

Cause Analysis of English Speaking Anxiety in Chinese College Students

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Abstract

As globalization continues to expand, learning a foreign language has become an essential aspect of personal growth. However, negative emotions like anxiety, frustration, and fear can hinder learners' motivation and effectiveness during the learning process. This paper uses literature analysis to explore the causes of English speaking anxiety among Chinese college students and its impact on academic achievement. By examining relevant literature, this article aims to uncover the various factors contributing to English speaking anxiety and tries to provide implications for English teaching.

Keywords

English speaking anxiety, Chinese college students, causes and consequences, literature review.

1. Introduction

1.1. Research background

In the field of foreign language learning, learners' emotion has always been recognized as one of the important factors that affect the learning outcome. As research in educational psychology deepens, it has become increasingly clear that emotions, in addition to cognitive factors, also play a crucial role in the process of foreign language acquisition. Negative emotions, such as anxiety, frustration, and fear, are prevalent in all stages of language learning, particularly during tests, oral communication, and cultural adaptation. These emotions not only impact learners' motivation and self-confidence but also reduce the effectiveness of learning strategies, which ultimately hinders overall learning outcomes. Therefore, understanding how negative emotions influence foreign language learning and exploring effective coping mechanisms are of great theoretical and practical value in improving teaching quality and learning efficiency.

1.2. Problems statement and objectives

As globalization deepens, English has become an important language for international communication, business, science, and technology. Chinese college students, who are the backbone of future society, must have good spoken English skills for their career development and international communication. Moreover, in the job market, English speaking ability is often considered a crucial indicator of one's international competitiveness. Therefore, students with good oral skills have better employment opportunities and career development potential. The goals of university English teaching, proposed by the Chinese Ministry of Education, emphasize the development of students' comprehensive English application skills, especially listening and speaking skills. However, in actual teaching, oral teaching is often restricted by factors such as limited classroom time and traditional teaching methods, resulting in slow improvement of students' oral ability. Despite investing a lot of time and energy in English learning, many

students still suffer from varying degrees of anxiety in practical application, especially in oral communication. This anxiety may stem from excessive self-demand, lack of ability, and fear of negative evaluation. (Powell, D. et al, 2022)

Although there has been some research on speaking anxiety, there are relatively few studies on the causes and countermeasures of speaking anxiety for English majors. This suggests that there is still much room for research in this area, and further exploration is needed on how to effectively reduce students' speaking anxiety and improve their oral communication skills. Additionally, with the development of information technology, new teaching modes such as flipped classroom and online learning have brought new challenges and opportunities for foreign language teaching. How these changes affect students' speaking anxiety and how to utilize these technological tools to alleviate anxiety is also a hot topic of current research. This paper analyzes the causes of anxiety in spoken English through a literature review which can consolidate existing research findings, understand the theoretical frameworks in a given field and identify under-explored issues in existing research. And in the end, this paper will try to provide implications for English teaching.

1.3. Research purpose and significance

In the context of globalization, the ability to speak English is crucial for students' future international communication and career development. The study of speaking anxiety can help students better adapt to the international environment and enhance their international competitiveness. Additionally, English speaking ability is an important aspect of students' overall quality, and studying speaking anxiety can promote their development in language ability, communication skills, and intercultural communication. Understanding the causes of speaking anxiety can also help educational institutions allocate teaching resources more effectively, such as increasing opportunities for speaking practice and providing psychological counseling, to support students' speaking learning. Furthermore, speaking anxiety not only affects learning outcomes but may also have a negative impact on students' mental health. Studying speaking anxiety can help schools and teachers pay attention to students' mental health and provide necessary psychological support and intervention. Research on speaking anxiety can inspire teachers to explore new teaching methods, such as task-based teaching, cooperative learning, and technology-assisted teaching, to adapt to students' learning needs and improve teaching effectiveness.

