

An Investigation of English Speaking Anxiety in Foreign Language Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This study attempts to examine English-major college students' anxiety in the foreign language classrooms. 114 students from the department of Applied Foreign Languages (AFL) at a national university of science and technology were recruited as the participants. A questionnaire was adopted as the instrument, designed to explore the potential causes, anxiety-provoking situations, positive and negative effects as well as physical symptoms of English speaking anxiety. It was found that worries about grammar (61%, M=3.61) and fears of making mistakes (61%, M=3.6) were the two biggest causes of English speaking anxiety for these college students. In addition, the students felt most anxious when they were unprepared (76%, M=3.90), and when they spoke in front of their teachers (67%, M=3.86). The major physical symptoms of English speaking anxiety for these English-major college students included speedy heartbeat, blank brain, and trembling voice. In reaction to speaking anxiety, around half of the students studied and practiced harder although only few students did more actively ask teachers questions or take speaking classes at the English Corner of this university.

Keywords: Foreign Language Classroom, English Speaking Anxiety, English-Major Students

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I. INTRODUCTION

Given that speaking in the target language has been seen as the most threatening aspect of foreign language learning, numerous investigations have been conducted on the subject of English speaking anxiety in the foreign language classroom (Awan, Azher, Anwar & Naz, 2010; Chuang, 2010; Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope 1986; Hou, 2013; Liu, 2006). Although the mastery of speaking skills in the target language is usually deemed as the first priority for second or foreign language learners, speaking has been such a difficult part that it can provoke great anxiety for second language acquisition (Chuang, 2010).

In Taiwan, the majority of freshmen (83.7%) in college would admit that they are most eager to improve their speaking skills of English (Wang, 2003), despite the fact that many of them do not seem to have enough chance to practice English speaking. Some Taiwanese students do not have enough confidence to speak in the classroom because they would consider grammar structure seriously and worry too much about making mistakes. With the increasing worries of grammar and fear of making mistakes in oral speech, anxiety naturally appears.

This study aims to investigate the potential factors, effects, and reactions caused by English speaking anxiety in the foreign language classrooms of the applied foreign languages department at a national university of science and technology. Research questions are addressed as follows:

1. What are the possible factors that lead to English speaking anxiety in a foreign language classroom?
2. In what situation does English speaking anxiety arise?
3. What are the positive and negative effects of English speaking anxiety on college students?
4. How do students behave when their English speaking anxiety arises?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Causes of English Speaking Anxiety

According to Samuelsson (2011), speaking anxiety is a social phobia that arises in people who feel it difficult to speak in front of people or in a group, and 15 to 20% of humans may undergo this symptom (cited in Hadziosmanovic, 2012). English speaking anxiety has been a serious problem for EFL students because these students are not used to the learning environment of English, which leads to their unwillingness to speak English in class (Liu, 2006). Additionally, most of the participants in Liu's study indicate that this anxious feeling does influence their performances and believe that those who are more confident are able to speak better or improve more. Hou (2013) further suggests that English-major students generally feel more anxious than non-English majors do because they have higher self-expectation for themselves and worry more about being left behind from others (p. 68).

Chuang (2010) concludes with four major reasons why college students feel anxious when being asked to speak English in class. They become apprehensive when answering questions without any preparation in advance, doing oral presentations, talking about their own opinions on unfamiliar topics, and lacking enough confidence in themselves (ibid). There are also other factors of anxiety such as learner personality, grammatical errors, being laughed at, fears of making mistakes, low English proficiency, and less experience of speaking English with foreigners (Liu, 2006). Ranked by Awan, Azher, Anwar and Naz (2010), 'speaking in front of others', 'worries about grammatical mistakes', 'being unable to respond quickly and smoothly', and 'worries about pronunciation' are the top four biggest causes of students' anxiety at different stages of language learning in the foreign language classroom.



Furthermore, Horwitz et al (1986) note that students tend to develop language anxiety when they need to express more complicated information, and when they are being evaluated (cited in Liu, 2006). Kitano (2001) similarly states that the degree of students' anxiety is believed to be closely related to the feeling of apprehension about others' evaluations (cited in Liu, 2006).

