

Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety among Chinese Students

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Abstract: Foreign language speaking anxiety is a significant issue faced by many students worldwide, particularly among Chinese learners. The Chinese educational system strongly emphasizes written examinations and rote memorization. These factors often result in a relative lack of focus on developing oral communication skills. This educational approach, when coupled with cultural factors that discourage public speaking and a fear of making mistakes, can have a profound effect on students' anxiety when required to speak in a foreign language. Additionally, the high societal expectations and pressure placed on students to excel academically can increase stress levels. This study investigates the impact of foreign language speaking anxiety on Chinese students, emphasizing its causes, manifestations, effects, and strategies for reduction. A literature analysis approach is employed to identify the key factors contributing to this anxiety, and specific ways in which it manifests among Chinese students are examined, such as avoidance of speaking in class and heightened nervousness during oral exams. Furthermore, the paper explores the broader effects of speaking anxiety on students' overall language acquisition and psychological well-being. To mitigate these challenges, the study proposes a series of strategies to reduce speaking anxiety, including creating a supportive learning environment, implementing positive reinforcement techniques, integrating anxiety-reducing activities into the curriculum, and providing psychological support. These findings underscore the need for educators to adopt comprehensive strategies to alleviate anxiety and foster an atmosphere conducive to active participation and communication. This research contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of foreign language speaking anxiety and offers practical recommendations to improve language education practices in China.

Keywords: Foreign language speaking anxiety, Chinese students, Literature analysis

1. Introduction

In today's increasingly globalized world, foreign language skills have become important to an individual's competitiveness. Fluency in a foreign language is necessary in both academic and professional environments. However, many students who have invested a great deal of time and effort in learning a foreign language often face serious anxiety problems when it comes to actual oral communication. This anxiety not only affects their academic performance and mental health but also hinders their effective communication in intercultural communication [1,2].

According to Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope, foreign language anxiety is known as a specific type of anxiety characterized by discomfort, fear, and nervousness when speaking or writing in a foreign language [3]. And speaking in the target language is the most feared language skill. And speaking in the target language is a more difficult language skill. Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety (FLSA) refers to the tension, uneasiness, and fear that learners experience when using a foreign language for oral communication [3]. The study of FLSA has gradually gained attention in the past few decades, and researchers have explored its causes, manifestations, and effects on learners. Especially in China, the phenomenon of FLSA is particularly prevalent, with many students showing high levels of anxiety in foreign language classes, and this anxiety seriously affects their learning outcomes and oral proficiency development [2]. In recent years, there has been a gradual increase in research on FLSA among Chinese students. Studies have shown that cultural factors, self-perception, and teachers' teaching styles are important causes of FLSA [2,4]. In addition, FLSA manifests itself in various forms among Chinese students, such as avoidance of class discussions, nervousness during tests, and low self-esteem when communicating with foreign teachers [5]. However, there is still a lack of research on its specific manifestations as well as existing studies have focused on the causes and effects of FLSA. There is still a lack of research on its specific manifestations and mitigation strategies [2,6]. This study aims to systematically analyze FLSA among Chinese students, explore its causes, manifestations, and effects, and propose effective mitigation strategies. Through the literature analysis method, this paper will integrate and evaluate the research findings in recent years to provide a comprehensive perspective. This will contribute to an in-depth understanding of the impact of FLSA on Chinese students and provide valuable guidance for educators and policymakers to improve teaching methods and learning environments [2].

The contribution of this study is to provide a systematic and comprehensive perspective by synthesizing and analyzing the research findings in recent years to reveal the multifaceted effects of foreign language speaking anxiety on Chinese students. This paper not only enriches the theoretical research on FLSA but also puts forward specific pedagogical suggestions and policy recommendations to help Chinese students better cope with foreign language speaking anxiety and improve their learning outcomes and intercultural communication competence [2,6].

To sum up, anxiety about foreign language speaking is an important factor that affects the learning and intercultural communication of Chinese students. This paper analyzes Chinese students' anxiety about foreign language speaking from the perspectives of causes, specific manifestations, influencing aspects, and improvement. By systematically analyzing the causes, manifestations, and effects and proposing effective mitigation strategies, this study aims to provide substantial guidance for educational practice to improve Chinese students' foreign language speaking ability and overall learning experience.