2. Literature review

Learning a foreign language is a complex cognitive and emotional experience that involves a range of rich and intricate emotional processes. Learners often experience negative emotions such as anxiety, shame, and burnout. Since Krashen introduced the affective filtering hypothesis in 1985, anxiety has been recognized as a major psychological factor that hinders language acquisition. This has become a hot topic for researchers of bilingual grammar acquisition both domestically and abroad. American psychologists Horwitz et al. (1986) were the first to discover the phenomenon of foreign language learning anxiety and coined the term "foreign language learning anxiety". This refers to the learner's unique and complex self-awareness, beliefs, emotions, and behaviors related to learning outside the classroom, due to the unique nature of the foreign language learning process.

2.1. English learning anxiety

The study of English learning anxiety has garnered significant attention both domestically and internationally. Researchers have investigated the various impacts of anxiety through diverse approaches and have proposed corresponding pedagogical recommendations. Nevertheless, this field requires further comprehensive research, particularly on how to more effectively

manage and alleviate English learning anxiety in the face of diverse teaching and learning environments and constantly evolving educational technologies.

In recent years, there has been a significant increase in research on the anxiety associated with learning English. This research covers a wide range of topics, including ontology, synthesized approaches, applied methods, correlations, influencing variables, and experimental pedagogy. According to Jia Lili (2022) and Cong Yu and Xing Jiaxin (2021) the research approach primarily relies on empirical inference, complemented by a concurrent scholarly investigation. The primary focus of our research is on undergraduate students who are enrolled in academic institutions, with a particular emphasis on those studying disciplines other than English. These studies delve into the anxiety of students from diverse backgrounds, grades, and disciplines in the acquisition of English. The study examines the various facets of English language learning anxiety, including its categorization, its impact on foreign language acquisition, the origins of its genesis, and strategies for reducing it to enhance the efficacy of learning. Researchers have also explored the interconnectivity between anxiety and learning strategies, as well as the specific impact of anxiety on learners' linguistic skills in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The methodologies used in this research include questionnaire surveys, interviews, and experimental designs. These methods facilitate the quantification and qualitative analysis of learners' anxieties, as well as the investigation into the interrelation between anxiety and academic achievement. Despite the abundance of research on English learning anxiety, there are still certain challenges, including the singularity of the study subjects, the limitations of the research methodologies, and the assessment of the efficacy of intervention measures for anxiety. Future inquiries may further explore the manifestations of anxiety amidst diverse cultural contexts and explore how the integration of information technology (such as online learning platforms) can alleviate learners' anxieties. The findings of this research have profound implications for the practice of English instruction, offering teachers insights into the mental states of their students and enabling them to devise more effective pedagogical strategies, such as fostering a positive classroom ambiance, employing varied assessment methods, and providing personalized educational support, all designed to reduce students' anxieties and enhance the efficacy of their English studies.

2.2. English speaking anxiety

The anxiety that English language learners experience when speaking significantly affects their ability to learn the language. This issue has received a lot of attention from researchers, who have explored the causes, consequences, and ways to alleviate English oral anxiety from various perspectives. Those studies focus on measuring, identifying the origins of, identifying influential variables on, and developing strategies to alleviate English speaking anxiety. The researchers examined the impact of individual factors such as self-confidence and self-expectations, classroom activities, teacher behavior, and social pressure on English speaking anxiety. They collected data using various research methods to examine the correlation between anxiety levels and linguistic performance, as well as the impact of anxiety on fluency, vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. Studies have found a significant inverse correlation between the level of English oral anxiety and the attainment of oral proficiency (Wang Chunxiao and Wang Yuefang, 2008). Most college students experience English speaking anxiety, which means that the level of tension is inversely proportional to the fluency and coherence of speech evaluation metrics, which are indicators of fluidity and coherence, respectively. Pronunciation has a relatively minor correlation with anxiety (Xu Chuyan et al., 2023). These scholarly findings have significant implications for the practical application of English education. They may provide teachers and students with valuable insights into oral anxiety, enabling the creation of more effective teaching strategies and learning methods that can mitigate students' oral anxiety and enhance their communicative competence in speech.