2.2. Positive Effects of Language Anxiety

Some researchers believe moderate stress can actually be beneficial for learning, and this is true as well for English speaking anxiety. Realizing their own weak points, hard-working students would study harder to achieve their goals. With some anxiety, students who are self-demanded could become motivated to make more progress than other students. In fact, appropriate tension and a little anxiety can make learners perform better (Alpert & Haber, 1960; Scovel, 1978). On the other hand, Hou (2013) suggests that there is a positive connection between motives and learning results because they are directly related to the quality of learners' performance and the amount of efforts invested in it. Therefore, for language learning, language anxiety may facilitate students with high self-esteem to study harder, arouse their potential, and bring about unanticipated better outcome.

2.3. Negative Effects of Language Anxiety

Although anxiety could motivate some students to learn more actively, it might reduce motivation as well (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1992). In fact, anxiety has been found to have negative connection with learning motivation and attitude, which becomes an interference for students to make up their defects (Chung, 2010; Wu, 2010). Especially, students with high anxiety usually have difficulty in dealing with tension. Being unable to relieve the stress from their

speaking anxiety, they feel nervous more easily. Language learners who are afraid of making mistakes can thus become unwilling to open their mouth to speak in English (Hou, 2013).

MacIntyre (1995) notes that non-native speakers' experience of language anxiety might deeply affect one's confidence (cited in Hadziosmanovic, 2012). Basic (2011) also suggests that the influence of speaking anxiety occurs when speaking activities in classroom are stated and required on the syllabus. Students who feel anxious tend to lose their confidence and get frustrated when they encounter difficulties in English classes. Liu (2006) further points out that students with higher level of anxiety will feel much tenser when giving individual presentations than working in a group. The anxiety of speaking English can become so intense that it results in students' unwillingness to speak in a foreign language classroom. In addition, speaking anxiety can cause inhibition of English learning and affect students' speaking ability because fear of speaking has a close connection with presenting in public places. However, with adequate exercise, students' fears could decrease by degrees. In general, anxiety is associated with students' performances (Balachandran & Skully, 2004; Tobias & Everson, 1997). When speaking in a second language, especially in English, anxiety has an adverse impact on their willingness to learn, which leads to negative effect on students' language acquisitions and performances. (Gaudry & Spielberg, 1971; Tobias, 1980).

2.4. Symptoms of English speaking Anxiety

As an emotional disorder, anxiety not only affects students' performance in class but also leads to some reactions and behaviors that they display while speaking English. Tobias (1986) indicates that



English-speaking anxiety leads to fear, nervousness, apprehension, and worry usually marked by some particular physiological signs such as pulse, tension, sweat, and so on (cited in Hou, 2013). It affects both their feeling and behaviors. Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) also note that students with anxiety have some common symptoms when they speak English, such as tenseness, trembling, sweating, cardiopalmus and sleeping disorder (cited in Chuang, 2010). Likewise, Samuelsson (2011) also asserts that anxiety has certain impact on students' conduct. They tend to evade any chance for speaking in front of others. When they have to speak to a crowd, anxious students will have physiological reactions such as talking too fast, stammering, and losing eye contact with other listeners. As a result, it is normal for anxious students to perform badly when speaking to the crowds.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Context & Participants

This research was conducted in the Department of Applied Foreign Languages at a national university of science and technology. There are eight classes in this department. Classes A are composed of students who majored in business in vocational high schools; on the other hand, classes B consist of those who majored in English in vocational high schools. Three classes (2A, 2B, and 3B) were chosen from the eight classes to participate in this study. 114 students (18 males and 96 females) who participated in this study voluntarily filled out the questionnaire. There were 124 responses that included 114 valid questionnaires and 10 invalid ones because of missing information. The effective response rate was 91.9%.

3.2. Instrument

The questionnaire designed for this investigation contains a total of 28 items divided into three main sections. Section I includes 24 Likert scale items used to investigate the possible causes of English speaking anxiety, anxiety-provoking situations as well as positive and negative effects of anxiety. Section II consists of three closed-ended questions that further examine students' reactions or physical symptoms toward English speaking anxiety. Section III gathers the participants' basic personal information such as their gender, department, and contact information.

