# A Study on the Causes and Influences of Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety in College Students

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*Abstract:* As the trend of global integration becomes more and more obvious, the ability to communicate in oral English becomes increasingly important. However, many students have great anxiety in the process of English learning, which has a huge impact on the improvement of students' English level. This paper will use case analysis to review the research on foreign language speaking anxiety at home and abroad, starting from one of the important components of foreign language learning anxiety, and review the research on foreign language speaking anxiety from four aspects: theory, cause, influence on motivation and influence on achievement, based on two main directions of theoretical and empirical research. The results show that (1) Horwitz's foreign language anxiety theory and Krashen's affective filter hypothesis are the main ones; (2) Speaking anxiety can be simply divided into internal anxiety and external anxiety; (3) Speaking anxiety has both positive and negative effects on students' learning motivation; (4) High speaking anxiety is not conducive to students' performance progress. Based on the results of the analysis, this paper reviews the shortcomings of the research on foreign language speaking anxiety and looks forward to the future of the research.

*Keywords:* Speaking anxiety, English learning, Foreign language anxiety.

## 1. Introduction

Oral English ability is a fundamental skill that students should have in the new era, and it is also an essential part of testing English learning and operation ability. A strong level of oral English allows middle school students to communicate effectively in social activities and prepares them for future career opportunities. It also equips them to better meet the demands of social development and international communication. However, many students are very nervous about oral English communication. They are afraid to speak English, which will affect the accuracy and fluency of oral English expression. As a result, they cannot reach the essential requirement of fluent oral English expression.

Anxiety constitutes a pivotal area of psychological inquiry, garnering scholarly attention since the 1940s, with research into foreign language anxiety emerging in the 1970s, and Horwitz, an American psychologist, was the first to delineate the concept of foreign language anxiety [1]. He argues that foreign language anxiety, unlike generalized anxiety, emerges uniquely during language learning and exhibits distinct features. It constitutes "a unique blend of self-perception, beliefs, emotions, and

behaviors associated with foreign language learning in the classroom." Various researchers have subsequently provided their unique interpretations of this anxiety. For example, Aida sees it as the pronounced fear and tension learners display during second language acquisition. Elaine and Horwitz classify it as situation-specific, akin to stage fright or test anxiety. Currently, academic research primarily focuses on pinpointing the sources of foreign language anxiety and exploring effective strategies to mitigate it, often from the teachers' perspective, emphasizing classroom techniques to alleviate students' anxiety.

Speaking anxiety, a component of foreign language anxiety hinders the enhancement of English learners' speaking skills. It may lead learners to dread speaking or refrain from expressing themselves in English, adversely affecting their English proficiency and holistic development. Thus, examining the link between spoken English and middle school students' anxiety and mitigating measures is crucial.

This paper will summarize and analyze current research on oral anxiety within academic circles. It aims to address the causes of speaking anxiety, its impact on middle school students' learning, and the relationship between oral anxiety and academic achievement. After reviewing the development stage of oral anxiety research, summarizing the main theories, and sorting out the main contents, problems are found, and suggestions are put forward so as to point out the direction for future research.

## 2. Theories on Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety

### 2.1. Affective Filter Hypothesis

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, renowned American linguist Krashen introduced a comprehensive second language acquisition framework. Initially, he presented the Monitor Model, later expanding it in the early 1980s with the core "Input Hypothesis." Thus, his second language acquisition theory is known as the "Input Hypothesis Model" [2].

The theory posits that language input can only permeate through filters to reach the language acquisition mechanism and be assimilated by the brain. The affective filter hypothesis underscores the role of learners' emotional factors in influencing the assimilation of language input during second language acquisition. These factors can impede or expedite the acquisition process, contingent on the learner's emotional disposition. A clear learning objective, high motivation, robust self-esteem, and optimal anxiety levels weaken the "emotional filter," whereas their absence strengthens it. In language acquisition, a potent emotional filter erects a barrier in the brain, impeding language input from accessing the acquisition device, thereby hindering acquisition. Conversely, a weakened emotional filter facilitates the seamless entry of comprehensible language input into the acquisition mechanism, accelerating the acquisition process. Students can actively engage in learning by reducing the affective filter and dismantling psychological barriers, fostering a more conducive environment conducive to effective language acquisition.

