

A Review of the Relationships Among Speaking Anxiety, Speaking Self-Efficacy and Speaking Achievement in Chinese EFL learners

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Abstract

This paper systematically reviewed studies on the relationships among speaking anxiety, self-efficacy and speaking achievement in Chinese students. Existing research shows that speaking anxiety is generally negatively correlated with speaking achievement, although moderate levels of anxiety can have a facilitative effect; speaking self-efficacy is positively correlated with speaking achievement; speaking anxiety and self-efficacy are negatively correlated and display a bidirectional relationship to some extent. Current studies still face several limitations, including uneven coverage of research participants, relatively limited research methods, insufficient localization of measurement tools, and a lack of in-depth exploration of underlying mechanisms. Based on these findings, this paper summarizes the research limitations and proposes several directions for future studies, aiming to provide insights for subsequent research and teaching practices.

Keywords

speaking anxiety, speaking self-efficacy, speaking achievement

1. Introduction

Under the background of globalization and deepening intercultural communication, the importance of learning English as a lingua franca has been widely recognized. Speaking ability is not only a core skill in intercultural communication, but also one of the four basic skills of English learning, so it is a key topic in the study of second language acquisition. However, over the years, the dilemma of “dumb English” has been troubling a large number of English learners and has become the biggest bottleneck in Chinese students' foreign language learning [1].

Studies have pointed out that more than half of Chinese undergraduates still have difficulties in basic English communication skills [2]. In addition, Chinese students also have some problems in spoken English, such as inaccurate pronunciation, frequent use of “Chinglish” expressions, and lack of confidence [3]. This situation has not improved significantly in the past two decades.

Since the 1970s, with the development of humanistic psychology and Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis in the field of second language acquisition [4], researchers gradually realized that language learning is closely related to the psychological state of learners. The focus of foreign language teaching in

China has shifted from teachers and textbooks to learners themselves, and the psychological factors in second language acquisition have also attracted more and more attention. Among these factors, speaking anxiety and self-efficacy have a significant impact on speaking achievement. As one of the most influential emotional factors in language learning [5], most studies confirm that there is a significant negative correlation between speaking anxiety and speaking achievement [6-10]. However, some studies have also found that moderate facilitative anxiety can encourage learners to be more dedicated to completing tasks, which has a positive effect on speaking achievement [11-12]; while speaking self-efficacy is positively correlated with speaking achievement [13-15].

Over the past decade, the three variables of speaking anxiety, speaking self-efficacy and speaking achievement and their relationships have attracted wide attention in the field of second language acquisition research at home and abroad, and a growing body of relevant empirical studies has been conducted. However, there are three obvious limitations in the existing research. First, most studies focus on the empirical investigation of a single variable or the relationship between two variables, and there is a lack of systematic literature of existing findings. Second, most of the reviews revolve around holistic foreign language anxiety, or anxiety and self-efficacy related to reading and writing skills, rather than speaking. Third, although some studies have explored the relationship between anxiety, self-efficacy and language performance of second language learners [16], there are still few reviews that systematically sort out the relationship between these three variables in the speaking dimension.

Based on this, the paper aims to systematically review and integrate the existing research on the relationship between speaking anxiety, speaking self-efficacy and speaking achievement. By identifying the gaps in the current research, this review hopes to provide theoretical inspiration and new direction for teaching practice and future research in China.

2. The Relationships Among Speaking Anxiety, Speaking Self-Efficacy and Speaking Achievement

2.1 The Relationship Between Speaking Anxiety and Speaking Achievement

In 1986, Horwitz et al. proposed the concept of “Foreign Language Anxiety” and defined it as a complex related to foreign language learning in the classroom environment, including self-awareness, beliefs, emotions and behaviors [17]. Among the four core language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, speaking is identified as the skill most likely to trigger anxiety [18]. A large number of studies show that there is a significant negative correlation between speaking anxiety and speaking achievement. For example, the studies of Young (1990) and Phillips (1991) both show that there is a moderate negative correlation between speaking anxiety and speaking achievement and speaking performance [19]. This conclusion also applies to English learners whose native language is Spanish. Speaking achievement of the high anxiety group was significantly lower than that of the medium anxiety group and the low anxiety group.

In a study focusing on advanced English for academic purposes (EAP) students in a second language environment, Woodrow (2006) proposed and empirically validated a two-dimensional structure covering in-class and out-of-class anxiety for the first time. He also developed the Second Language Speaking Anxiety Scale (SLSAS) and found both dimensions correlated negatively with learners' speaking test scores.

