

Two Major Factors that Lead to English Speaking Anxiety

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ABSTRACT

Teachers around China have reported students' reticence or stuttering in speaking English, which could partly be ascribed to students' English-speaking anxiety. This paper sought to identify the two major factors that lead to students' speaking anxiety, and the factors studied in this study include 1) Gender; 2) English Proficiency; 3) Parents' Education; 4) Learning Style; 5) Types of Classroom Activities. Quantitative data was collected from a total of 76 non-English major undergraduates in Yanshan University, using questionnaires. T-test, one-way ANOVA and regression analysis are used to analyze the statistics. English proficiency and types of classroom activities are found to be the two major factors that lead to English-speaking anxiety. Accordingly, the result suggests that more group work and pair work should be introduced in English class to ease students' English-speaking anxiety.

Keywords: *English Speaking Anxiety, English Proficiency, Learning Style, Types of Classroom Activities*

1. INTRODUCTION

Students in English class may engage themselves in negative self-talk, and they tend to feel stressed when they are asked to speak English during the class. The effect of the anxiety on foreign language learning has been explored since the 1970s. This study, which was situated in Chinese university classrooms, aims to investigate the two major factors that cause speaking anxiety in non-English majors to reduce students' scale of English-speaking anxiety. Multiple factors that might lead to non-English undergraduates English speaking anxiety have been studied by different scholars, and in this research, the following five factors will be closely examined, including 1) the learning style; 2) the gender of the target students; 3) target students' proficiency of English; 4) parents' education; 5) types of classroom activities. It is hypothesized that English proficiency and types of classroom activities are the two major factors that cause the speaking anxiety of non-English undergraduates.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Foreign Language Anxiety and Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety

Speaking had long been one of the most critical skills in English classes, and teachers have spent significant effort

in improving students' English-speaking skills. However, many foreign language teachers reported that students experienced certain unwillingness to speak or stuttering in a foreign language classroom. The term used to describe this phenomenon is anxiety, which could be defined as "the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of autonomic nervous system." [1]. However, the term "foreign language anxiety" was not discussed as a specific type of situational anxiety until 1986. Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope [2] stated "foreign classroom Anxiety" as a kind of tense, panic, and fear that foreign language learners may experience in the situation of a foreign language classroom. And the three interrelated components that consist of foreign language anxiety include 1) communication apprehension, which is the kind of timidity learners might feel when they face the situation of communication (listening, speaking in the public, etc.); 2) test anxiety, which is originated from learners' fear of being unable to achieve success or passing an exam; 3) fear of negative evaluation, which seems to be similar to test anxiety but is discussed in a broader sense and occurs in the social and evaluative situation [2]. However, these three components were challenged by some scholars. Aida [3] claimed that test anxiety could not be identified as a part that constructs foreign language anxiety since the test anxiety is more likely to be anxiety related to the learning behaviour itself rather than a foreign language. This argument was shared by Trang [4]. Considering foreign language anxiety was defined as situational anxiety, it is not surprising that different researchers may hold different interpretations and therefore have different opinions on the underlying constructs of foreign language anxiety. This study would

adopt the definition provided by Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope [2] because English speaking test has been included in general English tests in universities in China and test anxiety might play a role in students English speaking anxiety.

Based on the discussion on foreign language anxiety, scholars further researched the specified types of foreign language anxiety. Foreign language speaking anxiety was considered as the primary source of anxiety by some researchers. According to Guo and Xu [5], the speaking anxiety Chinese students have experienced was much higher than other foreign language anxieties, including listening anxiety, writing anxiety, and reading anxiety.

2.2. Variables

Since foreign classroom anxiety was identified as a separate type of anxiety, the background variables, including gender and actual language proficiency, which might attribute to the formation of foreign language anxiety is examined widely by researchers. And mixed results have been observed in the correlation between some variables and foreign language anxiety.

2.2.1. Gender

Although the relationship between gender and foreign language anxiety was closely examined by researchers, the contradiction still exists. Among the scholars claimed gender to be a leading factor in foreign language anxiety, there is a difference among their findings. Öztürk and Gürbüz [6] found that female students tend to have higher foreign language speaking anxiety levels, and Karatas et al. [7] had similar findings in Istanbul Technical University. On the other hand, Awan et al. [8] found that among 149 Pakistani university students, female students experience less speaking anxiety than male students. Guo and Xu [5] observed 453 university students in China and found that Chinese male students tend to have a higher degree of anxiety than female students. However, the exact number of female students and male students who took the experiment was not identified in their paper. Wang [9] came to a totally different conclusion. In the study among 240 university students in China (112 male and 128 female), no significant difference over English speaking anxiety was discovered.

