

A Brief Discussion on the Approaches to Relieve High School Students' Speaking Anxiety

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Abstract

Under the background of the new curriculum reform, higher requirements are put forward for the language abilities of students especially speaking ability. Speaking ability is one of the abilities that students must possess. Teachers are expected to help students to improve speaking ability. But there are many factors hindering the improvement of it, especially speaking anxiety. Teachers should optimize teaching methods in the teaching process, create a relaxing and harmonious oral environment for students, stimulate students' interest, so as to help students have confidence to speak English well and relieve speaking anxiety. Finally, the improvement of students' speaking ability can be achieved. This paper analyzes the reasons leading to students' speaking anxiety and offers some effective suggestions.

Keywords

High School Students; Speaking Anxiety; Speaking Ability.

1. Introduction

The English Curriculum Standard for Senior High School (2017 Edition) clearly points out that students' language skills, listening, speaking, reading and writing are required to be mastered. However, oral teaching is not only considered to be difficult but also largely overlooked. Although students are good at grammars and vocabularies, they may fail to express themselves fluently. The causes of this contradiction are believed to be highly related to speaking anxiety. It is of great importance for teachers to recognize that anxiety is a common problem for high school students in speaking English and to help them alleviate speaking anxiety. The speaking anxiety alleviation contributes to students' confidence-building, language acquisition, and speaking ability improvement.

2. Definition of Key Terms

2.1. Definition of Foreign Language Anxiety

Language anxiety is a complex psychological phenomenon to language learning. What is the definition of language anxiety? It holds different meanings for different researchers. Scovel (1978) describes anxiety as "a state of apprehension, a vague fear that is only indirectly associated with an object". Williams (1991) believes that foreign language classroom anxiety is a reaction in which students feel that the outside world demands beyond their own foreign language level and feel threatened. This threatened psychological or physiological emotion interferes with the students' attention on certain tasks. MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) held the opinion that foreign language anxiety means "a feeling of apprehension and fear associated closely with foreign language contexts including listening, speaking and learning."

2.2. Definition of Oral English Classroom Anxiety

Horwitz and Cope (1986) defined foreign language speaking anxiety as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process". According to Gregersen and Horwitz (2002), foreign language speaking anxiety includes communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation. In conclusion, foreign language speaking anxiety can be described as "a feeling of fear or nervousness when an individual is in a real or anticipated oral communication by using foreign language with other person or persons", which lead to worry and fear of the spoken English situation. The main manifestation is fear of making mistakes, and facing the situation of oral expression is easy to be nervous, uneasy, and afraid to speak English in public.

3. Factors Result in Speaking Anxiety

3.1. Factors from Students Themselves

3.1.1. Lack of Self-confidence

Lack of self-confidence is the biggest obstacle to students' success in oral communication in English learning. Students who lack self-confidence are often in bad psychological states such as nervousness, anxiety, irritability, fear, and restlessness. Most students with low confidence fail to speak English confidently in class. Besides, they are afraid of making mistakes and taking the initiative to raise their hands to speak, or they will become nervous when be asked. In addition, students are also afraid of negative reviews from teachers and classmates.

3.1.2. Personality Differences

Different students have different personality traits. Individual personality differences are mainly divided into two types, extravert type and introvert type. Normally, those extroverts seem to be more positive and active. Conversely, those introverted students lack confidence, and they tend to be silent in class, even if they are required to do any speaking activities, they always feel anxious and disturbed. Extravert learners usually dominate speaking classes, while introverted learners with low self-confidence don't dare to speak for fear of making mistakes in front of teacher and students.

3.2. Factors from Other Aspects

3.2.1. Difficult and Unfamiliar Learning Content

In the teaching process, if the learning topic set by the English teacher is very unfamiliar to students, due to the lack of relevant knowledge background, students have nothing to say, and eventually oral anxiety arises. However, if it is a topic that students often encounter in their daily life, students have a certain knowledge background accumulation, they can express their own views, and students who are in a more relaxing state will not feel anxious. In addition, if teachers provide very difficult topics for students to talk about, which will also cause speaking anxiety. As a result, students are reluctant to continue speaking, or they are more likely to make mistakes.

3.2.2. Inappropriate Correction and Feedback

It is found that feelings of anxiety become threatening when the teachers' ways of error correction are inappropriate. Untimely correction or inappropriate correction can seriously discourage students' motivation, especially in oral classes. For example, if the ultimate goal of oral tasks emphasizes fluency, during the process of accomplishing oral tasks, students make mistakes, then the teacher immediately interrupts the student's tasks, which will

discourage students' enthusiasm for continuing fishing tasks and cause speaking anxiety among students.