The primary determinants of effective filtering encompass learners' motivation, self-assurance, and anxiety. Language learning motivation serves as the impetus and accelerator for learners' endeavors. From a sociolinguistic perspective, motivation can be bifurcated into integrative and instrumental types. Integrative motivation signifies an interest in the target language culture or a desire for enhanced communication with its speakers. Instrumental motivation, conversely, pertains to learning primarily for exams, job prospects, etc. Learners' self-assurance reflects a holistic evaluation of their capabilities, impacting their language acquisition and application. Learner anxiety denotes an emotional state detrimental to language learning, encompassing unease, apprehension, dread, and tension, leading to heightened emotional filtering and impeding language acquisition.

## 2.2. Broaden-and-Build Theory of Positive Emotions

In 1998, Fredrickson proposed the extended-construct theory of positive emotions to explain the differences in adaptive meaning between positive and negative emotions [3]. The positive emotion expansion-building theory suggests that positive emotions broaden thought-action repertoires, fostering the development of enduring personal resources—intellectual, physical, mental, and social—yielding long-term adaptive advantages. It encompasses ten key emotions, two primary, and two supplementary hypotheses.

The extended-construct theory of positive emotions originally proposed four key positive emotions, including joy, interest, satisfaction, and love. Fredrickson then added pride to the positive sentiment in 2001 [4]. These positive emotions trigger a pattern of assessment of the current environment, expand the momentary range of thought and action, and construct lasting personal resources. Resilient learners use positive emotions, consciously or unconsciously, to undo negative emotional experiences and physiological arousal, to stay close to and explore new things, and to maintain an active connection with the environment [5].

## 3. Empirical Studies on Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety

This part will systematically describe the empirical research results on foreign language speaking anxiety.

## 3.1. The Causes of Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety

Many scholars have given their own understanding of the expression of anxiety in oral language. Wang Chunjuan and Zhang Rui believe that various pressures mainly cause anxiety, and these pressures can be simply divided into internal pressures and external pressures [6]. Some students are cowardly and lack self-confidence, manifested in the classroom by not looking up and avoiding eye contact with the teacher. oral anxiety in these students is significantly higher than that of confident and expressive students. While some students are eager to improve their oral communication skills, comparing themselves to others can trigger anxiety. When they perceive their performance as inadequate or notice others performing better, feelings of self-doubt and anxiety often arise. Additionally, when some students are asked to practice the language one-on-one with peers or teachers, they often feel as though they are being scrutinized. This heightened sense of evaluation can make them so anxious that they hesitate to speak, fearing mistakes. In an effort to present their best language skills, they may stop immediately upon noticing any errors, further hindering their progress. The anxiety of making further mistakes makes him afraid to say more.

Zhang Fuzhuang also put forward similar views in his paper on overcoming language anxiety in English classroom teaching, but he further divided anxiety into three categories [7]. The first is temperament anxiety, which is a kind of anxiety that people in any situation may trigger. It is a kind of long-term anxiety and is related to the personality characteristics of students. People with high temperament anxiety will form anxiety in various situations. The second is primary anxiety; this kind of anxiety mainly exists in a specific environment, a specific time of anxiety, such as the anxiety state presented before the exam. Situational anxiety is mainly a form of anxiety derived from a specific situation. Situational anxiety is mainly established in an independent situation and is relatively fixed. It is also the most common anxiety for students with poor English performance, and it will present a certain degree of anxiety in English classes.

