Analysis of the Causes of Chinese High School Students' English-Speaking Anxiety

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Abstract. Since the foreign language (FL) learners frequently express emotions of worry, stress, or nervousness while speaking, foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA) has been a long-standing issue in language acquisition. This study mainly focused on high school students, and to explore what causes the English-speaking anxiety and to find possible solutions The author designed a questionnaire and conducted non-participant observation and one-to-one interviews to explore the speaking anxiety among high school students. Through qualitative analysis which based on solid data, the present study found that lacking English speaking occasion, nonproficiency in English, and familiarity of the speaking topic are the main dominant factors causing English speaking anxiety among high school students. It is surprising that the percentage of having English speaking anxiety is overwhelming, even for people who are satisfied with their speaking level. The confidence in English speaking is fragile and can be affected easily by psychological and environmental elements.

Keywords: Foreign language speaking anxiety; English; high school students.

1. Introduction

Foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA) is a multifaceted psychological issue that affects considerable amounts of students who are learning a foreign language [1]. As in recent decades speaking anxiety has been taken into consideration as a part of second language acquisition, it attracted attention from numerous linguistic scholars. Many recent previous studies had found that FLSA hinders language acquisition and is a poor indicator of success in the language learning [2-5].

When students are suffering from English-speaking anxiety, anxiety usually affects how students behave in some class sessions and even causes some to fear or hate speaking English [6]. Therefore, it is crucial for teachers to explore what causes English-speaking anxiety and what methods can teachers adopt to release the anxiety. In this research, the author mainly adopted a questionnaire, and non-participant observation to discover the factors of causing English-speaking anxiety. The interview was used to explore a few unique phenomena that happened in this research which aimed to provide more solid information. The whole study followed the experimental framework of the two-dimensional construct, within the classroom and outside the classroom [7]. This construct to some extent has some area of what Rajitha and Alamelu (2020) stated the reasons for speaking anxiety are from two aspects, internal and external. It is also interesting to see whether when the occasion changed, some symptoms and the degree of affected by speaking anxiety naturally changed [8].

By conducting this study, many interesting and unexpected factors of speaking anxiety were found. Practical methods and advice from both authors and students were collected which will give inspiration to teachers in the future. Moreover, more authentic and solid data were collected to fill the big picture of English-speaking anxiety.

2. Method

2.1. Context and Participant

This study was conducted in a normal public high school in J province, mainland China.

Nearly 100 students volunteered to take the questionnaire. Students' age ranges from 15 to 17 years old. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), students' English levels are between A2-B1, which means to some extent they fail to express or

understand complicated things in the English context. Given each student has at least a 3-hour English class and 1-hour English corner activity per week, students have official 4 hours of oral English needed occasion in school [9].

2.2. Questionnaire

To address the research gap and Research Question 1(RQ1), this study conducted a questionnaire to collect students' attitudes and willingness on speaking anxiety. The questionnaire was posted online, and by the deadline, a total of 86 valid responses had been received. To gain more valid and diverse information from participant students, this questionnaire ended with an open-ended question. Considering the performance of speaking anxiety on the individual is different, the author sets 'others' option for students to add more details. Designing questions one to four intended to get more background information from participant students, which contributed to fulfilling the completion of the questionnaire and offering more information when conducting data analysis.

2.3. Observation and Interview

This research mainly utilized non-participant observation to collect data from English classes. Non-participant observation is a method for collecting information without interacting with its participants [10]. The goal of observation in this research is to explore what may cause or influence the condition of speaking anxiety among participant students. To ensure the accuracy and authenticity of the collected data, all involved English classes in this research were video-recorded. However, due to students having little time to speak English in some English classes, such as writing class, reviewing class, etc., the author carefully selected 15 classes worth observing. The standard of select these 15 classes is clear. Firstly, in the teachers' teaching plan, there are at least 2 activities that need students to speak, such as pair talk, group discussion, etc. Secondly, there is sufficient interaction between teacher-student and student-student. Besides the chosen English classes, students' performance in English corners also was observed to meet the need of exploring speaking anxiety as a two-dimensional construct: within the classroom and outside the classroom [7]. During the observation, students' speaking content, the pace of speaking, duration of speaking, and body language while speaking were emphasized and recorded.

