

Revealing The Cause and Effect of Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety in Chinese College Students: A Review Study

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Abstract:

English language speaking anxiety is regarded as one of the most difficult challenges in the education and acquisition process. China is also noted for having a large number of English language learners. Still, the majority of them have foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA) while conveying their ideas verbally in the language. Although scholars and educators have conducted extensive and numerous studies to investigate this issue, particular attention to Chinese college learners' perspectives on the main causes and effects of speaking anxiety is still needed. Students' anxiety is a complicated notions that arise from a range of educational, sociocultural, and individual aspects. By synthesizing existing literature, this paper provides a comprehensive insight into the effects of FLSA, especially focusing on Chinese college learners for improving academic performance and students' well-being. This study provides valuable insights for future research on designing effective interventions and support systems to mitigate speaking anxiety among Chinese college students, thereby contributing to their holistic development and academic learning.

Keywords: Speaking anxiety; second language acquisition; higher education.

1. Introduction

Many Chinese college students face many challenges during the process of English as a Foreign Language Learning (EFL) in higher education, especially in speaking. Students frequently regard speaking as their most anxiety-producing experience compared to reading, writing, and listening [1]. Empirical analyses show that anxious foreign language learners are more unwilling to join in and reluctant to speak English in class most of the time. Scholars regard anxiety as one of the largest emotional factors in language acquisition, which has been a leading researcher in second language acquisition in China and abroad since the 1970s [2]. Foreign research on foreign language anxiety started earlier and has a history of more than 40 years; it started late in China and only received attention at the beginning of the 21st century [3]. However, there are fewer studies conducted and summarized the causes and effects of speaking anxiety in Chinese college students. There is a need for a systematic review to understand the predicaments Chinese college learners face.

This paper aims to delve into many elements that contribute to speaking anxiety among Chinese college students, exploring its underlying causes and effects employed by students. By synthesizing existing research findings and identifying gaps in the literature, this study seeks to shed

light on an often-overlooked aspect of student well-being and provide valuable insights for educators and support services striving to form a better inclusive and friendly learning environment.

2. Definition and Measurement of Speaking Anxiety

Anxiety is a negative way to present a person's emotions. In general, anxiety is an intricate and multidimensional phenomenon and can be described as the subjective feeling of nervousness, apprehension, uncertainty, and nervousness brought on by autonomic nervous system activation [4]. Compared with other affective variables, excessive anxiety has debilitating effects on students when learning and communicating in a foreign language, preventing people from perfectly performing in class and influencing students' adaptation to the target environment and, eventually, their academic achievements.

Concerning the categorization of anxiety related to foreign languages, the categories generally distinguish three sorts of anxiety: trait, situation-specific, and state anxiety [5]. With the development of Foreign language acquisition (FLA) studies, researchers like Gardner, Horwitz, and Cope have widely concurred that foreign language anxiety is situation-specific [6].

Horwitz et al. developed the idea of foreign language

anxiety [6]. Foreign language anxiety is composed of a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process [7]. The extant literature on FLA research uses two primary research methods: quantitative (such as surveys and evaluating bodily markers) and qualitative (such as interactive observation and interviews). Self-report surveys are among the most often used approaches [6, 8].

3. Causes of Chinese College Students' Speaking Anxiety

The previous part has established the conceptual framework of speaking anxiety about the definition and measurements. English learners and teachers are particularly interested in the causes of foreign language anxiety to help students feel less anxious and improve their spoken ability. Scholars and educators have identified various causes of FLA in literature over the past few decades. Many variables influence and contribute to second-language anxiety, including linguistic, psychological, and cultural concerns.

3.1 Educational Factors

3.1.1 Teaching approaches

Unlike American and Western education, which prioritize students' opinions and emphasize expression, Levinsohn concluded that Chinese learners emphasize listening, rote memory, and instructor guidance [9]. Chinese students have very limited opportunities to exercise their spoken English capacity, and their English proficiency is reflected in written tests. Therefore, there is an „input-deficient environment“ in Chinese college English classes. Most communication inside and outside the English class is conducted in the mother tongue. This is a key factor contributing to students' low spoken English proficiency and anxiety about public speaking. [10].

3.1.2 Linguistic difficulties

Linguistic difficulties, such as bad grammar, poor vocabulary, limited exposure, inaccurate pronunciation, and interlocutors' verbal inadequacy, are major causes of anxiety. These are regarded as the causes of FLSA. Sparks and Ganschow believed poor language learning capacity is the sole reason for FLA [11]. In a relevant study in China, Yan and Horwitz found that several personal attributes were required, such as good memorization, responsiveness to language, the capacity to imitate, and exceptional listening and speaking skills [12]. The lack of vocabulary remained another important cause for anxiety in English classrooms; in Liu's research, one interviewee reported that due to a lack of vocabulary, the majority of the learners will not know what to say and how to say it when not

knowing the proper English words they need [13]. Consequently, individuals will feel more apprehensive when speaking a foreign language. Language barrier as a major factor in FLSA is consistent with Brown's study, which found that language barrier contributes to students' poor oral performance due to weak English proficiency [14]. Ahmed also demonstrated poor grammar and vocabulary deficiencies. They found that students would remain reticent when speaking English due to a lack of vocabulary and unfamiliarity with grammatical norms [15].

