Oral English Anxiety among Chinese College Students: Subjective/Objective Causes and Short-term/Long-term Impacts

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Abstract

Oral English anxiety among Chinese college students has become a key issue affecting their language acquisition and practical communicative competence. On the basis of six core Chinese journal articles, which adopt methods such as questionnaire surveys, classroom observations, and literature reviews, this paper systematically analyzes the causes of such anxiety from both subjective and objective dimensions. Subjective factors include personality traits, learning motivation, and language proficiency, whereas objective factors encompass teaching models, evaluation systems, and cultural environments. Additionally, this paper explores the impact of anxiety on students' classroom performance, academic achievements, and long-term language development and proposes targeted mitigation strategies on the basis of relevant studies, aiming to provide references for improving the quality of oral English teaching.

Keywords

Chinese college students, oral English anxiety, subjective causes, objective causes, short-term impacts, long-term impacts

1. Introduction

Against the backdrop of deepening globalization, English, as an important tool for cross-cultural communication, has increasingly highlighted the significance of listening and speaking skills. The College English Curriculum Requirements (Trial) issued by the Ministry of Education in 2004 clearly state that college English teaching should focus on cultivating students' comprehensive application abilities, especially strengthening listening and speaking skills, to meet the social demand for international communication competence. However, for many years, the phenomenon of "high scores but low abilities" among domestic students has persisted, and "deaf-mute English" has become a prominent problem in English education.

Oral English anxiety, as a common emotional barrier, manifests as negative emotions such as tension and fear when students express themselves in English and is often accompanied by physiological and behavioral reactions such as accelerated heartbeat and stuttering. Wang (2014) conducted classroom observations on non-English majors and reported that most students chose to remain silent due to such anxiety, with only a few actively participating in interactions, seriously hindering oral proficiency improvement. This phenomenon is not isolated; Jin's (2014) survey on college English classes also revealed that oral anxiety leads to low participation, forming a passive "teacher-lecturing, student-listening" pattern. Therefore, systematically

analyzing the causes and consequences of oral English anxiety is crucial for optimizing teaching strategies and solving the "deaf-mute English" dilemma.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Connotation and Types of Oral Anxiety

Oral anxiety is a unique emotional phenomenon in foreign language learning and refers to negative emotions generated by learners due to concerns about poor performance during oral communication. Horwitz et al. classify anxiety into three types: (1) communication anxiety (tension in real-time interactions); (2) test anxiety (fear of oral exams); and (3) evaluation anxiety (worry about negative judgments on one's expression). These types overlap to form psychological barriers to oral expression. Zhang (2015), in a study focusing on cultural influences, further noted that in the Chinese context, evaluation anxiety is amplified by "face consciousness," leading to unique manifestations such as extreme avoidance of public speaking.

2.2 Overview of Domestic Research

Domestic scholars have made progress in this field, but limitations remain. Qu (2013), in a literature review covering 11 core studies, noted that most research targets college students (neglecting primary/secondary education) and lacks subdivided analysis by gender or major. Methodologically, quantitative surveys dominate, with few qualitative studies exploring the dynamic formation of anxiety.

The specific studies include:

- Wang (2014), through classroom observations of non-English majors, reported a strong correlation between anxiety and low participation, with most students avoiding speaking for fear of mistakes.

- Chen and Li (2007): A survey of 86 CET-SET candidates (62 males, 24 females) via questionnaires revealed that 20.5% of the students experienced anxiety due to "face" issues and that 14.5% resisted harsh teacher correction.

- Zhang (2015): From a cultural perspective, traditional "collectivism" and "face culture" strengthen fear of public expression, drawing on cross-cultural communication theories.

- Wang (2011): Observed that interactions between weak language foundations and rigid teaching models sustain anxiety via case studies of non-English majors.

- Jin (2014) noted that teacher-dominated "cramming" teaching compresses oral practice time on the basis of surveys of college English classes.

3. Research Design

This paper analyzes six core studies (published in Chinese journals between 2007 and 2015) via literature review methods, with the following steps:

3.1 Data Screening

The literature was selected on the basis of three criteria: focus on non-English major college students; inclusion of empirical data (e.g., questionnaire results, classroom observation records); and relevance to "oral anxiety" and "teaching strategies." The key data included Wang's (2014) classroom participation rates, Chen and Li's (2007) anxiety source statistics, and Qu's (2013) review of research gaps.

3.2 Dimension Division

- Causes: Divided into subjective and objective factors.
    - Subjective factors: Defined as internal psychological and cognitive traits, including (a) personality traits (e.g., introversion, self-efficacy; Chen & Li, 2007), (b) learning motivation (e.g., utilitarian goals tied to CET-4/6; Wang, 2014), and (c) language proficiency (e.g., vocabulary/sentence pattern mastery; Wang, 2011).

- ■ Objective factors: Defined as external environmental influences, including (a) teaching models (e.g., teacher-centered methods; Jin, 2014), (b) evaluation systems (e.g., low weight of oral scores; Wang, 2014), and (c) cultural environments (e.g., collectivism and face culture; Zhang, 2015).
- • Impacts: Divided into short-term and long-term.
  - ■ Short-term: Classroom participation (e.g., avoidance of activities) and academic performance (e.g., oral test scores).
  - ■ Long-term: Comprehensive language ability (e.g., imbalanced skills) and career development (e.g., reduced cross-cultural opportunities).

3.3 Cross-Analysis

Common conclusions (e.g., teaching models affect anxiety) and differences (e.g., Wang (2011) emphasized rigid methods, whereas Jin (2014) focused on teacher dominance) were compared to ensure comprehensiveness.