2. Foreign language speaking anxiety

2.1. Causes of Foreign Language Anxiety in Chinese Students

Chinese culture places a high value on modesty and avoiding mistakes, which manifests itself in foreign language learning in the form of students' extreme fear of making mistakes. Liu and Jackson found that Chinese students are often afraid to take the initiative to speak in class for fear of being criticized or ridiculed for their mistakes [4]. This fear of making mistakes not only limits their classroom participation but also exacerbates their speaking anxiety [4]. In addition, China's test-driven education system focuses more on test scores. As a result, students learn and practice within safe boundaries rather than take risks with their oral expression. This educational environment makes students less tolerant of language learning errors, increasing speaking anxiety [4,7]. Students are taught from an early age that mistakes are unacceptable, which makes them less adventurous and

creative in language learning and leads to anxiety when faced with oral expression in a foreign language. In the traditional Chinese education system, teachers are usually regarded as the authority of knowledge and the standard of judgment, which makes students even more afraid of making mistakes in the classroom for fear of being criticized or losing face because of their mistakes [8]. This cultural context not only restricts students' freedom of linguistic expression but also causes them to be very reserved and cautious in classroom interactions, thus exacerbating their oral language anxiety. In addition, high family and social expectations of students also put them under great psychological pressure in language learning, and they are afraid of failing to meet these expectations, which may affect their self-esteem and sense of self-worth [8].

Self-perception, i.e., student's evaluation of their language ability, is an important internal factor that affects speaking anxiety. Jiang and Dewaele's study showed that negative evaluations of self-perception significantly increased students' speaking anxiety [7]. When students perceive that their pronunciation, grammar, or vocabulary use is not standardized enough, they tend to doubt their language ability, which leads to anxiety. Wu, in his study of Chinese TESOL students, found that such negative evaluations of self-perception were largely due to students' pursuit of linguistic perfectionism. They hoped that their oral expression could reach the level of native speakers, and this unrealistic expectation often led to low self-esteem and nervousness in actual communication [9].

Students' tendency toward perfectionism in self-assessment makes them extremely sensitive to their linguistic errors, limiting their class participation and making them feel very nervous and uncomfortable with their linguistic expressions [10]. Many students remained silent for fear of making mistakes and being criticized, which further weakened their oral competence and self-efficacy. Low self-efficacy makes students lack confidence when facing oral tasks, and they often worry about their poor performance, which leads to strong anxiety [8].

Fear of errors results from a combination of cultural factors and self-perception. Yu pointed out that students' heightened sensitivity to errors in the foreign language classroom stems from the culture's negative evaluation of errors and negative feedback on self-perception [2]. This view is further supported by Chen, Sun, and Wang's study, which demonstrated that students' fear of errors and negative evaluation of their linguistic competence in an online foreign language learning environment significantly increased their speaking anxiety [11]. This anxiety is not limited to classroom performance. Still, it extends to oral practice and actual communication outside the classroom, making it difficult for students to relax and feel comfortable communicating in a foreign language in a variety of situations [2,10,11].

Students' fear of making mistakes stems not only from their perfectionist tendencies but also from peer pressure. In the classroom, students often fear that their mistakes will make them the butt of their peers' jokes, which makes them more cautious and nervous about expressing themselves [10]. In addition, the teacher's attitude and manner in correcting students' mistakes can also significantly impact students' anxiety. If teachers are too strict or critical when correcting mistakes, students feel ashamed and stressed, increasing their speaking anxiety [8]. In conclusion, cultural factors and self-perception play an important role in Chinese students' speaking anxiety.

2.2. Specific Manifestations of Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety Among Chinese Students

Specific manifestations of foreign language anxiety among Chinese students include avoiding classroom discussions, showing extreme nervousness and stress during speaking tests, and feeling inferior and uncomfortable when speaking with foreign teachers or classmates [6]. Liu and Jackson's study showed that up to 70% of Chinese students reported remaining silent in class and unwilling to actively participate in discussions for fear of making mistakes [4]. This behavior limits their opportunities for language practice, affecting language proficiency. This avoidance behavior is usually rooted in low self-confidence in one's language proficiency and excessive worry about the

negative consequences of making a mistake. For example, Dong's study supports this finding by stating that students' avoidance of classroom discussions hinders their learning and may also deepen their language anxiety [12]. Horwitz et al. state that foreign language classroom anxiety causes students to avoid various interactions during the learning process to reduce their anxiety [3].

