

Causes and Consequences of Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety among Chinese College Students

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Abstract

Speaking anxiety is the most prominent and common phenomenon in the process of foreign language learning. As one of the important affective factors, anxiety has a pivotal influence on students' motivation promotion, effect absorption, and the establishment of the thinking-acting pool in foreign language learning. In this article, we will try to analyse the causes of foreign language speaking anxiety among Chinese university students from the comprehensive perspectives of individual students, family expectations, educational resources, and domestic and international environments, and shed light on the related problems it leads to.

Keywords

speaking anxiety, oral instruction, foreign language achievement, university education

1. Introduction

Language learning is not only a process of learning the rules of the language and participating in linguistic communication, but it is also a process in which the learner is constantly testing his or her perceptions and undergoing unfavourable evaluations. This process is stressful and is likely to create anxiety in students. Anxiety and tension or the classroom environment tends to contribute to the formation of an Affective Filter and ultimately hinders easy acquisition of the target language. The issue of anxiety in foreign language learning has received increasing academic attention since the 1970s; it has since been fuelled by Krashen's hypothesis theory (1982) and has received more attention. Domestic related academic studies include. Wu Wensheng's cluster analysis of college students' foreign language speaking anxiety status (2009), Shao Xinguang's study of college students' English learning anxiety in the network multimedia environment (2008), and Xiong Huilan's analysis of the factors affecting, English learners' speaking anxiety (2007). It can be seen that scholars have reached a certain depth in analysing and exploring speaking anxiety in foreign language learning from the surface to the inside, and have made a new interpretation of the causes of anxiety by integrating the characteristics of the times. In this article, we will analyse the impact of anxiety on college students' foreign language speaking ability through a multifaceted and comprehensive consideration, and try to explore the problems related to individual students' development and the general environment of teaching and learning as a result of this situation in the present time.

2. An Analysis of the Causes of Speaking Anxiety among College Students of Foreign Languages

2.1 Students' own causes

According to Tobias' model of language anxiety, learning can be divided into three stages: input, processing and output. If anxiety arises during the input stage, when the student is personally exposed to a piece of information, the internal response may distract the student's attention, thus leading to decoding less information and requiring constant exposure to that information to overcome the anxiety interference. If anxiety arises at the processing stage, where the student is unable to recognise the meaning of the new word based on either his or her own experience or similar words in the native language, then both foreign language comprehension and learning may be more affected. If anxiety arises at the output stage, it may result in the student's inability to retrieve vocabulary effectively or to use grammar rules appropriately, or even to respond appropriately to questions.

In the College of Foreign Languages of Qingdao University, for example, students' foreign language classroom emotions are generally at a medium-high level, with foreign language classroom pleasure slightly higher than foreign language classroom anxiety. Due to the tendency of students to choose subjects and areas of expertise, and the advantage gained from the sense of achievement in the foreign language classroom in most cases, most of the students in the College of Foreign Languages are still more motivated by the value of foreign language learning than by the expectation of motivation, even though there is a prevalence of speaking anxiety.

2.2 Family expectations

Against the backdrop of globalisation, international talents have become an important cultivation goal in the education of children in Chinese families. On the one hand, strengthening language learning in order to master cross-language communication skills has become the consensus of most Chinese parents; on the other hand, overseas study and exchanges have become an important educational choice for Chinese families.

According to an HSBC survey, 54 per cent of Chinese parents want their children to study abroad even when they face certain financial or other difficulties; China occupies three of the top six spots in average education spending across the globe, with Hong Kong, China's average education spending being three times higher than the global average. According to the latest BSA 2023 report, 76 per cent of parents let their children study abroad because they want to exercise their independence. When parents' expectations are too high and are not met after a certain amount of effort it is easy for students to become frustrated, and anxiety about expressing themselves in a foreign language can increase.

2.3 Competitive pressures arising from the unequal distribution of educational resources

Although foreign-language education continues to trend towards a younger age, the overall English penetration rate in China is only about 5 per cent. Some regions are unable to receive professional foreign language teaching due to their remote geographical location, lack of language environment, cultural differences and insufficient learning resources, and there are not enough opportunities for language input and output, which prevents students from effectively improving their speaking skills and pronunciation.

In the Xinjiang region, for example, students are generally exposed to English for the first time in the fourth and fifth grades; as teachers often use minority dialects, they tend to confuse individual pronunciations when teaching foreign language pronunciation, which makes the students' foundation of spoken foreign language pronunciation insufficiently solidified. When students enter university and come into contact with a larger platform of learners of the same age who have a better foundation in spoken pronunciation and abundant educational resources, they are prone to anxiety in speaking foreign languages in the competition among their peers.

