


The Impact of Foreign Language Anxiety on the Acquisition of Oral English Proficiency for
EFL College Students in China

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Abstract

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Under the Supervision of James E Romesburg, PH.D.

The seminar paper explores the different factors that may affect oral communication for EFL students in college based on other authors' researches. However, the psychological factor, foreign language anxiety, has often been neglected. Therefore, I continued to deeply research whether unwillingness to communicate and foreign language anxiety influence oral English proficiency. Finally, I came up with the solutions for teachers to help students to eliminate the communicative uneasiness and make them speak English confidently in public.

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Chapter I Introduction

Nowadays, English is undoubtedly spoken as one of the most prominent international languages in the world, and it is widely used in many countries. However, many college students in China do not have a good command of oral English, though they have been learning English for several years. This phenomenon is very common in China. Liu and Jackson (2008) stated that EFL (teaching English as a foreign language) college students might be unwilling or feel anxious about speaking English in public. Their unwillingness to communicate and their FL (foreign language) anxiety can significantly affect their willingness to have access to English and the effects of their English proficiency gains (p.82). Therefore, we need to establish effective strategies to eliminate their foreign language anxiety and stimulate the students to enhance the oral communication in China.

Statement of the Problem

In China, most EFL college students learn English by mainly focusing on grammar and vocabulary to pass exams, which involves reading, listening, and writing. Therefore, in the non-English speaking environment, students may not improve their quality of oral expression. Actually, the factor of foreign language anxiety is often neglected. Young (1991) stated that Horwitz and Cope were the first to consider that foreign language anxiety should be treated as a separate and distinct phenomenon, especially during language learning (p.427). According to Liu and Jackson (2008), their (the students') unwillingness to communicate and their FL anxiety were significantly correlated to their self-rated English proficiency and access to English (p.82).

Definition of Terms

Liu and Jackson (2008) defined Foreign Language anxiety as “a complex, multidimensional phenomenon,” and they drew on Macintyre and Gardner’s statement (1994) to

illustrate this term, referring to "the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language (L2) contexts, including speaking, listening, and learning" (p.72).

Purpose of the Study

This paper aims to analyze the causes of foreign language anxiety for college EFL students in China, and find out appropriate strategies to eliminate their uneasiness of oral communication. For example, Young (1991) stated, "One of the current challenges in second and foreign language teaching is to provide students with a learner-centered, low-anxiety classroom environment" (p.426).

Significance of the Study

A. The study will help reveal the relationship between foreign language anxiety and oral English communication.

B. The study can also encourage EFL college students to communicate in English freely, and make significant progress on their quality of oral English communication.

Methodology

For the secondary research, I consulted five electronic databases and reviewed 21 articles based on previous researches in the field about the aspects or factors influencing oral English communication such as pronunciation, intonation, vocabulary, grammar, thinking, and English learning environment. However, they may often neglect the psychology factor—foreign language anxiety. Therefore, I continued researching the relationship between foreign language anxiety and oral English communication, which helped me to figure out if language anxiety has a negative influence on the quality of communication. In addition, I found out the causes, which led to foreign language anxiety. I especially paid more attention to foreign language anxiety in order to discover effective strategies to solve this problem. This secondary research was

conducted in and through the Karrmann Library at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville via the Internet through EBSCO host, JSTOR, Project Muse, Google Scholar and CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure) as the primary sources. Key search topics included “EFL,” “FL anxiety,” and “oral English communication.”

Conclusion

This paper may help college EFL students overcome the psychological disorder, foreign language anxiety, to communicate more freely with others.

Chapter II Review of Literature

Nowadays, English is widely used in our daily life at school or at work in China. More and more people realize the importance of speaking English, and oral English plays an important role in English learning. The traditional class focusing on teaching grammar may not better develop students’ oral English ability. Wang and Li (2013) stated that college English learners spend more time on the input of language knowledge instead of the output aspect in language practice, which leads to the common phenomena— “dumb English.” Therefore, a great number of researchers study the reasons which may affect oral English learning of EFL students. Wang (2014) claimed, “Speaking competence mainly covers speaking accuracy and fluency” (p.110). He drew on the statement of Yuan and Ellis (2003) to describe speaking accuracy as “the extent to which the language produced conforms to target language norms,” which includes the correct use of pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar (p.110). As to speaking fluency, he believed that it indicates the ability to produce the spoken language without too much pausing or hesitation. Too many hesitations and pauses in speaking may obstruct the speaking fluency and also depress the speaker (p.110). Hunter (2011) agreed, “A perennial struggle for teachers is how to develop both accuracy and fluency in students’ speaking since one often seems to come at the

expense of the other” (p.30). Wang (2014) cited the statement of Skehan and Foster (1999), “Over-focus on accuracy may result in the lack of fluency, and too much emphasis on fluency may lead to the lack of accuracy.” Therefore, he said that Chinese EFL learners needed to keep a balance between speaking accuracy and fluency” (p.111).