3. Causes of English speaking anxiety

The English speaking anxiety inherent in conversational situations is a pervasive phenomenon, precipitated by an array of elements, with domestic scholars offering their unique perspectives on this issue. It is suggested that students may have unrealistic expectations of themselves, striving for mastery in oral expression which can lead to anxiety when reality does not meet their expectations (Hu Juan, 2019). And the author also stated that students with limited proficiency in English may struggle to articulate their perspectives, exacerbating their anxiety. Mak (2011) found that concerns about unclear pronunciation, grammar, or expression, as well as the fear of making mistakes or being judged negatively by others, are also common causes of verbal anxiety. While some scholars pointed out that when conversing with others, especially those who speak a different language, one may feel apprehensive about being misunderstood or not understanding the other person (Wu Wensheng and Lu Jiamei, 2013). Wang Yiqing (2010) also suggested that unfamiliarity with the culture of the target language can lead to communication challenges and subsequent anxiety. Besides, the traditional teacher-centered approach to teaching may limit opportunities for students to practice speaking, leading to anxiety. The tense classroom atmosphere may also discourage students from speaking. Without adequate preparation, the fear of not being able to express oneself fluently can also cause anxiety (Lee et al, 2021; Xiong Huilan, 2007).

Based on the above, we can broadly categorize these factors into three groups, namely, individual psychological factors, teaching and learning environment factors, and cultural and social factors.

3.1. individual psychological factors

3.1.1. Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy refers to an individual's confidence in their ability to successfully complete a task in a given situation. In the context of English language learning, this involves learners' confidence in their ability to communicate orally using English. If learners lack confidence in their oral expression skills, their low self-efficacy may cause them to feel uneasy and anxious during actual communication. This anticipation of difficulty in oral communication may lead to an excessive concern about their inadequacies, resulting in anxiety. Learners with low self-efficacy tend to fear failure, which may cause them to resist oral practice and actual communication due to their fear of performing poorly. This fear and resistance can exacerbate feelings of anxiety. Additionally, learners with low self-efficacy may be particularly sensitive to the evaluations of others and worry that their oral expression will be evaluated negatively. This fear of social evaluation can make them feel nervous and anxious when taking on speaking tasks. In contrast, learners with high self-efficacy are usually better able to regulate their emotions and maintain a positive attitude when facing challenges. Self-efficacy also affects learners' choice and use of learning strategies. Learners with low self-efficacy may tend to avoid using effective learning strategies, such as actively participating in class discussions or seeking additional speaking practice opportunities, which may hinder their speaking ability improvement and increase anxiety.

3.1.2. Personality

Personality traits have a significant impact on how individuals perceive and evaluate themselves, particularly in regards to introversion, extroversion, self-esteem, and self-efficacy. For instance, introverted individuals may feel uncomfortable in social situations, leading to excessive focus on self-presentation during oral communication in English, which can result in anxiety. Similarly, individuals with low self-esteem and self-efficacy may lack confidence in their speaking ability, leading to anxiety during actual communication. Personality also influence an individual's tendencies and behaviors in social interactions. Extroverts may be

more willing to engage in conversation, while introverts may prefer to listen. In oral English learning, this can lead to more practice opportunities for extroverts, while introverts may feel anxious due to a lack of practice. Different personality also affect how individuals react to stress. Some individuals may be more prone to stress, which can manifest as anxiety during spoken English tasks. For example, those who are prone to nervousness or worry may feel particularly anxious during speaking tests or public speaking. Additionally, more adventurous individuals may be more willing to try new expressions, even if they make mistakes, while risk-averse individuals may avoid using spoken English for fear of making mistakes, leading to anxiety. Adaptable individuals are more likely to adjust to new environments and challenges, including language learning. Conversely, individuals who are less adaptable may feel uneasy in the face of changes in the language environment, which can lead to anxiety. Effective communication skills can help alleviate anxiety by enabling individuals to express themselves more effectively. Personality traits such as cooperativeness and the strength of communication skills directly affect an individual's confidence level in oral communication, which in turn affects their level of anxiety.