2.2.2. English Proficiency

Another variable that was carefully studied is the language proficiency of students, and mixed results are still discovered by scholars. Some researchers reported that English proficiency level tended to play no significant role in foreign language speaking anxiety. However, Wang [9] and Liu [10] studied students in different proficiency group and found the speaking anxiety among students

differs significantly. According to Wang [9], students with lower English proficiency tend to have higher English-speaking anxiety. Liu [10] observed undergraduates in Taiwan and had close results that correlation exists in the student's language proficiency levels and language anxiety. Both Wang [9] and Liu [10] adopt students' performance in general English test as the criteria to categorize students into different proficiency levels. However, since the test used was not conducted by the government, the reliability of the findings might be hindered. Another study using an official and nationwide test as the criteria needs to be conducted the test the findings.

2.2.3. Parents' education

Parents' education, as one of the other background variables, was researched by a limited number of scholars. Awan et al. [8] found that students whose parents are more educated tend to be less anxious, although the relation between parents' education and English-speaking anxiety is not significant.

2.2.4. Types of Classroom Activities

Although many scholars studies students speaking anxiety scale in different classroom activities, the types of classroom activities were not identified as an individual factor that correlated to English speaking anxiety. Liu [11] concluded from observation that students might be less anxious if they were asked to work with others; however, whether the correlation between English speaking anxiety and types of classroom activities is significant is yet to be studied.

2.2.5. Learning Styles

The correlation between learning styles and anxiety in mathematics, computer, and statistics was widely discussed by different scholars. Ertekin, Dilmac, and Yazici [12] state that mathematics anxiety is significantly related to learning style. However, the impact of different learning styles was not closely examined in the foreign language speaking anxiety study yet.

2.3. Rationale for Study

Considering what has been discussed above, there are still limitations that exist in previous studies. First, although gender and language proficiency were examined by many scholars, the correlation between these two individual variables and English-speaking anxiety still fails to reach a definite conclusion. Second, the study of other variables, including parents' education, types of classroom activities, and students' learning styles, were limited. Third, the study on the weight of different variables was still blank.

Therefore, this study attempts to attribute to the further study of the correlation between gender and English speaking anxiety and the correlation between English proficiency and English speaking anxiety, to foster the study on the relationship between variables, including parents' education, learning styles, and types of classroom activities and English speaking anxiety.

3. METHODS AND MATERIALS

3.1. Research Questions

The study seeks to answer the following question: What are the two major factors that cause the speaking anxiety of non-English undergraduates?

3.2. Participants and Procedures

Seventy-six (57 female and 19 male) first year and second-year non-English major undergraduates in Yanshan University participated in the research, and 76 valid questionnaires were collected altogether.

The research has been conducted in two stages.

In the first stage, a two-part questionnaire is distributed to non-English undergraduates in Yanshan University. The whole questionnaire would cost students around 12 minutes. The first part is the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), which translated to Chinese to achieve a better understanding of students. The second part is a questionnaire about students' demographical information, including their gender, parents' education, and the scale of anxiety they feel in different classroom activities. The English proficiency of students will be evaluated by the marks they got in CET 4, which is a nationwide standardized test.

In the second stage, students were distributed with a VAK Model Questionnaire to decide their learning style. Answering this questionnaire would cost students around 5 minutes.

3.3. Research Instruments

Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), a background questionnaire, and VAK model questionnaire were adopted in the study.

4. RESULTS

The results of survey were computed using EViews (Econometrics views) in terms of mean, standard deviation, and T-test to investigate the relation between the scale of anxiety and possible factors (gender, parent education background and different proficiency levels). Regression Analysis was conducted to identify what kind of different

class activities made the students the most/least anxious. Analysis of ANOVA has tested the relationship between English speaking anxiety and learning style.

Table 1 Relationship between English Speaking Anxiety and Learning Style

Variables	Count	Mean	SD	T-test
Auditory	41	2.836	0.627	
Visual	8	2.952	0.428	
Kinesthetics	17	2.723	0.482	
Unclear	10	2.648	0.451	
All	76	2.798	0.555	0.063
P=0.614				

Table 1 gives an idea about the relationship between English speaking anxiety and learning style. According to the questionnaire, ten students cannot decide their learning style. The students' anxiety with different learning styles is higher than the mean anxiety (2.50) on the FLCAS. But as evidenced by P value (P=0.614), there is no significant difference between English speaking anxiety and learning style.

Table 2 Relationship between English speaking anxiety and types of classroom activities

Variables	Mean	Std. Error	P
Prepared individual presentation	2.657	0.067	0.049*
Group discussion	1.947	0.052	0.000*
Pair work	1.961	0.050	0.001*
Answer questions without preparation	2.592	0.069	0.028*
All	2.798	0.175	0.000*

* p<.05.

Table 2 indicates the students' anxiety in different classroom activities. As can be seen, the levels of anxiety have a significance in different classroom activities. P value(P=0.000) shows that different types of activity has a significant role in student anxiety. In all classroom activities, students feel more anxious (M=2.657) in prepared individual presentations and in answering questions when not prepared (M=2.592). Thus, individual working may increase the anxiety in speaking classroom.