In speaking tests, Bai's survey showed that about 60% of students showed significant physiological and psychological reactions, such as rapid heartbeat, sweating, and anxiety, when faced with a speaking test [8]. This nervousness is usually caused by excessive worry about test results and fear of failure [8]. Nervousness during testing can directly affect students' ability to express themselves, causing problems such as frequent pauses, speaking too quickly, or answering questions incorrectly [8]. Liu, Lin, and Zhang highlight the dynamic role of anxiety and motivation in foreign language learning and point out the negative impact of the stress of the test environment on learner performance [13].

When communicating orally with foreign teachers or classmates, Chen et al. found that about 45% of Chinese students often feel low self-esteem and anxiety due to fear of their language mistakes [11]. This insecurity stems from negative evaluations of their language skills and hypersensitivity to others' evaluations [11]. Differences in the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of foreign teachers increased communication complexity and made students feel more nervous during the communication process. Wu's study showed that Chinese TESOL students showed similar anxiety during the workshop, worried about being judged by others for their lack of language competence [9]. Dong further pointed out that the lack of understanding and misunderstanding caused by such cultural differences may make students feel more nervous about cross-cultural communication and create persistent resistance [12]. It can be seen that foreign language speaking anxiety is widespread among Chinese students and manifests itself in the form of avoiding classroom discussions, nervousness and stress during speaking tests, and low self-esteem and discomfort when communicating with foreign teachers or classmates. These manifestations of anxiety reflect students' lack of confidence in their language skills and their fear of making mistakes.

2.3. The Impact of High Levels of Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety on Chinese Students

High levels of foreign language speaking anxiety significantly affect Chinese students' academic performance, leading to their poor performance in speaking tests and classroom discussions and can also reduce their interest and motivation in learning a foreign language and hinder their ability to communicate across cultures [2,5].

High levels of foreign language speaking anxiety significantly affect Chinese students' motivation. According to Amoah and Yeboah, foreign language speaking anxiety is one of the major psychological factors contributing to Chinese EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners' speaking difficulties [14]. Anxiety causes students to have negative feelings toward speaking learning and reduces their motivation [14]. Chen and Hwang's study also showed that in a virtual reality environment, reduced anxiety levels can significantly increase students' motivation to learn. In contrast, in a traditional classroom environment, students with high anxiety levels show lower motivation to learn [15]. This suggests that reducing anxiety can effectively improve students' motivation and increase their interest in learning spoken English. In addition, another study pointed out that foreign language speaking anxiety significantly affects students' achievement motivation and self-efficacy [16]. High levels of speaking anxiety made students afraid of public performance. They reduced their achievement motivation and self-efficacy, weakening their motivation to learn and making them reluctant to participate in class discussions and speaking tests [16].

High levels of foreign language speaking anxiety significantly affect Chinese students' second language achievement. Li and Wei's study found that language learning anxiety significantly reduced the second language achievement of rural Chinese middle school students [17]. Data from the study

showed that the average second language proficiency of students with higher levels of anxiety was 15% lower than that of students with lower levels of anxiety [17]. Due to the stress and negative emotions caused by anxiety, students' engagement and motivation are suppressed, which affects their learning outcomes. Secondly, Oruç and Demirci found that foreign language anxiety indirectly leads to a decrease in second language achievement through a decrease in students' classroom engagement [18]. The data showed that for every unit increase in anxiety level, students' classroom engagement decreased by 20%, leading to a decrease in second language achievement of approximately 12% [18]. High levels of anxiety discourage students from participating in classroom interactions and exercises, reducing opportunities for language practice, which in turn affects their language learning outcomes and final grades. Again, Chen and Zhang's study indicated that lower levels of emotional intelligence were associated with higher levels of foreign language anxiety, and this anxiety significantly affected students' second language performance [19]. The data showed that 75% of students with lower emotional intelligence had high levels of foreign language anxiety, and their second language scores were, 18% lower than those of students with higher emotional intelligence [19]. Students with lower emotional intelligence are more likely to experience anxiety when learning a foreign language. This anxiety interferes with their language learning process and leads to underachievement. Finally, through a meta-analysis of several studies, Dikmen showed that there is a significant negative correlation between anxiety in foreign language learning and foreign language achievement [20]. The results of the meta-analysis showed that the correlation coefficient between anxiety level and language performance was -0.45, which means that high levels of foreign language anxiety significantly reduced students' language performance and affected their second language performance [20]. These studies consistently show that high levels of foreign language speaking anxiety significantly affect Chinese students' second language performance by increasing negative emotions and stress and decreasing classroom engagement and motivation.