3.2 Sociocultural Factors

FLSA derives mostly from the social and interpersonal aspects of English learning. Hence, it is also deemed as one of the social anxieties [6]. Yan and Horwitz's findings revealed that influencing factors included students' geographical background, which had never before been identified as a source of anxiety in the literature [12]. Students thought that regional disparities in dialects, education systems, and other sociocultural variables influenced their English proficiency levels. The problem of geographical disparities appears to be very significant in Chinese language acquisition, notably in Shanghai. One attendee claimed to have been astonished that the hotel doorman knew English.

Peer influence is also an essential element. The internal feelings and the thoughts of peers' or classmates' evaluations would constantly cause anxiety among students. In Yan and Horwitz's study, participants claimed that peers formed a type of language-learning environment, and if others studied more or did better, they also would be lifted [12]. In other words, they believed that the pace of others would affect their own. In line with these results, Liu and Chen's research found that students were most anxious when they found out that their friends or classmates had better English scores than theirs [13].

Another is fear of negative evaluation. Liu and Jackson questioned 547 non-English majors in China and discovered that most were unwilling to communicate in English in class but prefer privately [16]. More recently, Šafranč and Zivlak also confirmed that students who feared negative evaluation were more prone to FLA [17]. They also clarify that students have displayed varying amounts of language learning anxiety, independent of how they understand the scenario as a possible source of negative evaluation.

3.3 Individual Factors

3.3.1 Self-perception

As no other field does, Horwitz posited that language study uniquely threatens self-perception [7]. He suggests that performance in a second language challenges one's

sense of being a competent communicator, potentially leading to embarrassment. Young observed that students who perceive themselves as having low proficiency in a foreign language are particularly prone to anxiety in classroom settings [17].

3.3.2 Communication Apprehension

Regarding communication apprehension, speaking in class emerges as a common concern among anxious second-language learners [10, 17]. Horwitz et al. refer to this anxiety as communication apprehension in the context of second language performance [7].

4. Effects of Speaking Anxiety in Chinese College Students

Research has indicated that anxiety related to FLSA is not only prevalent among students, but it also poses several detrimental effects on their acquisition of foreign languages.

4.1 Academic Performance

Anxiety may set off a chain reaction of repercussions when learning English. It could cause learners to fall short of the tasks, make more mistakes, forget what had been taught, forget what they are prepared to say and how to say it, fail to speak English fluently or organize ideas clearly, become less confident and articulate and consequently unwilling to speak English [17]. Moreover, "overstudying" is also identified by MacIntyre as an effect of language anxiety. It refers to frequent reactions when students notice that he or she fail to get good scores because of anxiety [2].

Students' feelings towards English will also be affected. In Hong Kong, public English exams exacerbate classroom fears, including speaking components such as role-playing, topic debates, presentations, and group discussion performance. Therefore, when students practice their speaking skills at school while preparing for public exams, current classroom speaking anxiety will intensify, naturally affecting attitudes toward English [18].

4.2 Personal Effects

One of the most distressing symptoms of FLSA is a significant anxiety response in a language learner. Those who are anxious about language learning will often experience apprehension, worry, and even fear, as well as difficulty concentrating, becoming forgetful, sweating, and having palpitations [7]. Unfortunately, FLSA makes studying English difficult or miserable for students. Some learners are likely to be less inclined or terrified to speak out or engage in oral tasks due to FLSA. Liu's study discovered that the respondent used less social-emotional, fluency-oriented, and nonverbal techniques when talking with others in En-

glish due to her/his anxious level of communication [19].

4.3 Affective Effects

Due to the interconnected nature of affective variables, it is logical to suppose that FLSA, one of the most important components in language research, might impact other affective variables, including attitudes and motivation for language acquisition. This anxiety is likely to influence students' impressions of language acquisition. For instance, Liu and Huang found anxiety and students' motivation to learn English were negatively correlated. This suggests that anxiety could be crucial in shaping students' feelings and motivation towards language learning [20]. More recently, Shao et al. found that Chinese learners are more sentimentally fine-tuned, or less worried, in English lessons tended to judge their English proficiency more favorably [21].

5. Conclusion

It is important to discover techniques that might assist them in lessening their FLSA. However, many instructors lack knowledge and comprehension of the causes and effects of FLSA and its coping techniques and seldom consider ways to alleviate anxiety. One probable explanation is that FLSA has received little attention from both EFL teachers and students in China. This paper sorts out the cause-and-effect of Chinese college students' foreign language speaking anxiety, to promote the in-depth development of domestic FLSA study and the production and application of ontological research and applied research results on foreign language anxiety in China. By understanding the intricate interplay of these factors, educators, students, and parents can develop targeted interventions and support systems to alleviate speaking anxiety and promote student success. Additionally, this study highlights the significance of addressing speaking anxiety for enhancing academic performance and student well-being, emphasizing the need for holistic approaches in higher education settings. FLSA is clearly a complicated notion that remains a source of worry in language acquisition. Future research should continue exploring innovative strategies for Chinese learners, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and supportive learning environment.

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