Table 3 Results of comparison between English speaking anxiety and English proficiency

Variables	Count	Mean	SD	T-test
CET4 < 425	31	2.644	0.571	
CET4 ≥ 425	45	2.904	0.524	
All	76	2.798	0.555	-2.281
P=0.044*				

* p<.05.

Table 3 shows the role proficiency plays in English speaking anxiety. In Table3, the students with CET4 score ≥425 (the more proficient) have a higher mean score of 2.904 on the FLCAS. By contrast, the mean score of

students with CET4 score<425 (the less proficient) is 2.644. It indicates the more proficient students tend to be more anxious in speaking English. And as evidenced by the P-value(P=0.044) shown in Table 3., proficiency does play a significant role in students' speaking anxiety.

Table 4 Results of comparison between English speaking anxiety and parents' education level

Variables		Count	Mean	SD
Mother Education Level	Below/in Senior High School	46	2.801	0.566
	Over Senior High School	30	2.793	0.547
T-test=0.742 P=0.330				
Father Education Level	Below/in Senior High School	54	2.769	0.561
	Over Senior High School	22	2.919	0.521
T-test= -0.803 P=0.424				

As evidenced in Table 4, there is no relative difference between parents' education level regarding the anxiety score. The mean anxiety of mother education below or over Senior High School is 2.801/2.793(P=0.741), while the mean anxiety of father education below or over Senior High School is 2.769/2.919(P=0.424).

Table 5 Results of comparison between English speaking anxiety and gender

Variables	Count	Mean	SD	T-test
Male	57	2.766	0.569	
Female	19	2.894	0.512	
All	76	2.798	0.555	0.762
P=0.385				

Table 5 gives an idea of the general level of the students' anxiety. The level of the students' anxiety is 2.798, which is higher than the mean anxiety on the FLCAS. The mean anxiety of the male-students is higher than in the female students. The p-value is 0.3858, which indicates that both female and male students suffer from anxiety in English speaking, but there is no significant difference between English speaking anxiety and gender.

5. DISCUSSION

English proficiency and types of classroom activities are found to be the two major factors that lead to students' English-speaking anxiety. Thus, the hypothesis of this study is verified.

5.1. English Proficiency as a Major Factor

This study improves our understanding of the relationship between students' English proficiency level and students' English-speaking anxiety. The result suggests that there is significant relationship between English proficiency and students' English-speaking anxiety.

The current finding is inconsistent with the research conducted by Wang [9] and Liu [10]. One reason that contributes to this difference might be the different measures adopted to evaluate students' English proficiency. The other reason that might cause the difference is the test anxiety, which could be brought along with passing CET 4.

5.2. Types of Classroom Activities as a Major Factor

Furthermore, the study on the relationship between types of classroom activities and foreign language speaking anxiety might add to the understanding of the correlation between them since the types of classroom activities was seldom identified as an individual variable that may contribute to foreign language speaking anxiety.

The finding of this research is consistent with the findings of Liu [11]. Students are least anxious when they are in group work. The reason for this result might be ascribed to the classroom atmosphere. In China, classrooms are mostly teacher-dominant, and students might feel stressed in the teachers' presence. However, students only need to face their classmates in group work and pair work. Besides, students would not be judged during group work and pair work. On the other hand, students are confronted with the evaluation from teachers if they are asked to answer an unprepared question in class or conduct a prepared presentation. The fear of negative evaluation, which was claimed to be one of the components of foreign language anxiety by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope [2], might increase students' fear of negative evaluation or making mistakes and therefore increase students' anxiety scale.

5.3. Gender, Parents' Education, and Learning Styles as Minor Factors

Unlike the previous studies which discover that gender plays a significant role in English-speaking anxiety, the current study reveals that although female students have a slightly higher scale of English-speaking anxiety than male students, no significant relationship exists between gender and English-speaking anxiety. The reason to this finding might be the gender equality in China has been largely progressed in recent years, and in universities located in China, both male and female students receive almost equal attention from English teachers.

In the current study, the role that parents' education plays in English-speaking anxiety is parallel with the finding of Awan et al. [8]. Parents' education is not significantly

associated with students' English-speaking anxiety. In China, students share an equal chance to study a foreign language no matter what their parents' education level is according to compulsory education policy. In this context, the finding is justified.

Although learning style and mathematics anxiety are significantly associated with each other [12], learning style plays an insignificant role in English-speaking anxiety. However, research is needed to test this finding.

6. CONCLUSION

The present study attends to understand the two major factors that lead to students' English-speaking anxiety in China and identified English proficiency and types of classroom activities play significant roles in students' English-speaking Anxiety. In a practical English classroom, more group work and pair work could be designed by teachers to reduce students' scale of anxiety. Furthermore, since there are only five variables are examined in this study, more variables could be studied in the future research.

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