IV. RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Research Question 1: What are the possible factors that lead to English speaking anxiety in a foreign language classroom?

TABLE 1 reports the college students' perspectives about the potential causes for English speaking anxiety. 61% of the participants were found to worry about their grammar (61%, $M=3.61$) and have fear of making mistakes (61%, $M=3.6$) while speaking English in the classroom. Nearly 60% of the participants felt nervous in that they did not understand teachers' questions (58%, $M=3.61$) and lacked sufficient amount of vocabulary (57%, $M=3.57$). Around half of the students ascribed their anxiety to poor pronunciation (53%, $M=3.46$), and lack of fluency in English (52%, $M=3.43$). 48% of the students did not have confidence in their speaking ability ($M=3.36$) and felt shy to speak English in class (47%, $M=3.31$). Fewer students had English speaking anxiety because they were afraid of being laughed at for their spoken errors (39%, $M=3.15$). The results seemed to highly coincide with those of several scholars who also found the major causes for English speaking anxiety in a foreign language classroom included worries about grammar (Awan,



Azer, Anwar & Naz 2010), fears of making mistakes words (Chung, 2010).
(Liu, 2006), and failures of understanding teachers'

TABLE 1: Causes of English Speaking Anxiety in the Foreign Language Classroom

Questionnaire Items / (N=114)	SD/D	N	A/SA	MEAN
1. I feel nervous when speaking English in class owing to lack of vocabulary.	11	38	65(57%)	3.57
2. I become anxious when speaking English in class because of poor pronunciation.	16	38	60(53%)	3.46
3. I worry about grammar while speaking English in class.	13	31	70(61%)	3.61
4. Fear of making mistakes refrains me from speaking English.	14	31	69(61%)	3.60
5. I seldom speak English in class because I don't feel confident about my language ability.	21	38	55(48%)	3.36
6. My English is not fluent enough so as to make me become uneasy while speaking English in class.	18	37	59(52%)	3.43
7. I feel shy to speak English in class.	28	32	54(48%)	3.31
8. I am afraid of speaking English in class because I don't want to be laughed at for my spoken errors.	34	36	44(39%)	3.15
9. I feel nervous easily when I don't understand teachers' questions.	14	34	66(58%)	3.61

Note. SD (Strongly Disagree) = 1; D (Disagree) = 2 ; N (Neutral) = 3 ; A (Agree) = 4 ; SA (Strongly Agree) = 5



Research Question 2: In what situations does English speaking anxiety arise?

TABLE 2 presents the kinds of situations from which English speaking anxiety may arise in a foreign language classroom. The majority of the English-major students (76%) felt anxious when they spoke English without preparation (M=3.90). Two thirds of the students became nervous when speaking English in front of their teachers (67%, M=3.86). Around half of them felt reluctant to speak English when facing a more competent English speaker (52%, M=3.44) and had anxious feelings when speaking on stage (51%, M=3.50). 47% of the students still became anxious even when they had got prepared in

advance (M=3.39). Merely 14% of the students felt uneasy when practicing English dialogues with their classmates (M=2.67). These results were quite similar to those of Kitano (2001), who also pointed out students became apprehensive when answering questions without preparation in advance and when doing oral presentations. In this department, oral presentation was usually assigned as big projects which occupy a great percentage of the grade, and students would have higher expectation on themselves to get good grade. Therefore, their anxiety seemed to rise especially in situations when their performance was being graded by the teachers (Horwitz, et al, 1986).

TABLE 2: Situations of English Speaking Anxiety in the Foreign Language Classroom

Questionnaire Items/ (N=114)	SD/D	N	A/SA	MEAN
10. I feel uneasy when I practice English dialogues with my classmates.	45	53	16(14%)	2.67
11. I get nervous when speaking English in front of my teacher.	12	26	76(67%)	3.67
12. I feel uneasy when I have to speak English in class without preparation.	8	19	87(76%)	3.90
13. Even if I have prepared in advance, I still feel anxious about speaking in English.	19	42	53(47%)	3.39
14. I have anxiety when speaking English on stage.	15	41	58(51%)	3.50
15. I don't feel like speaking English when facing someone whose English speaking is better than mine.	20	35	59(52%)	3.44

Note. SD (Strongly Disagree) = 1; D (Disagree) = 2 ; N (Neutral) = 3 ; A (Agree) = 4 ; SA (Strongly Agree) = 5



Research Question 3: What are the positive and negative effects of English speaking anxiety on college students?