Foreign language speaking anxiety is a common phenomenon among Chinese students, and this anxiety has a profound effect on the strategies students use in intercultural communication. Foreign language speaking anxiety often leads students to adopt more avoidance strategies in intercultural communication. These strategies include avoiding active speaking, minimizing interactions with foreigners, and avoiding participation in activities that require oral expression. By avoiding communication, students attempt to reduce anxiety and tension, but such strategies limit their opportunities for language practice and hinder the improvement of language proficiency and intercultural communication skills. Research has shown that anxiety tends to cause students to avoid language communication and reduce opportunities for language practice, thus affecting the development of language proficiency [21]. In intercultural communication, anxiety makes students more likely to rely on native language strategies, such as using native language vocabulary and phrases in communication or communicating directly in the native language. Although such strategies may reduce anxiety in the short term, they are not conducive to improving students' foreign language proficiency and the depth of intercultural communication. Recent studies have pointed out that language anxiety causes students to rely more on their native language in intercultural communication, which affects the improvement of foreign language proficiency and the effectiveness of intercultural communication [22]. To alleviate anxiety, students might opt for simplified language, such as utilizing straightforward sentence structures and vocabulary to convey intricate concepts. While this approach can minimize language errors, it may also undermine the precision of information and the profundity of communication, constraining students' capacity to articulate complex ideas and participate in advanced discourse. Research indicates that while using simplified language may alleviate anxiety, it could also curtail the efficacy and depth of communication [23].

2.4. Measures to Improve Chinese Students' Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety

Creating a supportive learning environment, using interactive teaching methods, and providing more opportunities for speaking practice are effective strategies to reduce Chinese students' foreign language speaking anxiety, and these measures can help improve their self-confidence and speaking ability. Research has shown that a supportive learning environment can significantly reduce students' speaking anxiety, and he pointed out that by providing positive feedback and encouragement, teachers can help students feel more support and recognition, thus reducing their anxiety in oral expression [24]. Jin, Dewaele, and MacIntyre emphasized that by promoting positive emotions and providing constructive feedback, teachers can effectively reduce students' foreign language speaking anxiety and improve their learning experience and language proficiency [25]. These studies suggest that the supportive role of the teacher is crucial in reducing students' anxiety and that a positive classroom climate helps students to participate in speaking activities more confidently.

Interactive teaching methods have been shown to reduce anxiety by providing students with more opportunities to engage in speaking practice through increased interaction with both their teacher and their peers. Amoah and Yeboah's research demonstrated that interactive teaching methods, including group discussions, role-playing, and interactive games, can significantly decrease students' speaking anxiety while enhancing their speaking ability and confidence [14]. Furthermore, El Shazly's study highlighted the benefits of utilizing artificial intelligence technologies, such as AI virtual assistants, to support teaching. These technologies offer personalized practice and immediate feedback, leading to a significant reduction in speaking anxiety and an improvement in speaking performance [26]. By providing a non-judgmental practice environment, this technology enables students to express themselves more freely, ultimately reducing anxiety.

Woodrow pointed out that frequent oral practice can help students become familiar with the language-using environment and gradually reduce their anxiety about oral expression [27]. He further emphasized that by increasing the opportunities for practical practice, such as classroom discussions, presentations, and role-plays, students can gradually overcome their fear of making mistakes and increase their confidence in authentic communication [24]. In addition, Amoah and Yeboah support this view by arguing that by increasing practice opportunities, students' fluency and accuracy in language use were significantly improved [14].

In conclusion, creating a supportive learning environment, using interactive teaching methods, and providing more opportunities for oral practice can reduce Chinese students' foreign language speaking anxiety and significantly improve their self-confidence and oral expression. These measures help students achieve better results and experiences in language learning by enhancing their positive emotions and practical application skills. Educators should emphasize applying these strategies to better support students in their language learning journey.