In Mukdad's research, she divides the factors causing oral anxiety into three types: linguistic factors, social factors, and psychological factors, and points out that language factors are the most likely to cause anxiety [8]. During initial language acquisition, linguistic factors frequently induce anxiety. Learners at this stage often experience significant pressure when attempting to speak in the

target language, stemming from their limited understanding of language components and rudimentary grasp of grammar, which triggers anxiety. Moreover, learners' psychological anxiety often stems from misconceptions in the language learning process. Many learners prioritize native-like pronunciation over accuracy in target language communication, leading them to focus excessively on their accent and, consequently, shy away from speaking due to accent-related fears.

## 3.2. The Influence of Speaking Anxiety on Students' Motivation

Foreign language anxiety has a profound impact on students' learning motivation. Wang Tianjian proposed language anxiety and efficacy [9]. In his paper, he shows that language anxiety is negatively correlated with efficacy, and efficacy is positively correlated with listening, speaking, reading, and writing (although anxious people tend to underestimate their abilities, non-anxious people tend to overestimate them). It can be theoretically explained that anxiety is negatively correlated with skill achievement because worry and skill achievement are cause and effect of each other. On the one hand, falling behind in skills can lead to critical evaluation from individuals, peers, teachers, or parents. On the other hand, anxiety will aggravate the degree of skill lag because anxiety will attenuate learning behavior and learning efficiency. However, he also suggests that anxiety and efficacy also have important implications for language education. On the one hand, information on anxiety and efficacy can help language teachers to know students' grasp of skills and timely repair gaps. Measuring results of concern and efficacy can also be used as a basis for class placement and group teaching, thus saving language teachers from formal testing Time and expense. On the other hand, information about students' anxiety and self-efficacy can help teachers identify psychological issues promptly. This allows teachers to reduce excessive anxiety, correct inappropriate self-efficacy beliefs, and ultimately promote the comprehensive development of students' overall abilities.

Lv Hongyan believes that negative evaluation anxiety and communication anxiety are the two most prominent manifestations of oral anxiety [10]. From a psychological perspective, negative evaluation anxiety can be defined as the fear of being judged by others, the disappointment resulting from negative evaluations, and the anticipation of future negative judgments. Such anxiety can undermine an individual's self-esteem and confidence, leading to anticipatory anxiety both before and during social interactions, which may increase their tendency to worry excessively. Individuals who are overly concerned with the opinions of others tend to adopt behaviors that minimize the potential for negative evaluations, such as avoiding initiating conversations or remaining silent to prevent speaking, particularly if they believe their pronunciation, accuracy, fluency, or content are inadequate. They fear teacher dissatisfaction or ridicule from classmates. The behavioral manifestation of communication anxiety is often characterized by interactional withdrawal. In Chinese English classes, influenced by traditional culture, most students hesitate to speak up. One factor is the fear of being perceived as "showing off" by peers. Another is the traditional teacher-centered classroom model, where students tend to receive knowledge passively. However, it is also believed that a moderate level of anxiety can serve as a positive factor in language learning, maintaining learners in a heightened, active, and agile state of mind. This mild, non-relaxed emotional state can modestly enhance the process of second language acquisition.

Kiruthiga and Christopher point out in their paper that confidence is the most influential factor when it comes to speaking skills [11]. Elevating students' self-confidence corresponds to an enhancement in their speaking abilities. Motivation ranks second in significance for determining speaking proficiency. Highly motivated learners exhibit superior oral skills, whereas lacking motivation results in poor oral English. Confident students engage more in learning, experience less anxiety, and are more adept at goal-setting and interacting with teachers. Kiruthiga and Christopher recommend that teachers consistently bolster learners' self-esteem, alleviate pressure, foster enthusiasm, and mitigate oral anxiety to elevate their English proficiency.