The research of Lü (2010) and Wang (2010) also shows that the speaking anxiety of non-English major undergraduates is significantly negatively correlated with speaking achievement. In high school students, there is a significant negative correlation between high, middle and low levels of anxiety and speaking achievement, and this negative correlation grew stronger as anxiety levels increased [20]. Recently, Hu et al. (2024) turned their attention to the foreign language anxiety of primary school students. Their research reveals that speaking anxiety in primary school students is also significantly negatively related to speaking achievement; notably, the debilitating effect of anxiety on speaking was more pronounced in formal and high-stakes exams.

Although the mainstream consensus is that the relationship between the two is negatively correlated, a few studies have found that speaking anxiety has a positive predictive effect on speaking achievement, confirming the positive role of facilitating anxiety. Alpert and Haber (1960) divides anxiety into two

categories: one is debilitating anxiety, which refers to high-level negative anxiety that will induce avoidance behavior; the other is facilitating anxiety, which refers to medium and low-level positive anxiety, which can motivate individuals to devote themselves to tasks. Li, Y. (2012) found that there is a significant positive correlation between speaking anxiety and speaking achievement of high school students, that is, the higher the level of speaking anxiety, the better the speaking achievement is. According to the discussion of Williams (1991) on the inverted U-shaped theory of foreign language anxiety, the facilitative effect of anxiety on learning is not universal. It is limited to medium and low levels of anxiety, and is mainly reflected in prepared oral tasks. The experiment by Hewitt and Stephenson (2012) verified this view. The results showed that learners in the moderate anxiety group had the least ineffective expression in oral tasks, and the speaking accuracy was significantly better than that of the low anxiety group and the high anxiety group. In a word, speaking anxiety is not a purely negative factor. Moderate anxiety can not only encourage some students to work harder, but also enhance learners' concentration on language expression, reduce ineffective output, and ultimately improve speaking achievement.

2.2 The Relationship Between Speaking Self-Efficacy and Speaking Achievement

The concept of self-efficacy was first proposed by American psychologist Bandura (1978) under the framework of social cognitive theory [21]. Since then, it has been widely applied in foreign language learning research. When this concept is specifically used in the speaking field, it becomes “speaking self-efficacy”, which is expressed as the subjective judgment and confidence of learners about whether they can successfully complete tasks such as oral expression, communication or examination. This includes their perception of their ability to understand other people's words, pronounce accurately, choose appropriate vocabulary and grammar, and communicate effectively. Generally speaking, the higher the speaking self-efficacy of learners is, the better their speaking achievement or speaking performance will be.

Learners with a high speaking self-efficacy not only have an optimistic view of their speaking ability, but are also more willing to invest time and energy in speaking practice. They are more positive and less evasive when facing oral tasks. This sense of efficacy also helps to reduce the interference of nervousness with speaking performance. These positive psychological states and learning behaviors can effectively promote the improvement of speaking skills, which in turn brings higher speaking achievement. In contrast, learners with low speaking self-efficacy are more likely to have a negative perception of their own ability. They often lack the motivation to stick to oral practice, and it is easy to retreat when they facing with oral tasks. This will shorten the practice time and reduce the frequency of practice, which will eventually make it difficult to improve speaking achievement. This conclusion has been widely verified among Chinese students, including middle school students, vocational college students and university students. Many studies of middle school students have found that there is a significant positive correlation between speaking self-efficacy and speaking achievement [22-23]. Similar findings have also been confirmed among university students.

Although the academic community generally recognizes that there is a positive correlation between speaking self-efficacy and speaking achievement, a small number of studies have found that speaking self-efficacy cannot significantly predict speaking achievement, or the relationship between the two is relatively weak. Wang, D. (2015) found that in the group of high school students, speaking self-efficacy has no predictive effect on speaking achievement [24]. The study attributed this result to the limited emphasis on oral communication in high school English teaching at that time, coupled with the lack of a standardized speaking assessment and evaluation system. This leads to a deviation between students' subjective judgment of their speaking ability and their actual speaking performance. Similarly, Zeng, X. (2012) concluded in a study on the relationship between college students' self-efficacy, oral English learning strategies and speaking performance: “self-efficacy and speaking performance are positively correlated, but the correlation coefficient is not significant.” The study further pointed out that this weak correlation is directly related to two factors: the participants' overall low level of speaking self-efficacy and the general lack of effective metacognitive strategies. Even if some students have a certain sense of speaking self-efficacy, they may struggle to turn this subjective belief into effective learning behavior, so it is difficult to improve their speaking achievement. Therefore, although the positive correlation between the two is supported by most studies, whether a stable predictive relationship exists and under what conditions this predictive effect will be significant or disappear still needs to be further explored in combination with more influencing variables.