Speaking Accuracy

Hunter (2011) came up with a question: “If they practice pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar, will they use them spontaneously and correctly when necessary?” (P.30). Actually, Wang (2014) stated that learners might often make mistakes when they have face-to-face communications with “hesitations, false-starts, grammatical inaccuracies and limited vocabulary” (Hughes, 2002, p.77). In this way, both their speaking fluency and accuracy may be affected (p.111).

Pronunciation

Wang and Li (2013) maintained, “Pronunciation is a very essential part in oral English practice” (p.66). Marza (2014) also stated that good pronunciation is a key aspect to understanding and making ourselves understood. It should play an important role in EFL English learning and the teaching process because it is directly related with the development of students’ oral English communication competence, which may help to improve their language proficiency and comprehensibility (p.262). Wang (2014) agreed, “Chinese and English differ a lot in sounding systems, so those pronunciations which do not exist in Chinese cause great difficulty for Chinese EFL learners” (p.111). Wang and Li (2013) claimed that English has consonant clusters and consonants in words, which can be linked in free position at the end of words or syllables. The way and boundary of phonemic continuity during talking, which mainly shows in English conversation, show consecutive syllables are smooth and uninterrupted and the

boundaries between syllables and words cannot be heard clearly. However, Chinese is different. Most Chinese syllables begin with consonants, with a few exceptions of vowels. What is more, there are few true Chinese vowels, which are mostly preceded by a glottal stop, so it cannot be connected with the ending consonants to pronounce, such as the staccato sound in music (p.65). Liu (2011) stated that many EFL students have heavy regional accents, which will affect their oral English greatly because that will make listeners confused (p.1). Wang and Li (2013) believed, “Due to some objective reasons, such as the district factors, students in the southern part of China seem to meet much more difficulties than other areas causing some psychological obstacles in oral English communication” (p.66). In addition, Wang (2014) agreed, “Mispronouncing a single sound will result in the listener’s misunderstanding, and different stresses as well as intonations lead to totally different meanings” (p.111). According to the results obtained, Marza (2014) believed that students are encouraged to know the significance of how to pronounce properly, otherwise, they probably will not be able to be understood, which may lead to broken communication (p.271). Wang and Li (2013) stated, “some students did not cultivate a good habit of imitating at the initial stage of oral English learning, over time, with their study focus shifted; it is hard for them to correct the customary pronunciation habit” (p.66).

Intonation

Wang and Li (2013) claimed that intonation refers to the way the voice rises and falls as we speak, which students often ignore in oral English. Different intonation may express different emotional color, attitudes, mood, and even different meanings. The proper use of intonation can also be considered as a kind of speaking skill conveying information in a concise, authentic way (p.66).

Vocabulary

According to Liu (2011), EFL students do not accumulate enough vocabularies, so they cannot use appropriate words to express themselves (p.1). Wang (2014) said that it is essential for Chinese EFL students to input enough vocabulary, just like the bricks to a building, into their long-term memory. Otherwise, learners can hardly convey their ideas in oral English. He also mentioned that the ability to recall these words and expressions could strengthen their speaking fluency (p.111).

Grammar

Liu (2011) claimed that grammar is another problem. English word sequences are different from those of Chinese. Therefore, it is often that native English speakers may feel confused when EFL English learners speak English following the Chinese grammar (p.1). Wang (2014) stated learning the accurate use of grammar does not equal correctly using it in one's speech. That is the reason why some students are good at grammar in reading and writing but they may often make mistakes in their spoken English (p.111).

Thinking

Rybold (2010) maintained, "Cross-cultural comparisons suggest that Chinese thinking and Western thinking represent value differences at their roots" (p.5). Liu (2011) stated that EFL students often tend to use Chinese thoughts to translate Chinese into English. They may also easily speak English in a Chinese way, when actually an English native speaker would never speak it in that way (p.1). Li (2010) agreed, "Most students just put what they have learned in books into their daily communication or just translate Chinese into English in their conversation, thus lots of misunderstanding emerge" (p.69).