3. Discussion

This paper thoroughly examines existing literature to present a detailed exploration of the primary causes of foreign language speaking anxiety among Chinese students. It particularly focuses on the impact of psychological factors and self-perception. Research indicates that the fear of making mistakes and negative self-assessment of language proficiency are fundamental factors contributing to foreign language speaking anxiety among Chinese students [2,4]. These psychological barriers influence students' emotional well-being and have tangible negative effects in practical language usage scenarios, such as avoiding classroom discussions, exhibiting extreme nervousness and stress during speaking tests, and experiencing low self-esteem and discomfort in oral communication with foreign teachers or classmates [6]. Moreover, high levels of foreign language speaking anxiety significantly impact students' academic performance, resulting in poor performance in speaking tests

and classroom discussions, diminished interest and motivation in foreign language learning, and hindered the development of intercultural communication skills [2,5]. Consequently, this study underscores the importance of creating a supportive learning environment, employing interactive teaching methods, and providing more speaking practice opportunities as effective strategies to alleviate foreign language speaking anxiety among Chinese students [2,4]. Implementation of these strategies can help students enhance their confidence and oral expression in a positive and supportive setting. Educators and school administrators should consider integrating educational resources and counselling services to design instructional programs and activities that effectively reduce students' anxiety and boost their confidence in language use.

To better understand and address Chinese students' anxiety about foreign language speaking, follow-up studies should consider the following aspects: First, deepen research on cultural factors. Follow-up studies should explore how factors specific to Chinese culture, such as face culture, collectivism, and educational styles, affect students' foreign language speaking anxiety. These cultural factors play an important role in students' self-perceptions and interactions with others, and further understanding of these factors can help develop more targeted mitigation strategies. Second, research on personalized teaching strategies. With the development of technology, personalized learning is gradually becoming possible. Future research could explore how AI and big data technologies can be used to provide personalized speaking practice and feedback to meet the needs of different students. For example, AI virtual assistants can provide customized practice plans and instant feedback based on students' performance, effectively reducing speaking anxiety [26].

The need to assess long-term effects and prioritize future research in this area is evident. Most existing studies have focused on short-term interventions, and there is a clear need for further investigation into the long-term effects of mitigation strategies. Long-term follow-up studies of students to evaluate the effectiveness of supportive environments and interactive teaching methods in reducing speaking anxiety and enhancing speaking ability over time will yield more reliable evidence to support the use of these strategies [24,25]. Additionally, the significance of cross-cultural comparative studies should not be underestimated. While Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety (FLSA) is prevalent globally, students from diverse cultural backgrounds may experience varied sources and manifestations of anxiety. Therefore, future studies should consider conducting cross-cultural comparisons to explore the similarities and differences of FLSA in different cultural contexts. Drawing on successful experiences from other countries can potentially optimize foreign language learning methods for Chinese students [14]. In addition to teaching strategies, research on the effects of psychological interventions also warrants attention. There is a need for the exploration of different types of psychological interventions, such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), positive thinking training, and emotion management techniques, to evaluate their effectiveness in reducing foreign language anxiety. Furthermore, combining these interventions with teaching strategies can offer comprehensive solutions [27]. Lastly, teacher training and development are pivotal. Teachers play a crucial role in students' language learning, and further research should focus on improving their ability to support and reduce students' speaking anxiety in the classroom through teacher training. This training could encompass positive psychology, interactive teaching methods, and creating a supportive learning environment [25]. Research in these areas has the potential to provide a more comprehensive understanding and solutions to Chinese students' foreign language speaking anxiety, ultimately enhancing their foreign language learning outcomes and intercultural communication skills.

4. Conclusion

This paper explores the causes, manifestations, and effects of foreign language anxiety among Chinese students and finds that a combination of factors, including cultural background, self-perception, and educational system, leads to the prevalence of anxiety in foreign language learning.

This anxiety not only affects students' classroom participation and language practice opportunities but also has a significant negative impact on their motivation and second language performance. Chinese students' anxiety about foreign language speaking can be effectively reduced by creating a supportive learning environment, using interactive teaching methods, and providing more opportunities for oral practice. Their oral expression and self-confidence can be enhanced. This will contribute to students' academic progress and promote their intercultural communication skills and overall quality in their future careers. Educators and school administrators should actively explore and implement these strategies to better support students in their language learning journey.

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