Besides, error correction is also divided into direct error correction and indirect error correction. However, when students make mistakes, most teachers will directly point out the students' mistake, and they will feel very anxious. Because they feel that they have lost face in front of their peers, leave a bad impression on others, and reduce their expectations as teachers or classmates. They will most likely not take the initiative to answer questions next time, and choose to withdraw, which is extremely detrimental to the development of students' speaking ability.

4. Measures to Relieve High School Students' Speaking Anxiety

4.1. Enhance Students' Self-confidence

Learning is closely linked to how people feel about themselves. Students' self-concept will influence their learning process. If students feel negative about themselves, they will be shy in class and do not dare to use the target language because of lacking self-confidence. On the contrary, if students feel positive about themselves, they will act actively in class and take risks to challenge themselves. It will be beneficial for teachers to encourage students to build self-confidence and praise students as much as possible. Teachers are expected to create an emotional environment containing trust and belonging, which enhances students' confidence and self-esteem. If students feel confident, they will be ready to use target language in the class and they will also have stronger willing to speak.

4.2. Design Different Speaking Activities According to Students' Personalities

Teachers should know that different students have different personalities and more importantly teachers need to apply different teaching techniques according to different students, especially for students who are disadvantaged in oral expression such as introverts. For these students, teachers can choose easier speaking tasks, and give them more time to prepare. In addition, more inspiration and encouragement should be given, so that students can gradually build self-confidence through positive feedback. At different stages of English teaching, classroom speaking activities should be enriched to improve students' self-confidence and effectively reduce their speaking anxiety. Individual differences should be taken into consideration while teaching plan being carried out. It is believed that each student can be taught well as long as taught properly.

4.3. Create Harmonious Classroom Atmosphere

Creating harmonious classroom atmosphere is clearly an essential prerequisite to English teaching and learning. The emotional filtering hypothesis proposed by Krashen's (1985) points out that the learner's emotional variables will be filtered by language input. When the learner is more motivated, less anxious and full of self-confidence, the amount of language filtering is low, so the effective input is obtained. As one of the important emotional variables in second language acquisition, language anxiety not only has a significant influence on language input, but also has a certain relationship with language learners' language output in public, especially spoken language. Therefore, in oral teaching, English teachers should actively create an equal, relaxing and harmonious classroom atmosphere which is conducive to mobilizing students' enthusiasm, cultivating their self-confidence, and relieving speaking anxiety.

4.4. Choose Speaking Topics that Students are Interested in or Familiar With

Different students have different language proficiency. Therefore, the choice and design of the speaking topic should be suitable for their language level. When choosing speaking

topics, teachers should take into account their comprehensive ability. Students should be familiar with or interested in the chosen speaking topics. Besides, teachers are supposed to use simple words to describe the task requirements and give students enough time to prepare. If there is an unfamiliar or difficult speaking task, students should be guided to learn some relevant vocabulary and expressions in advance. Teachers can schedule warm-up exercises before speaking so that students have something to say, enhance self-confidence, alleviate speaking anxiety, and make it possible for each student to participate in oral practice activities.

4.5. Conduct Group Cooperative Learning

The cooperative learning approach is believed to have positive impact on relieving students' speaking anxiety. Many students' oral anxiety results from the fear of making mistakes and being laughed by others. However, the form of group cooperation gives students time to think, discuss and practice before answering questions. In this way, the anxiety of students will be greatly reduced. Group work can also effectively avoid the tension caused by the teacher's roll call to ask questions and the anxiety of speaking alone in front of the whole class. Besides, students who share the same goals can work together, help each other and encourage each other, which can be seen as an effective way to alleviate the anxiety. With the help of cooperative learning, students are able to understand the significance of cooperation and build the confidence of speaking English.

4.6. Correct Mistakes Properly

Frequent mistake correction in answering questions can easily disrupt students' thinking and frustrate their self-confidence and enthusiasm, which leads to anxiety. Vigil & Oller's error correction theory (1976) states that during error correction, teachers must give positive feedback to students. Too much negative feedback, such as correcting mistakes at any time, and too much emphasis on formal errors, will make students have a psychological fear of communication. Therefore, for mistakes in students' oral expression, teachers should use more indirect error correction, such as guiding students to find mistakes on their own and correct themselves. Besides, after students correct the mistake, teachers should give them positive and supportive evaluation. At this time, students' anxiety will be reduced. Over time, the students' confidence in speaking English will increase, and the anxiety will disappear.

5. Conclusion

Speaking anxiety is one of important factors that hinder speaking improvement. English teachers should analyze the causes of anxiety and try every possible way to eliminate the causes of oral anxiety in the classroom, and actively adopt appropriate and effective teaching strategies to help to enhance students' self-confidence, stimulate students' initiative and enthusiasm in speaking English, gradually relieve their speaking anxiety, and finally promote the improvement of students' spoken English ability.

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