English Learning Environment

Liu (2011) believes that many EFL students' oral English communication ability is not excellent, even though they have access to English for several years and have already grasped plenty of vocabulary and had a good grasp of grammar. That is because they have fewer chances to practice what they learn in their class (p.1). Gao (2011) stated that English teaching in Chinese colleges is aimed to improve the examination skills, as listening, reading, and vocabulary. In this way, everything is prepared for examination rather than real ability. Thus, students may easily have a passive attitude in which they may study only just before exams. It is very common that they recite a great number of words for the section of reading and vocabulary, but cannot make sentences and have correct pronunciation for speaking (p.141).

According to Wang and Li (2013), it is predominant in students' learning process that students often focus on the input process. They pay more attention to whether they can understand the reading, listening, and watching materials, but it is an interesting phenomenon that they cannot even translate very simple Chinese sentences into exact English. This is because they neglect the language output that English should be learned and used for communicating in their daily life from the beginning (p.68).

Speaking Fluency

Liu (2011) stated, "We have to pay more attention to practical communicating ability instead of only laying emphasis on the grammatical correctness" (p.2). Shumin (2002) believed, "students must understand how words are segmented into various sounds, and how sentences are stressed in particular ways. Thus, grammatical competence enables speakers to use and understand English-language structures accurately and unhesitatingly, which contributes to their fluency" (p.207). On the other hand, Jr and Stout (2014) claimed student conversations often

contain long gaps of silence, short answers, and rigidly follow questions-answer sequence (p.12). Shumin (2002) said that learning to speak a foreign language requires not only knowing its grammatical and semantic rules but also how native speakers use the language in specific contexts with many factors interacting. That is the reason why EFL adult learners have difficulty in speaking the target language fluently and appropriately (p.204). Wang and Li (2013) stated that it is often hard to find the corresponding equivalence of Chinese meaning when we speak English. Still, we should not be bothered by it or stopped by any unfamiliar words, which may help us solve this problem (p.68).

Foreign Language (FL) Anxiety

However, as to the obstacles of oral English proficiency, many people neglect effective or psychological factors. He and Zhang (2010) cited Cook (2002) that EFL learners living in English-speaking countries or the ones taught by native-speaking English teachers can speak English in American or British accents while most of the English learners in China find it impossible to achieve that. In this way, it is a common phenomenon that the EFL learners are unwilling to use the language because they feel frustrated by an impossible target (p.773). Some individuals exhibiting the hesitance to respond in the target language may negatively have terrible language outcomes (Knell & Chi, 2012, p.69). Because of this, Liu and Jackson (2008) came up with the term Foreign language (FL) anxiety, which they defined by drawing on the statement of Macintyre and Gardner(1994, p.284) as “the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language [L2] contexts, including speaking, listening, and learning” (p.72). Liu and Jackson (2008) also cited Burgoon’s statement (1976) that the phenomenon that people exhibit the tendency of unwillingness to communicate originates from a variety of causes and he considered that they include “apprehension, low self-esteem, lack of

communicative competence, anomie, alienation, and introversion” (p.71). According to Wang (2014), anxiety is the effective factor that Arnold and Brown (1999, p.8) described as the “most [pervasive obstruction in] the learning process” because people may worry about being in a situation that Brown (2001, p.269) described as “wrong, stupid, or incomprehensible,” which may greatly affect learners’ speaking performance (p.111). Liu (2006) agreed, “Horwitz is one of the earliest and most prominent figures to investigate foreign language anxiety,” and Liu (2006) stated that Horwitz et al. (1986) proposed foreign language anxiety includes three components: “communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation” (p.302).

Communication Apprehension

Subaşı (2010) drew on the statement of Horwitz et al. (1986), “Communication apprehension is a type of shyness characterized by fear of anxiety about communicating with people” (p.31). Wang (2014) stated that a large number of Chinese EFL students are rather nervous in class, especially when they are asked to speak in class without any preparation. Too much nervousness makes learners “tongue-tied or lost for words,” (Shumin 2002, p.206) and Zhang and Jia (2006) said it would absolutely influence their achievement in foreign language classrooms (p.111). Tok (2009) cited the statement of Liu and Jackson (2008), “Introverted and reserved people tend to be quieter and less willing to communicate. Participants with high level of communication apprehension have a marked tendency to avoid public speaking” (p.85). Liu (2006) stated that during the pair work, students prefer listening, looking up words, or thinking about what to say and how to say it in English rather than actively responding to their teacher in class. Foreign language anxiety occurs when students answer questions alone or give presentations at the front of the class without preparation. Most students would become nervous; for example, some students become so tense that their mouths or legs even shake during their