3.1.3. Motivation

Highly motivated students often have high expectations for their own learning outcomes. When it comes to oral English learning, these high expectations can lead to anxiety during oral practice and actual communication. They worry that their performance won't meet their own standards or satisfy the expectations of others. Learning motivation is closely related to self-efficacy. Highly motivated students may believe that they can improve their speaking ability through hard work, but this belief may be challenged if they encounter difficulties during actual practice, resulting in anxiety. Conversely, if students lack confidence in their speaking ability, even if they are highly motivated to learn, they may avoid speaking practice for fear of failure, which can also lead to anxiety. Additionally, highly motivated students may be more willing to try new learning strategies and challenges, including speaking English in unfamiliar environments. This risk assessment can cause them to feel anxious in the face of the unknown and possible failure. Motivated students may be more inclined to participate in class discussions and group activities to improve their speaking skills. However, these social interactions can cause additional stress, especially if there is a fear of being judged or misunderstood, which can cause anxiety.

3.2. Teaching and learning environment factors

3.2.1. Teaching methods

Teaching methods play a crucial role in the learning of oral English, and inappropriate teaching methods can cause or worsen students' anxiety when speaking. Teaching methods that do not consider the learner's personality, learning style, and language level can make learners uncomfortable during speaking practice, leading to anxiety. For example, introverted learners may feel uneasy in group discussions, while extroverted learners may feel frustrated in an environment that lacks interaction. Additionally, some teaching methods may focus too much on correcting students' mistakes, causing them to worry excessively about making mistakes during oral expression, which can lead to hesitation and anxiety when speaking. Furthermore, teaching methods that do not provide enough opportunities for oral practice can prevent students from adequately applying what they have learned, leading to a lack of confidence in actual communication and creating anxiety. Similarly, frequent speaking tests and strict evaluation criteria can cause students to feel anxious about failing or not meeting standards, which can inhibit their oral expression and affect learning effectiveness. Finally, when the teaching content does not align with students' real-life situations and future application scenarios, students may question the purpose and usefulness of oral learning, leading to anxiety.

3.2.2. Classroom interactions

During classroom interactions, students may feel anxious about being evaluated by their peers or teacher. This fear of negative evaluation can cause nervousness and hesitation when speaking. Additionally, students may become overly self-conscious about their pronunciation, grammar, or vocabulary, which can further hinder their oral expression. For introverted or socially anxious students, classroom interaction can be a daunting social challenge, amplifying their anxiety in the spoken English classroom. Without encouragement and support, students may choose to remain silent to avoid making mistakes, which can lead to prolonged silence and increased anxiety. Teachers' attitudes and approaches can also affect students' anxiety levels. A strict or unsupportive teacher can create pressure and anxiety, whereas a supportive and encouraging teacher can help students build confidence and reduce anxiety.

3.3. Cultural and social factors

3.3.1. Cultural differences

Students may feel anxious because they lack a sense of identity with the target language and culture. When students are unfamiliar with or do not understand the cultural practices, values, and communication styles of English-speaking countries, they may feel confused and uneasy when trying to communicate in English. Cultural differences can also cause difficulties in cross-cultural communication, such as not understanding the rules of non-verbal communication (body language, eye contact, etc.), which can lead to misunderstandings and communication barriers in oral communication, resulting in anxiety. Additionally, there may be significant differences between English and Chinese in terms of expressions, polite phrases, and directness. These differences can cause students to feel uncertain when expressing themselves in spoken English and worry that their expressions will not be accepted or understood. In our culture, direct expression of personal opinions or criticisms may be seen as impolite, whereas in English communication, direct and honest expression is often encouraged. This cultural difference can lead to students' anxiety when expressing themselves in spoken English as they worry that their words and actions will be seen as inappropriate. At the same time, students may be overly concerned about their pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary choices when learning to speak English, fearing that mistakes in these areas will be noticed by native English speakers. This self-consciousness can be amplified in cross-cultural communication, as students may be more sensitive to evaluations brought about by cultural differences.