One-to-one interview in this research was used to target unusual and special performance from students during English classes and English activities. Students were asked for giving reasons for their special performance during speaking.

3. Results

3.1. Percentage of Students Having Speaking Anxiety

The first research question of this research is 'What percentage of participant students who recognize themselves are having speaking anxiety'. As this question was directly designed in the questionnaire (see appendix), the result is clear. There are 71 students who identified themselves as having speaking anxiety in total. Due to there being 86 valid questionnaire responses, the result is 80.28% of students are suffering from speaking anxiety in participant high school.

3.2. Factors Cause English Speaking Anxiety

The second question of this research is 'What factors cause English speaking anxiety in participants' high school?'. The result of this question is composed of two parts. The first part is from participants' responses to the questionnaire which to some extent represented participant students' subjective willingness and self-perception of speaking anxiety. The other is concluded from non-participant observation which provided a relatively objective aspect of causing factors.

3.2.1 Factors in questionnaires

The results from the questionnaire were presented in Figure 1.

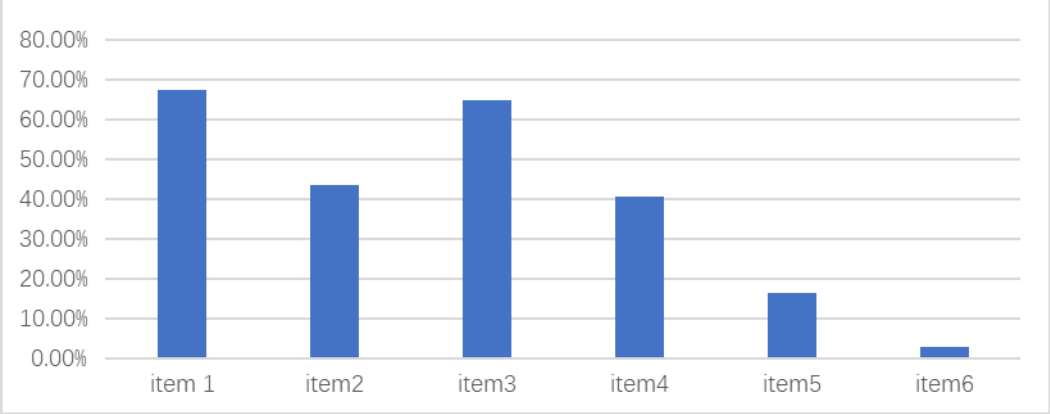


Fig. 1 The Factor of Causing Speaking Anxiety

Figure 1 showed that almost over 65% of participant students regarded item 1 and item 3 as dominant factors of causing English speaking anxiety which is 'lacking appropriate English using occasion' and 'unfamiliarity and insufficiency of English vocabulary'. Compared with items 1 and 3, items 2 and 4 were at the relatively inferior but still important stage in influencing students' English-speaking anxiety which is 'feeling anxious and shy when speaking in English' and 'having poor English listening competence'. Item 5 took the second to last proportion which is 'the fear of getting negative evaluation', and no surprisingly, there were over 90% of students who chose this option also chose item 2 (feeling anxious and shy when speaking). Item 6 refers to the 'others' option in the questionnaire. Some participant students successfully provided more details about this question. However, these details all pointed to lacking confidence in any occasion need to speak no matter in English or Chinese. To sum up, facing English speaking anxiety, students in high school put focus on language nonproficiency and psychological barriers, and language nonproficiency was at a dominant position.

3.2.2 New factors in non-participant observation

Interestingly, new factors emerged during non-participant observation. During the 15 chosen English classes, the author took detailed records and then found that speaking anxiety also relates to the degree of familiarity with speaking topics. When observing 15 English classes, the different topic made obviously different effects on students' speaking performance. Duration of speaking is an obvious index when the degree of familiarity changes. Figure 2 demonstrated the relation between familiarity and the duration of speaking.