presentation, so they may contribute less to their class participation. Therefore, this anxiety makes many students unwilling to volunteer to speak English in class (p.313). Tok (2009) drew on Burgoon's (1976) statement that the unwillingness during the English speaking process is considered as one of the biggest obstacles for EFL learners (p.85). Baran-Łucarz (2014) stated Horwitz and Cope (1986, p.128) who characterized language 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." They considered that language anxiety can also be experienced outside the classroom, in conversational settings (p.450).

Fear of Negative Evaluation

Subaşı (2010) drew on the statement of Horwitz et al. (1986) when he stated, "fear of negative evaluation can be defined as apprehension about others' evaluations, avoidance of evaluative situations, and the expectation that others would evaluate oneself negatively" (p.31). Liu (2006) cited the statement of Kitano (2001) that students' anxiety levels were significantly positively related with their fear of negative evaluation (p.302). According to Tok (2009), the other obstacle in improving students' communication in EFL classrooms is the foreign language anxiety due to the students' concern about making mistakes particularly in front of their friends. This obstacle may lead to a dominance of the teacher and confident students during class discussions whereas introverted, shy, and highly anxious students cannot benefit from the opportunities arising from the context (p.85). Wang (2014) stated that as the result of the face-saving culture in China, many learners are not brave enough to speak English in the classroom. Many students choose to keep silent in order to avoid losing face in public. Affected by such self-restriction, it becomes harder and harder for them to open their mouth as time goes by (p.111). Subaşı (2010) drew on the statement of Aydın (1999) that based on the research, the

EFL learners often got frustrated when they were not able to communicate effectively in the target language, which made them experience FL anxiety. In turn, FL anxiety will reduce their confidence in themselves. She also found that these learners had a very strong fear of being negatively evaluated by their peers, which resulted in avoiding speaking in order not to seem foolish (p.45).

Test Anxiety

Subaşı (2010) cited the statement of Horwitz et al. (1986) in which he said, “Test anxiety refers to a type of performance anxiety stemming from a fear of failure” (p.31). Shi (2012) quoted the statement of Horwitz and Cope (1986), who said, “anxiety is built up to the climax when language learners communicate with others orally and oral test has the potential of provoking both test and oral communication anxiety simultaneously in susceptible students” (p.446). Liu (2006) stated the results supported by Horwitz et al.’s (1986) generalizations that communicative uneasiness and “social-evaluative anxiety” will produce a bad impact, which may make the students with high communicative anxiety get lower scores on the tests. Thus, the conclusion by MacIntyre and Gardner (1989, p.271) maintained, “The results presented tend to indicate that anxiety leads to deficits in learning and performance” (p.302). Shi (2012) quoted the statement of Sarason (1986) in which she said, “Test anxiety occurs when students who have performed poorly in the past develop negative, irrelevant thoughts during evaluative situation” (p.446).

Based on Riasati’s (2015) research, more than 33% of the respondents are unwilling to speak or are moderately willing to speak when they are aware that their speaking will be graded (p.6). Shi (2012) generalized the statement of Horwitz and Cope (1986): “anxiety is built up to the climax when language learners communicate with others orally and oral test has the potential

of provoking both test and oral communication anxiety simultaneously in susceptible students.” Shi (2012) also stated, “Others hold that task-irrelevant thoughts, such as worries and concerns about self-evaluative aspects of failure contribute greatly to the poor performance.” Therefore, he said, “it is reasonable that some test-takers tend to feel extremely apprehensive in the orally evaluative situation” (p.446).

Unwillingness to Communicate

Knell and Chi (2012) drew on MacIntyre and Gardner’s statement (1994) that language anxiety has a negative effect on language learning because self-deprecating thoughts may have an impact on the learning process and willingness to communicate in the target language (p.69). Moreover, there is a close relationship between unwillingness to communicate and anxiety (Liu & Jackson, 2008, p.72). Tok (2009) stated, “Qualitative studies have suggested that unwillingness to communicate and anxiety affect each other in FL learning.” He quoted from the statement of Liu et al. (2006) that because of anxiety, EFL learners often tend to keep silent and show a tendency of more unwillingness than other students to be involved in a speech communication class which, in turn, may make them more anxious (p.86).