2.3 The Relationship Between Speaking Anxiety and Speaking Self-Efficacy

Speaking anxiety and speaking self-efficacy are the two core variables that affect second language speaking acquisition, and there is a close intrinsic relationship between the two. A large number of empirical studies at home and abroad show that speaking anxiety is negatively correlated to speaking self-efficacy [25-28]. Although these studies use different methods, they have consistently confirmed a significant negative correlation between the two. Among them, Wang (2010) and Zhang (2024) adopted a variable-centered approach in the analysis [29]. The former found that anxiety and self-efficacy have always been negatively correlated, whether at the writing level or speaking level; the latter, targeting sophomores in high school, confirmed this negative correlation through Pearson correlation analysis. In contrast, Chen and Li (2025) adopted a person-centered approach. Through latent profile analysis of college students, they found that there are obvious differences in speaking self-efficacy among learners with different speaking emotional characteristics: the speaking self-efficacy of low-anxiety learners is significantly higher than that of high-anxiety learners, which further confirms the negative correlation between the two [30].

However, the negative predictive effect of speaking anxiety on speaking self-efficacy is not valid in all dimensions, and this conclusion is closely related to the selection of research methods. The traditional variable-centered method defaults that the research sample is homogeneous, which is easy to cover up the inherent differences between different dimensions and different research participants. In contrast, Chen and Li (2025) adopted the person-centered latent profile analysis (LPA) method, which can more accurately describe the complex relationship between speaking anxiety and speaking self-efficacy. Based on this method, they divide Chinese college students into three emotional profiles: Anxiety-Overpowered Profile, Emotionally Neutral Profile and Enjoyment-Filled Profile. They also further explored the predictive effect of speaking anxiety on various dimensions of speaking self-efficacy, including oral task efficacy, complexity efficacy, accuracy efficacy, fluency efficacy and self-regulated efficacy. The results show that in the "Enjoyment-Filled" learners with low anxiety and high enjoyment, speaking anxiety does not have a significant predictive effect on accuracy efficacy. Researchers attribute this to the strong positive emotional buffer effect generated by a high level of speaking enjoyment, which effectively weakens the negative impact of anxiety on this specific dimension.

Speaking anxiety does not have a significant predictive effect on self-efficacy in certain contexts. In a study on English Public Speaking (EPS), Zhang and Ardasheva (2019) found that physiological and emotional states, including speaking anxiety, did not have a significant predictive effect on learners' EPS self-efficacy [31]. The authors give several possible explanations: regarding the previous experience of learners, all participants in the study have experienced public speaking, and most of them have attended EPS courses. These learners are likely to have developed effective anxiety adjustment strategies, thus weakening the direct impact of anxiety on self-efficacy; regarding measurement methods, the use of retrospective self-report measures (rather than real-time evaluation) may not accurately capture learners' emotional fluctuations during speeches, which will introduce memory bias; in terms of task type, public speaking is a speaking task with high exposure and high evaluation risk. Learners generally show a high level of anxiety, and individual differences are very negligible, so it is difficult for the results to show a significant predictive effect. Therefore, the relationship between speaking anxiety and self-efficacy may vary depending on factors such as learners' previous experience, measurement methods and task types.

Furthermore, a growing body of research has confirmed a bidirectional relationship between speaking anxiety and speaking self-efficacy. In other words, self-efficacy is not only influenced by anxiety but can also, in turn, affect learners' anxiety levels. For example, Sun and Teng (2021) analyzed the structural equation model of 226 second-language Chinese learners and found that speaking self-efficacy has a strong independent negative predictive effect on speaking anxiety. The predictive strength of self-efficacy obviously exceeds the influence of actual speaking proficiency. Trisnaningati and Sinambela (2021) focused on public speaking situations such as thesis defense and found that self-efficacy is the core factor affecting public speaking anxiety (PSA) and can directly negatively predict the PSA level [32]. The study also suggests that when intervening with speaking anxiety in high-risk scenarios, priority should be given to improving self-efficacy.