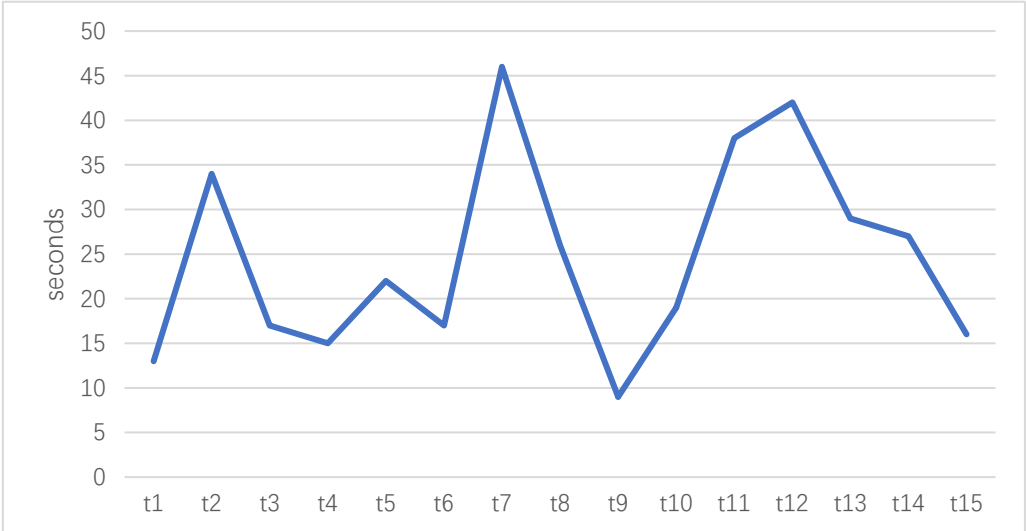


Fig. 2 The Duration of Speaking on topics

According to Figure 2, topic 1 (methods of first aid), 4 (natural disasters), and 9 (poems) were at the low position. Students' speaking duration on 1, 4, and 9 were between 9-15 seconds which to

some extent reflected students had less experience on these topics. On the contrary, topic 7 (healthy lifestyle), 11 (environmental protection), and 12 (sports and fitness), these daily mentioned topics were at a relatively high position. Students' speaking duration on topics 7, 11, and 12 was between 38-46 seconds.

3.2.3 Other factors

The author coded topics 1, 4, and 9 as the typical unfamiliar topics, and topics 7, 11, and 12 as familiar topics. Data showed how the familiarity of topics affects students' pace of speaking, and content of speaking (refers to key words around topics and the diversity of used sentence types). With the help of the otter app (version 3.19.0), students' speaking was transferred to text. In the unfamiliar topics, students' speaking pace is around 18 words per 10 seconds. Words like 'Uh-huh' happened with constant short intervals between two key words. Personal pronoun 'I' was used to starting a sentence frequently. Furthermore, subtle body language like avoiding eye contact, smoothing hairs, and settling ruffled clothes happened. In the familiar topics, the pace of speaking apparently increased to 24 words per 10 seconds approximately. The connection between the two key words became smoother, and the fluency improved. There were more diverse English sentence types during speaking. Sentences started with a gerund, infinitives, even rhetorical questions appeared. The frequency of conducting body language also decrease, especially the frequency of avoiding eye contact reduced.

Switching attention from inside classes to outside activities, in English corner, a more natural and free setting, the fluency and content of students' oral English increased surprisingly. Four students who had the most apparent improvement in speaking fluency and speaking content were invited to the interview. The reasons given by the four students were shown as below:

Student 1:

"I feel comfortable when I speak English only with my friend, and I'd love to practice new words and expressions with her. She is not the judging person."

Student 2:

"I like the English corner more than English class, because I can choose any interesting topics to practice my oral English. The topic in English class most of time are old and official."

Student 3:

"I speak English here because I have more time to prepare what I am going to say. Actually, I already had a rehearsal before I talk"

Student 4:

"Because my speaking partners are all my best friends, we are interested in many same topics. I don't feel stressed out when with them.

From the interview, the author found that a stable practicing partner benefits from releasing speaking anxiety. When students had the freedom to choose their practicing topics and the people surrounding them, speaking anxiety naturally decreased. In parallel, the more time for students to prepare, the less speaking anxiety they would have.