TABLE 3 presents the students' perspectives on the positive effects of English speaking anxiety. More than half of the participants (55%) agreed that speaking anxiety facilitated them to study English even harder (M=3.62) while 41% started to practice

reading English articles aloud for the sake of speaking anxiety (M=3.4). Nevertheless, much fewer participants agreed that speaking anxiety made them actively ask teachers questions (18%, M=3.04), raise hands to speak up in class (19%, M=2.94), and join conversational classes at English Corner (13%, M=2.75).

TABLE 3: Positive Effects of English Speaking Anxiety in the Foreign Language Classroom

Questionnaire Items / (N=114)	SD/D	N	A/SA	MEAN
16. English speaking anxiety facilitates me to study English with more effort.	4	47	63(55%)	3.62
17. I start to practice reading English articles aloud due to my speaking anxiety.	8	59	47(41%)	3.40
18. English speaking anxiety boosts me to actively ask teachers questions about the courses.	18	76	20(18%)	3.04
19. I try to raise my hand to speak up in class when anxiety arises.	30	62	22(19%)	2.94
20. I join conversational class at English Corner owing to my English speaking anxiety.	43	56	15(13%)	2.75

Note. SD (Strongly Disagree) = 1; D (Disagree) = 2 ; N (Neutral) = 3 ; A (Agree) = 4 ; SA (Strongly Agree) = 5

TABLE 4 concerns about the negative effects of English speaking anxiety in the foreign language classroom. A low percentage of participants (25%) lost confidence in their oral ability due to English speaking anxiety (M=2.85). 11% of the students lowered their interest in English (M=2.39) and found it harder to concentrate (M=2.31) due to the

occurrence of English speaking anxiety in the foreign language classroom. Merely eight students (7%) had insomnia at night because of English speaking anxiety (M=2.22). It seemed that there were no evident negative effects of English speaking anxiety on these college students.



TABLE 4: Negative Effects of English Speaking Anxiety in the Foreign Language Classroom

Questionnaire Items / (N=114)	SD/D	N	SA/A	MEAN
21. English speaking anxiety causes my insomnia at night.	72	34	8(7%)	2.22
22. I lose confidence in my oral ability because of English speaking anxiety.	45	41	28(25%)	2.85
23. English speaking anxiety lowers my interest in English.	66	36	12(11%)	2.39
24. I find it hard to concentrate in class because of English speaking anxiety.	70	32	12(11%)	2.31

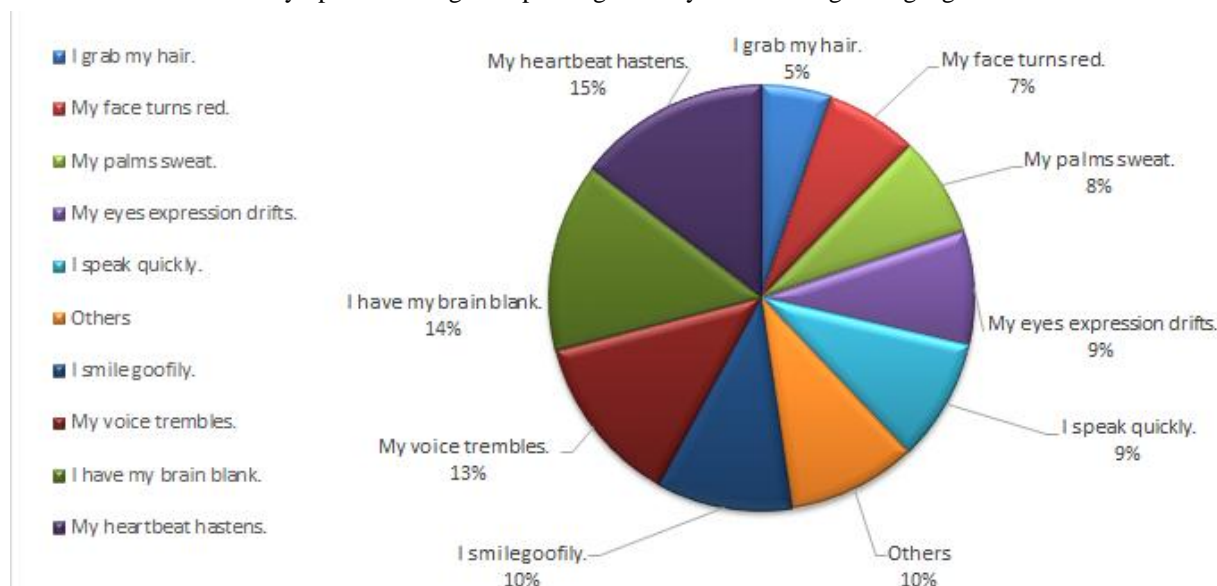
Note. SD (Strongly Disagree) = 1; D (Disagree) = 2; N (Neutral) = 3; A (Agree) = 4; SA (Strongly Agree) = 5