In general, there is a significant negative correlation between speaking anxiety and speaking self-efficacy; however, this relationship will be affected by factors such as research methods, learner types, speaking task

types and measurement methods. At the same time, there is a bidirectional relationship between the two, and the level of speaking self-efficacy will also affect changes in speaking anxiety levels.

3. Discussion

The research on the relationship between Chinese students' speaking anxiety, speaking self-efficacy and speaking achievement has become more and more abundant, providing meaningful references for second language acquisition and teaching practice. However, a review of the existing literature reveals several key issues in this field.

3.1 Limited Scope of Research Participants

Existing studies have obvious limitations in the selection of research participants, mainly focusing on non- English major university students, and other types of learners are ignored.

From the educational stage, although some studies involve primary and secondary school students, there are still few relevant findings. Primary school students are at a critical stage for second language acquisition, and their psychological characteristics and cognitive level are significantly different from those of adult learners. The formation mechanism of speaking anxiety and speaking self-efficacy at this stage, as well as their impact on speaking achievement, should receive more attention. Similarly, secondary school learners are in adolescence, and the impact of emotional factors on their language learning is particularly prominent, which is worth further discussion.

Judging from the type of learners, there may be obvious differences between English major students and non English major students in speaking anxiety and speaking self-efficacy. However, the research specifically for English major students is still relatively insufficient. In addition, there is an obvious lack of attention to rural students, ethnic minority students and other groups. Therefore, future research should expand the scope of research participants to improve the relevance and explanatory power of research findings.

3.2 Relatively Limited Research Methods

The current research mainly adopts quantitative methods such as questionnaire surveys and scale measurements. In this way, the research results may be influenced by the subjective factors of the participants to a certain extent, and it is difficult to comprehensively and objectively reveal the inherent characteristics of speaking anxiety and self-efficacy. Future research should actively integrate mixed research methods, combining interviews, classroom observations and other qualitative methods with quantitative data. This helps to overcome the limitations of relying only on questionnaires and scales to understand these phenomena more holistically.

In addition, it should be noted that most existing studies adopt variable-centered methods (such as correlation analysis, regression analysis, structural equation model), which tends to ignore individual differences among research participants. In contrast, the person-centered approach can more accurately capture the complex relationship between speaking anxiety, self-efficacy and speaking achievement, and also find the differences between different groups of learners. Existing research (Chen & Li, 2025) proves the feasibility and unique value of this method, and it should be more widely applied in the future.

3.3 Insufficient Localization of Measurement Tools

At present, most domestic studies directly adopt foreign scales. Take the widely used “Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS)” as an example, which was developed by Horwitz et al. in 1986 for the Western classroom context. The cultural background and foreign language learning environment are different in Chinese. Affected by factors such as collectivist culture, concept of saving face and test-based education, the level of speaking anxiety of Chinese learners is often significantly higher than that of learners from other cultural backgrounds. Therefore, it is necessary to further verify the applicability of these scales in China. Although some scholars have tried to develop a local speaking anxiety scale for Chinese college students, this scale has not been widely adopted by the academic community. On the contrary, most studies still rely on the adapted version of FLCAS.

Compared with the measurement of speaking anxiety, the tools used to evaluate speaking self-efficacy are not mature enough. At present, there is a lack of a universally recognized and standardized self-efficacy scale in China, and different studies differ greatly in tool selection and dimension definition. Therefore, one of the priorities in the future is to develop speaking anxiety and self-efficacy measurement tools suitable for Chinese second language learning situations.

4. Conclusion

In summary, existing research has made some progress in revealing the relationship between speaking anxiety, self-efficacy and speaking achievement. However, it should also be recognized that there are limitations in research participants, methods and measurement tools. In addition, the exploration of the intrinsic mechanism between these variables also needs to be further explored. Future research could examine the complex interaction path between the three variables in more depth. For example, we can explore whether speaking anxiety indirectly affects speaking achievement by weakening learners' self-efficacy, or whether self-efficacy indirectly improves speaking achievement by reducing speaking anxiety.

Factors such as gender, learning motivation and learning strategies may play a moderating role in these relationships, and their impact deserves in-depth study. By incorporating mediating variables and moderating variables, researchers can build a more systematic theoretical model, which helps to deepen our understanding of the psychological mechanism underlying second language speaking acquisition. These understandings can provide more targeted and practical guidance for teaching practice, and ultimately improve learners' speaking skills.

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