking is not as good as other aspects of learning English, so they avoid participation or abandon their efforts. Avoidance deprives students of the opportunity to make progress. Liu found that students' oral anxiety levels were negatively correlated with their academic performance [20]. Hence, the problem of anxiety among students with less proficiency becomes worse. The biggest contributor to this issue is a lack of confidence, and Table 3 will go into more detail on how speaking anxiety and self-confidence are related.

Table 3. Frequencies and Percentages of Fear of Negative Evaluation Factor.

Items 8, 9, 10	SD	D	N	A	SA	A+SA
I fear that I'll make mistakes in English classes.						
F	5	12	10	16	12	28
%	9.09%	21.82%	18.18%	29.09%	21.82%	50.91%
I frequently think that my other classmates speak English more fluently than I do.						
F	4	13	14	14	10	24
%	7.27%	23.64%	25.45%	25.45%	18.18%	43.63%
In English classes, I find it embarrassing to provide up answers.						
F	8	14	10	14	9	23
%	14.55%	25.45%	18.18%	25.45%	16.36%	41.81%

3.4. Self-rated Anxiety-affecting Elements

It can be clearly seen from Table 4 that self-confidence is the one with the highest score among the four self-rated anxiety-affecting elements, with a score of 3.87. 36 out of 55 of the participants agreed or strongly agreed self-confidence is the key factor that influences the level of their speaking anxiety, with no one choosing strongly disagree. According to the affective filter hypothesis put forth by Krashen in 1982, students who can avoid negative attitudes (such as fear or a lack of enthusiasm) will succeed in second language acquisition [21]. A language learner's perception of his or her ability to master the target language is positively correlated with the person's self-confidence. Research shows that a confident language learner is more willing to participate in conversations and actively engage in language output, thereby making progress in communication skills [22].

At present, English classes in China tend to be more teacher-centered, and the content of the class is mainly to explain grammatical structures or to read articles. Learners seldom have the opportunity to practice oral English, and as time goes on, as their ability declines, they will become less confident in speaking English. Before speaking their first word when learning their mother tongue, children experience a time of "listening (silent)" for around a year. The length of silence varies from person to person, and the same guideline applies to learning a second language. It will be quite difficult for students to communicate in English when the language input necessary for speaking English has not

yet arrived. The instructor is the single most significant source of language input for students, providing many possibilities for exposure to spoken language [16]. To ensure that students comprehend, teachers should utilize English as often as possible in English classes.

Additionally, teaching strategies might incorporate group work, pair work, and cluster groups. They can more effectively test the learners' capacity for agreement and negotiation. In order to communicate their ideas to the rest of the group, students need to improve their presentation and negotiation abilities. They can also pick up a lot of fresh information while listening to others at the same time. On the other hand, group activities make it easier for teachers and students to match students with various levels of learning ability to various learning subjects and carry out more productive learning. Finally, this form of cooperation will also give students a sense of belonging. Compared with individual work, teamwork can distract students from their anxiety. Students' self-confidence and sense of accomplishment will significantly increase when they are able to do the tasks that they are unable to complete on their own.

Table 4. Averages of Self-rated Anxiety-affecting Elements.

Element	Self-confidence	Classmate's or teacher's attitude	Pronunciation, fluency or coherence	Physical study environment
Average	3.87	3.53	3.53	3.37
*The highest score for each element is 5.				

3.5. Online Class

When asked "I feel more relaxed when the speaking classes are online," 27 participants agreed or strongly agreed, with only 16 choosing “Disagree” or “Strongly Disagree”. This indicates that their level of oral anxiety is reduced when they take an online speaking class. Researchers also found in interviews that using web-based learning platforms or tools can alleviate students' speaking anxiety and exercise their oral ability [12]. Schools can enhance the infrastructure (online learning platform, network connection quality and web-based learning materials) within their capacity to help students improve their interest in oral learning and reduce their speaking anxiety.

4. Conclusion

This study mainly investigated the factors that cause university students' speaking anxiety. Fifty-five participants with various educational backgrounds completed a closed-question questionnaire. According to the quantitative data, communication comprehension, exam anxiety, and fear of receiving poor evaluation were the three leading causes of speaking anxiety among the study's participants. Each anxiety-affecting element also has different revealed causes. On the factor of communication comprehension, students are mainly anxious because they cannot understand every word of the teacher and the way the teacher corrects mistakes. Answering questions without preparation and giving public speaking are two of the biggest contributors to test anxiety. In this study, fear of negative evaluation refers to the fear of making mistakes and assuming that others will judge one's spoken English negatively. In addition to the above three reasons, the most important factor affecting students' oral anxiety is self-confidence. At the same time, more than half of the students think that online speaking classes can make them feel more relaxed. In the teaching process, the change in teachers' teaching practice and vision is undoubtedly the most critical solution to the problem of alleviating students' speaking anxiety.

This study, admittedly, has limitations. Firstly, this study had a limited sample size of only 55 participants. The limited sample data led to limited accuracy and representativeness of the research results. Secondly, there are many variables in the questionnaire. The 55 participants varied in age, education, educational background, major, and English proficiency. However, oral English anxiety may be affected by the above factors. If the variables were further controlled, the results of the study may be different. Finally, only quantitative analysis was used in this study, and the researchers' interpretation of the data may be different from what the participants actually thought. Future research

can be improved on the basis of this research, and more diverse data can be obtained to find the reasons and solutions for university students' speaking anxiety. Because there are still a lot of intriguing subjects to address, the author anticipates that other scholars will perform additional research on this subject.

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