In addition, Sun Yihan divides oral anxiety into three types in her paper [12]. The students of the normal and rectangular type hold a neutral attitude toward oral learning, neither active nor passive. Therefore, the level of oral anxiety is also medium. In terms of oral English ability, although they do not worry about their oral English level on the surface, they still reveal signals that they are not confident in their oral English ability. Therefore, in the classroom, although they can complete tasks according to the teacher's requirements and participate in classroom activities, the class participation is not high, and they rarely actively raise their hands to answer questions, even if the answer is more superficial, and there is a certain tension, panic, and other emotions. Over-positive students lack confidence in their oral ability, worry about their own expression mistakes, and worry about the negative evaluation of teachers and classmates. For this reason, in order to maintain the image of their body, they will learn to speak using the main movement of the product pole and avoid mistakes. She also pointed out that the division of the polar focus is usually the class "end of the two poles" students. That is to say, one is the top ranking, the pursuit of perfection of excellent students; One is low-ranking students with strong self-esteem. This state will bring great psychological pressure to the top students, who are worried about the teacher's negative evaluation, and the poor students, although their grades are low because of strong self-esteem, will actively perform in the classroom. The last category is passive avoidant. These students lack confidence in their oral skills and fear receiving negative feedback from others about their performance. As a result, they tend to avoid practicing spoken English, hindering their language learning progress. Passive, avoidant students tend to be at the bottom of the class and have a serious lack of self-confidence.

### 3.3. The Influence of Speaking Anxiety on Students' Achievement

Anxiety, as an emotional variable, also depends on the level of students' learning ability and IQ [6]. The correlation between learning ability, anxiety levels, and learning outcomes is intricate. Specifically, as learning ability increases, anxiety levels tend to decrease, minimizing the adverse impact on learning efficacy. Conversely, individuals with lower learning ability and low anxiety experience a more pronounced negative effect on their learning outcomes. Notably, those with high intelligence quotient (IQ) and low anxiety do not perform as well academically as those with high IQ and high anxiety. In contrast, those with low IQ and low anxiety outperform their high-anxiety counterparts. Essentially, when dealing with complex and challenging learning material, high anxiety can enhance learning for high-IQ individuals but hinder it for those with lower IQ. Furthermore, high learning pressure acts as a catalyst for low-anxiety learners, yielding favorable learning outcomes. Conversely, minimal learning pressure benefits those prone to anxiety (highly anxious individuals), also resulting in positive learning effects.

There is a significant negative correlation between students' anxiety levels and oral English scores and students' total scores [10]. The oral expression ability and other skills of students in the low anxiety group are higher than those in the high anxiety group. Students with high anxiety often worry about making language mistakes, fearing that their lack of fluency will lead to disapproval from teachers and ridicule from classmates. Fear of losing face exacerbates tension and anxiety, impeding language performance. Conversely, low-anxiety students actively engage in class discussions, prioritizing information comprehension over grammatical accuracy. Lv Hongyan noted a significant positive link between strategy use and both oral and overall performance [10]. Low-anxiety learners frequently employ oral strategies, while anxiety hinders effective strategy utilization.

### 4. Conclusion

Foreign language speaking anxiety constitutes a pivotal area of inquiry within second language acquisition research, yet it remains in its nascent stages, with ample potential for advancement in

theoretical frameworks, research scopes, and methodological approaches. Future endeavors in this domain should intensify their focus on theoretical excavations and empirical assessments of speaking anxiety within second language acquisition. Such endeavors would enrich the repository of speaking anxiety research and furnish practical, empirically grounded strategies for mitigating speaking anxiety in educational settings. Currently, the majority of academic studies concentrate on elucidating the genesis of foreign language anxiety and devising interventions to address it, predominantly from the teacher's perspective, emphasizing techniques for alleviating students' anxiety in the classroom. However, research-oriented toward student-centered approaches for reducing oral anxiety remains scant. To bridge this gap in foreign language oral anxiety research, the academic community may consider undertaking more studies on the interplay and transmission of anxiety and oral anxiety in specific contexts.

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