According to some statistical analyses, Liu and Jackson (2008) made a conclusion that the students' unwillingness to communicate and their FL anxiety were closely interlinked so that students who are unwilling to communicate in the target language easily feel more anxious when they speak in public, like in class. In turn, such students with FL anxiety are reluctant to speak the target language in class (p.81). More importantly, Liu and Jackson (2008) also stated students' unwillingness to communicate and their FL anxiety can significantly affect their willingness to access English and the effects of their English proficiency gains (p.82). Ferris and Tagg (1996) claimed that many college professors realized that EFL students should overcome

the shyness or cultural inhibition to communicate more with native speakers rather than the speakers of their own language (p.308). In this way, EFL students are supposed to overcome these obstacles in order to enhance their English communication skills. Based on the study for participants who were first year non-English majors at Tsinghua University, most of the students had no access to any English native speaking people except their English teachers and schoolmates (Liu & Jackson, p.73).

Summary

Therefore, Liu and Jackson (2008) believed that in order to help students reduce foreign language anxiety in class, teachers could utilize various ways to stimulate students' interest to learn and use the language more. Teachers should also positively create a caring atmosphere to offer more exposure to speak English. At the same time, teachers should encourage students and appreciate their achievements in order to build up their self-confidence greatly because practice can help them eliminate their uneasiness and help them become more confident when students speak English with others in different occasions. In this way, students can gradually exhibit their willingness to use the language with more exposure to the language (p.82).

Chapter III Conclusions and Recommendations

In conclusion, although foreign language anxiety has a bad impact on oral English communication, this problem can still be solved. We need to find out appropriate strategies to eliminate their foreign language anxiety of oral communication. The following recommendations have been made based on the research previously discussed as well as the journal of Theory of College Oral English Classroom Anxiety and Eliminating Measures by Zhang (2011).

Strengthen Language Input

People can speak English fluently and confidently based on their language input,

especially listening. Without listening input, it is impossible to speak English aloud. Therefore, listening should be involved before speaking, which may comply with the laws of language learning. Listening is also the way people learn their own mother language. Therefore, teachers should help students to be immersed in the English listening environments to strengthen their listening input gradually. When students often listen to English, they may start to imitate and finally speak out without strain. They need not think too much and do not feel uneasy when they speak English in this kind of English learning process.

Create a Good Environment in English Class

Creating a relaxing, friendly and harmonious environment may contribute to alleviate students' communicative anxiety. Personally, teachers should respect students and treat them equally. More importantly, teachers can design all kinds of activities in their class creatively, which may be suitable for the students. Neither too difficult nor too easy, the activities may make students interested in taking part in them and help them feel they play the important roles in class. In this way, it can stimulate students' class participations without language uneasiness.

Give More Encouragement and Positive Comments to Students

Making mistakes is not avoidable during language learning and is an important part of learning English, because when a student makes a mistake one time, he/she will make progress later. Therefore, teachers and students should know how to correct mistakes, especially when students speak English in a wrong way, such as the errors about pronunciation, grammar or others. Teachers need to pay attention to their speech tone and style when they correct these mistakes. If the mistakes are not important or they will not influence students' oral expressions, the teachers can ignore them sometimes to avoid interrupting students; otherwise, they may have serious psychological language anxiety and be too afraid of making mistakes or losing face to

Speak out. On the contrary, teachers may encourage students to speak and often give them positive comments after their performances, which can help students build their confidence, and then they may easily be willing to express themselves in class or in public.

Utilize Various Evaluation Methods to Assess Students' Performance

Sometimes, students have a tendency of language anxiety because of examinations. Examinations are often oriented to the results. If students' performance is always evaluated by final scores, they will emphasize the results instead of the process. When they get a low mark on their exams, they may lose confidence, which may easily lead to language anxiety. Therefore, teachers can design the evaluation forms into two parts, which not only include result assessment but also process learning evaluation like class participation and class demonstrations or presentations. Thus, it can help decrease language anxiety and boost their class performance. At the same time, students can know learning is not for examinations, and they can still realize their own progress in the learning process, which may build a sense of achievement.

It seems that foreign language anxiety is an important psychological factor, which greatly has an impact on students' oral English communication, but sometimes people often neglect it or even do not realize it. Therefore, teachers and students can have good cooperation to overcome this problem together to promote oral English communication.

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