Research Question 4 : How do students behave when their English speaking anxiety arises?

FIGURE 1 presents the results of a closed-end question which requires the students to check all their physical reactions or symptoms toward English speaking anxiety in the foreign language classroom. It was found that the major symptoms the students had when English speaking anxiety arised were hastening heartbeat (15%), blank brain (14%), and trembling voice (13%). Other common symptoms

included goofy smiling (10%), speaking hastily (9%), drifting eyesight (9%), sweating palms (8%), blushing (7%), and grabbing hair (5%). The symptoms less than 5% were categorized as ‘others’ in the figure. Despite the percentages were not very high, the major symptoms of speaking anxiety such as hastening heartbeat, brain blank, and trembling voice were all harmful or even detrimental for the development of English speaking skills in the foreign language classroom.

FIGURE 1: Symptoms of English Speaking Anxiety in the Foreign Language Classroom



V. CONCLUSION & IMPLICATIONS

Based on the findings of this investigation, several conclusions and implications could be drawn to elaborate the college students' English speaking anxiety in the foreign language classroom. First, worries about grammar and fears of making mistakes were the two biggest causes of the students' speaking anxiety because Taiwan was an EFL learning context where grammar translation teaching method used to be prevalent in tradition. Second, the English major students arouse nervousness in certain situations which might ascribe to the high self-esteem of these English-major students. Many of them felt especially anxious when they were not prepared in advance, when they spoke in front of their teachers, and when they presented on stage. As for the effects of English speaking anxiety, half students were found to study English harder and practice reading articles aloud. However, very few of the students turned to teachers actively, tried to speak up in class or took conversation courses at English Corner. The most common physical symptoms these students had developed in reaction to English speaking anxiety included speedy heartbeat, a blank brain, and trembling voice. Therefore, teachers still need to ensure a less threatening learning environment, for these common physical symptoms toward English speaking anxiety are all disadvantageous or even harmful for learning English speaking in foreign language classrooms.

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外語課堂之英語口說焦慮的研究調查

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摘 要

本研究的主旨在探討大學主修英文的學生對於英語課程學習的焦慮。研究對象為一百一十四位來自一所國立科技大學應用外語系的學生。本研究採問卷方式，目的在探索造成英語口說焦慮的可能因素、發生情況、正負面影響、以及焦慮時的徵狀。研究結果顯示：擔心文法(61%, M=3.61)、害怕犯錯(61%, M=3.6)是兩個口說焦慮的主要原因。大多數的同學表示他們在沒有準備的情況下(76%, M=3.90)以及在老師面前說英文(67%, M=3.86)最讓他們感到焦慮。常見的焦慮症狀包括心跳加快、腦筋空白與聲音顫抖。面對英語口說焦慮，近半數的學生更認真學習英文，然而只有少數同學更加積極地請教老師問題或參加學校的外語學習園區的英文口說課。

關鍵字：外語課堂、英語口說焦慮、英語主修學生

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