3.3.2. Social expectation

In the era of globalization, English has become a crucial tool for international communication. It is widely believed that possessing good oral English proficiency is an important indicator of one's career development and international competitiveness. However, this social expectation can create pressure for learners who worry that their English proficiency may not meet the standards. Many industries and professions require a certain level of oral English proficiency, which can make learners anxious when preparing for interviews, job presentations, or international meetings. They fear that their lack of speaking ability will negatively impact their career prospects and job performance. Furthermore, the education system places a strong emphasis on English grades and speaking ability. Students may become anxious when faced with activities such as oral English tests and speech contests due to the fear of poor grades or underperformance. Additionally, the display of fluent spoken English in the media and popular culture may inadvertently raise public expectations of spoken English proficiency, making learners feel less confident in actual communication and worry that they will not be able to achieve this ideal. In our country, learners may lack sufficient practice opportunities to improve their speaking skills. This lack of language environment, coupled with high societal expectations of spoken English, may also lead to learners feeling anxious when they need to communicate in English.

4. Discussion and conclusion

4.1. Implications for English teaching

To reduce oral English anxiety caused by teaching methods, teachers should adopt personalized and flexible teaching strategies, create a positive and inclusive learning environment, and encourage students to learn and improve by doing. Teachers should also adjust their evaluation methods, focusing on the process rather than the results, to help students build self-confidence and reduce anxiety. Creating a supportive and inclusive classroom environment involves encouraging students to experiment and make mistakes, providing interactive activities that suit different learning styles and needs, emphasizing the learning process and progress, encouraging cooperative learning, enhancing opportunities for oral practice through group discussions and role-playing, and giving positive feedback at the right time. To reduce students' oral English anxiety caused by cultural differences, teachers can incorporate cross-cultural communication into their teaching, provide diversified communication opportunities for students to practice oral English in a safe environment, and gradually build up their self-confidence. Teachers should focus on the process rather than the result when evaluating students' speaking, reduce students' worries about mistakes and evaluations, and provide support and encouragement to help them overcome the challenges posed by cultural differences and improve their oral communication skills.

The education system should adjust its objectives to focus more on practical application skills and create more opportunities for English speaking practice, such as international exchange programs and language corners. Students should recognize that everyone's learning progress and approach is unique and not worry too much about comparing themselves with others. The media can present a more balanced picture of English speakers with different levels of proficiency and reduce the over-promotion of perfect spoken English. Schools can also provide counseling and support to help students manage anxiety and develop a positive attitude towards learning.

4.2. Conclusion

Future research should explore the intersection of spoken English anxiety with other disciplines, such as psychology, education, and sociology, to gain a more comprehensive understanding and solution. For instance, cognitive science can be combined to examine how anxiety affects language processing and memory, while a socio-cultural perspective can be used to explore the social roots of anxiety and cultural differences. Although there have been many theoretical explorations of anxiety in spoken English, empirical studies are still lacking. Future studies can adopt diverse research methods, such as long-term tracking studies and case studies, to verify theoretical assumptions and provide specific practical guidance. In the context of globalization, international comparative studies can be conducted to explore the differences in spoken English anxiety among students in different countries and regions, as well as the cultural, educational, and social factors behind these differences. This will provide educators with more strategies to alleviate students' oral English anxiety and policymakers with a scientific basis for more effective language education policies and practices.

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