2.4 Impact of the international environment

With the trend of globalisation becoming more and more significant, oral communication skills are taking up a greater part of the weighting in the admissions examination of universities and colleges. Students who

wish to study abroad often have a language test as a mandatory indicator of their ability before they receive an offer of admission to their destination institution. Taking German as an example, if you have the intention to study abroad during your undergraduate studies, most German colleges and universities require you to have a language level of 16 points (4*4 points) in your sophomore year and to pass the APS document examination and the interview re-test; if you want to study in Germany during your postgraduate studies, you need to have a total of 18 points of listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating, of which the speaking and interview parts are usually troublesome for most of the students.

At the same time, due to the influence of domestic education habits, students are often afraid of making mistakes in the classroom, and do not dare to use the learned vocabulary and grammar to make sentences in a timely manner to express their views orally (Meng & Chen, 2014). Overseas students focus more on classroom performance than domestic students, and the inferiority of oral practice and language output is the direct cause of some students' unsatisfactory performance and their lack of confidence in oral expression.

2.5 Impact of test-taking tendencies

With China's reform and opening up to deepen the implementation of the development and comprehensive national power to enhance the examination as a means of screening people material and measure individual differences has been widely used in further education, employment, job title assessment, talent recruitment and other important areas. However, with the provisions of some institutions of higher education admission and other educational indicators, some teachers gradually give up the expansion of professional knowledge outside the textbook, the educational model of fun and interest in navigation to test-based, boring and boring classroom education to the test, prompting a large number of candidates to form a strong test to win the mentality.

Anxiety is generally high among college students with a strong desire to win. Even if they are well prepared for the speaking test, most of the foreign language college students still feel more nervous and have more speaking anxiety when the test time is near. If in the more competitive national exams, such as the all-English test interview for the high school English teacher qualification, out of the expectation of excellent results, the speaking anxiety of each candidate will also reach a high level. On this basis, if the unreasonable beliefs and behaviours of foreign language learners are not corrected in a timely manner, such as psychological counselling, it will not be conducive to the formation of new cognition, new behaviours, and the achievement of the desired goals.

3. Exploring the Causes of Speaking Anxiety among Non-Foreign Language College Students

3.1 Personal reasons

English speaking anxiety is a common phenomenon in foreign language learning, and non-English major college students are one of the main groups suffering from speaking anxiety (Liu, 2023). For most non-foreign language majors, language anxiety is the fear of having to use a foreign language when it is not very good. Thus, language anxiety can be regarded as a stable personality trait and a tendency for a person to react nervously when using a foreign language for oral expression. In the foreign language learning process of non-foreign language undergraduates, fear of negative evaluations may be reflected in students' excessive worry about purpose versus academic performance and competence and self-assessment. Although language learning is not error-free, mistakes may be a cause of anxiety for some students - as they focus on the difficulty of making a good social impression when they speak a new language.

Researchers at the University of Cape Breton have used a unique aerodynamic approach to present the rapidly changing relationship between enjoyment and anxiety of foreign language learners when communicating in a second language on a time scale with rating fluctuation attribution: the highly dynamic relationship presented in the data can corroborate the importance of emotions in oral communication in a second language (Boudreau et al., 2018). If the level of communicative anxiety is too high it may have a negative impact on performance. Anxious students may underestimate their level of performance, whereas relaxed students may overestimate their level of performance, students with high levels of anxiety do not assess their ability as high as they actually do, and anxiety makes some students more reluctant to speak up.

3.2 Teaching methodology

China's non-English majors usually have less than four English classes a week, in such a short period of time, students lack of real context supply, in addition to the teacher's questions in class, there are few opportunities to communicate in a foreign language, which also lacks the motivation and interest in foreign language learning - once the teacher conducts the oral questions or tests. When the teacher asks questions or gives tests on speaking, the lack of self-confidence brought about by insufficient training can cause anxiety.

Initial overstimulation, cognitive dissonance, and inability to respond are the three main factors that create anxiety. Anxiety arises when students are unsure of what is going to happen, realise that their performance will be evaluated, worry about the consequences of an event, feel uncomfortable in a situation or feel threatened. Some of these students with high levels of trait anxiety generally perceive more occasions as threatening or threatening, and their state anxiety rises even higher when confronted with these occasions. If such nerve-racking feelings occur frequently the individual student develops specific coping responses or establishes psychological precautions to reduce or minimise state anxiety. In the case of undergraduate students at Qingdao University, trait and state anxiety were negatively associated with self-confidence, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and test scores, and were strong predictors of self-perceptions in academic achievement.