3.3. Methods Teachers Can Adopt

The third question of this research is 'What possible methods can teachers adopt to help students release their speaking anxiety?'. The results of this were summarized and concluded from the open-ended question in the questionnaire. Among the answers, more oral English activities, positive guidance, and encouragement were kept mentioning by participant students. Therefore, improving class activities design and creating more interesting outside class activities are the methods of optimizing students' speaking experience. Apart from increasing opportunities for English needed occasions, teachers should actively play the facilitating role in classes by giving more praise, eye contact, and positive feedback, especially when students are afraid of getting a negative evaluation or suffering from a serious psychological barrier in speaking. In official English classes, besides choosing an appropriate topic for English activities, allowing students to choose their practicing partners can also be an effective method to release their anxiety and panic.

4. Discussion

This research project was designed to find out the basic information about English speaking anxiety in participants' high school, factors causing students' speaking anxiety, and applicable methods to help release speaking anxiety. To achieve the aims of the research and answered research questions, the author conducted a qualitative study and utilized a questionnaire, non-participant observation, and one-to-one interviews to collect data. By combining students within class performance with outside-class performance, more new factors were revealed and emerged.

The finding of the first research question is beyond the author's expectations. According to question 4 in the questionnaire (see appendix), students were asked to rate their oral English level from 1-5 (one means the least satisfaction, five means the most satisfaction). The result of this question was shown as expected. Almost half of the students rated themselves as '3', and relatively close many students rated themselves '2' and '4'. Students who rated themselves '1' is slightly more than the '5' owner. In this typical normal distribution, students who rated themselves '3' and below are naturally assumed to have speaking anxiety. However, the result, 80.28% of students thought they are having speaking anxiety, which means there are large amounts of students who are satisfied with their speaking competence but still facing or suffering from speaking anxiety. And the reasons behind this phenomenon are really worth exploring.

Besides the proportion of students who are having speaking anxiety, the diversity of factors also impresses the author. English using occasions and the nonproficiency of English are the two key words among the factors. To help find the solutions to the current problems is not one-way considering. Lots of elements like the accessibility of the method, time limitation during the class, self-confidence, and outside evaluation all need valuing when teachers decided to take action. Hence, the way of releasing and solving speaking anxiety may never have one absolute answer.

5. Conclusion

According to the findings of the current study. speaking anxiety is a prevalent problem among Chinese high school students. The author explored the main factors of causing the speaking anxiety and found that nonproficiency in the language, psychological barrier, and unfamiliarity with the speaking topic are the three dominant elements that affect and cause the speaking anxiety among high school students. Using the two-dimensional construct of speaking anxiety, outside the classroom and within the classroom, as the experimental framework, the author was able to discover more potential factors of factors as the stability of speaking practice partners, time for preparation etc. These discovered factors contribute to helping teachers to take practical action to release anxiety. Creating more English-speaking occasions, allowing students to choose their own speaking practicing partners, giving more time for preparation, and choosing an appropriate speaking topic are the solutions to releasing anxiety from students' willingness, classroom observation, and interviews.

This research is limited by a relatively small sample size. If it is possible in the future that more not only students but teachers can join in and more authentic and valid could be collected and analyzed, more causing factors may be revealed and the big picture of speaking anxiety can be more complete.

Appendix

Questionnaire:

1. How often do you usually practice oral English?
a. Every day
b. 3-5 times a week
c. Less than 2 times a week
d. Never
2. How long do you usually spend on practicing oral English per week?

a. Less than one hour
b. 1-2 hours
c. 2-5 hours
d. More than 5 hours
3. Where do you usually practice oral English?
a. Morning reading period
b. English class
c. English corner
d. Practice with a stable partner
e. Others (please provide your preference)
4. Please rate your oral English (1-5, 1 the least satisfying, 5 the most satisfying)
5. Do you think you are having speaking anxiety currently?
6. Reasons for causing your speaking anxiety (multiple choices).
a. Lacking practicing occasion and experience
b. Psychological barrier, feeling shy, even scared when speaking English
c. Don't know much about the English vocabulary
d. Poor listening competence that you can't understand other people
e. Others (Please provide your details)
7. From your personal perspective, which below can help you release the speaking anxiety?
a. Engaging in more English needed occasion, practice it often
b. Turning to teachers and friends for help
c. Remembering more English vocabulary
d. Preparing what you would say in advance, then translating it into English
e. Hoping not many people pay attention to you while you speaking
f. Others (please provide your details)
8. What do you wish your English teacher could do to help release speaking anxiety?

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