3.4 Conclusion Integration

A systematic framework based on "system thinking" was used to integrate findings, emphasizing interactions between factors (e.g., cultural values amplifying personality-based anxiety) rather than an isolated analysis.

4. Results

4.1 Causes of Oral English Anxiety

4.1.1 Subjective Factors

(1) Personality and psychological traits

Introverted students are sensitive to social feedback. For example, a rural student in Wang's (2014) observation avoided speaking due to the inferiority of pronunciation compared with that of urban peers. Chen and Li's (2007) survey revealed that 20% of students stayed silent to protect themselves "face" or avoid mockery, forming a "fear of mistakes → silence → skill decline" cycle. Wang (2011) added that temperamentally anxious students, even those with adequate proficiency, struggle to express themselves owing to their inherent timidity.

(2) Learning Motivation and Goal Deviation

Most non-English majors prioritize the CET-4/6, which neglects oral skills. Wang (2014) reported that students practiced oral English only in 2 weekly classes, viewing it as a "burden." Jin (2014) noted that this utilitarianism reduces participation, worsening anxiety.

(3) Weak Language Foundation

Insufficient vocabulary and rigid sentence patterns hinder expression. Wang (2011) reported that students who repeat simple sentences are unable to respond flexibly. Qu (2013) linked this to limited weekly English exposure (consistent with Wang's 2014 findings), creating a "poor ability → high anxiety → less practice" cycle.

4.1.2 Objective Factors

(1) Teaching Models and the Classroom Environment

Most colleges lack specialized oral courses; practice is limited to mechanical repetition in general English classes (Wang, 2014). Large classes (over 50 students) result in <1 minute of oral practice per student per class (Chen & Li, 2007). Jin (2014) criticized "cramming" teaching for reducing expression opportunities.

(2) Unreasonable evaluation systems

Oral scores account for <20% of the total grades, with overemphasis on accuracy (pronunciation/grammar) over fluency (Wang, 2014). Chen and Li (2007) reported that 14.5% of students are anxious because of teachers' public criticism of mistakes.

(3) Cultural and Environmental Constraints

Traditional collectivism emphasizes harmony, making students avoid "standing out" (Zhang, 2015). The lack of real English contexts (e.g., few interactions with native speakers) increases fear of communication (Wang, 2011). Qu (2013) noted that Sino-Western communication differences (direct vs. implicit expression) widen the gap between learning and practice.

4.2　Impacts of Oral English Anxiety

4.2.1　Short-Term Impacts

(1) Reduced Classroom Participation

Wang (2014) reported only 10–15% active participation; most students avoided group discussions. Jin (2014) reported that anxious students responded with short sentences even when called on.

(2) Decline in Academic Performance

Chen and Li (2007) reported that high-anxiety students scored 15–20 points lower on oral tests, with symptoms such as stuttering and repeated vocabulary. Wang (2011) noted that some patients failed final oral exams due to anxiety.

4.2.2　Long-Term Impacts

(1) Imbalance in Comprehensive Language Ability

High anxiety, via Krashen's "affective filter," blocks input absorption (Chen & Li, 2007). Qu (2013) reported that long-term anxious students had slower reading and less fluent writing.

(2) Lack of communicative confidence

Zhang (2015) cited cases of students missing foreign-related jobs for fear of self-introduction in English. Wang (2014) reported that anxious graduates who relied on translation tools lost independent communication skills.

5.　Discussion

5.1　Interactivity of Causes

Anxiety arises from intertwined factors: e.g., cultural "face consciousness" (objective) amplifies the fear of mistakes (subjective), whereas rigid evaluation (objective) exacerbates this fear. Wang (2011) illustrated with "vocabulary deficiency → silence → teacher neglect" chains, emphasizing systemic intervention.

5.2　Extensibility of Impacts

Anxiety affects beyond language: Jin (2014) noted that students avoid international programs; Zhang (2015) warned of potential resistance to Western culture, hindering globalization adaptation.

5.3　Research Limitations

Qu (2013) highlighted several gaps: a focus on college students (neglecting K-12), a lack of subdivided studies (by anxiety type/group), and few intervention tests. Jin (2014) added the underrepresentation of ethnic minority students.

6.　Conclusions and Implications

6.1 Research Conclusions

Oral English anxiety among Chinese college students stems from multiple factors: subjectivity, introversion, utilitarian motivation, and weak foundations; objectively, traditional teaching, unreasonable evaluation, and cultural constraints. It reduces participation, harms academic performance, and long-term impairs comprehensive language ability and career prospects. Existing research reveals basic characteristics but needs broader and deeper exploration.

6.2 Practical Implications

6.2.1 Teaching Level

(1) Classroom models: Group collaboration, role-playing, and film dubbing (Wang, 2014) should be used, and small classes (4–6 students) should be adopted to increase practice time (Chen & Li, 2007).

(2) Reform evaluation: Raise oral scores to ≥30% of total grades; use delayed correction (Chen & Li, 2007) and peer assessment (Wang, 2014).

(3) Integrate Cultural Guidance: Compare Sino-Western communication styles; encourage "trial and error" (Zhang, 2015) via simulated scenarios (e.g., foreign-related shopping).

6.2.2 Student Level

(1) Adjust Mentality: Practice meditation; focus on fluency over perfection (Wang, 2014); interact with foreigners to reduce strangeness (Zhang, 2015).

(2) Strengthen Foundations: Daily learn 5–10 practical sentences; use circumlocution (e.g., "place to park cars" for "garage"; Wang, 2011).

(3) Create Contexts: Join English corners or volunteer services; form study groups (Jin, 2014).

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