As mentioned in the 'broaden-and-build' theory, negative emotions narrow the thought-action pool while positive emotions broaden it, which means that positive emotions should eliminate the lingering effects of negative emotions by facilitating this broadening process (Fredricksen, 1998). Appropriately shaping the educational environment can help change students' achievement emotions.

3.3 Employment pressure

Examination - as a means of screening the quality of talent and measuring individual differences, has been widely used in today's further education, employment, job evaluation, talent recruitment and other important areas, anxiety as a typical non-intellectual emotional factors in the impact of the performance of the test takers can not be ignored (Li, 1995).

According to the survey, non-foreign language college students' anxiety caused by forgetting the correct way of expressing themselves in a foreign language is the most common in job interviews, with colleagues or clients, which is mainly attributed to the fact that they have not laid a solid foundation, the influence of traditional English teaching methods and too few social interaction activities (Ma, 2021). The same fear of mistakes continues into the employment stage of non-foreign language majors, and the speaking anxiety and inferiority complex derived from the working language and the atmosphere created by the returnee elites in foreign enterprises will be significantly greater than that in state-owned enterprises.

4. Problems caused by speaking anxiety

4.1 Uneven development of basic foreign language skills

Because test-oriented education focuses on written tests rather than listening and speaking, some foreign language or non-foreign language majors are often proficient in grammar and good at writing, but face more deficiencies in oral expression and listening comprehension. The neglect of oral expression and reading aloud in the target language has made it impossible for some students with a poor sense of language to express the target language they have learnt with the most authentic and standardized pronunciation, as 'mute foreign language' has become a common situation.

To a certain extent, this phenomenon can directly contribute to the ineffectiveness of language learners in the practical application of the target language they have learnt - the most notable example of this is the inability of some international students to use the target language as a working language for fluent communication or official document writing without any obstacles even after they have returned to their home countries.

4.2 Lack of language expression skills

Oral anxiety can be subdivided into personality anxiety, temporary anxiety and situational anxiety based on the duration of the effect of anxiety on students (Yang, 2014). Compared with students who are easy-going, foreign language learners who have high personal requirements and a strong sense of competition tend to pursue perfection in oral expression, thus generating anxiety; temporary anxiety often occurs before and after classroom quizzes or large-scale exams, and the target group is the majority of the students and is not necessarily inversely proportional to the students' own performance; situational anxiety is even more varied from person to person, for example, in speeches, classroom speeches, group discussions, and other personal presentations. Situational anxiety is more individualised, for example in presentations, classroom speeches, group discussions, etc. Personal presentations are prone to slips of the tongue, stuttering, and semantic confusion. Foreign language communicative anxiety has a significant effect on the frequency of self-correction use and presence of oral learners - learners with high levels of communicative anxiety produce more implicit and overt correction behaviours than those with low levels (Wu, 2021), which further enhances their personal linguistic expressive competence.

Unlike basic pronunciation correction, it is difficult to quickly improve a university student's language expression and organisational skills once they have been developed. The skills need to be accumulated in internal seminars, competitions, public speeches, and classroom seminars in order to improve one's perception and proficiency of spoken language.

4.3 Barriers to intercultural communication

As a first-hand tool for cultural exchange and a bridge for inter-ethnic communication, language learners should devote themselves to transforming their language knowledge into communicative competence.

Take Qingdao University College of Foreign Languages as an example, in which the German major is called Intercultural German Studies (Interkulturell Germanistik kommunikation), which can be seen nowadays that colleges and universities and their professional counterparts have reached a new height of importance for intercultural communication, which also means that during the period of language learning of college students, they have the ability of transforming the strain of adaptation to the spoken language context. It also means that during the period of language learning, college students are required to have a higher level of practical experience in language skills and adaptive transformation ability. The negative emotional cues brought by speaking anxiety hinder smooth oral communication, affect the effective learning behaviour and cognitive development, and greatly reduce the effect of intercultural communication.

5. Conclusion

With the deepening of international communication, the learning rate of foreign languages as well as the speaking level of college students have been significantly improved. However, due to the influence of learners' personal, family or external environmental factors, foreign language learners will have different degrees of speaking anxiety as a result. Speaking anxiety is still one of the problems that need to be solved, such as the lack of solid foundation, the uneven development of language skills, the lack of expressive ability, and the obstacle of cross-cultural communication, which are caused by foreign language majors and non-foreign language majors in their daily study and employment.

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