

# ***A Review of Research on Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety of Chinese College Students: Causes, Consequences and Strategies***

Xinyue Zhang<sup>1,a</sup>, Jiaxin Zhao<sup>1,b,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*College of Foreign Languages, Beijing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics, Beijing, 100083, China*

<sup>2</sup>*Faculty of English and Languages, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, 06010, Malaysia  
a. 1994334916@qq.com, b. 17206962@siswa.um.edu.my*

*\*corresponding author*

**Abstract:** As English has become a compulsory course for all of the students in China, that is to say, English is becoming more and more important in China. However, due to a lack of English environment, a large proportion of students have foreign language anxiety especially speaking anxiety. Therefore, this study focuses on foreign language speaking anxiety among college students to figure out the causes, and consequences of it and further explore some effective strategies to solve these problems. The data all come from literature from previous studies. After composing and analyzing those data, it can be concluded that there are three causes: fear of committing grammatical errors, low English proficiency and fear of receiving a negative evaluation, and three consequences: onset of physical symptoms, resistance to speaking English and less self-confidence among Chinese college students. Furthermore, some strategies can be applied to solve it from the perspective of instructors and students respectively.

**Keywords:** Foreign language speaking anxiety, cause, consequence, strategy, Chinese college students

## **1. Introduction**

Since the 1970s, research on language teaching and learning has switched from examining teachers' instructional strategies to examining students' learning processes. Individual differences among learners and the influence of affective factors on language learning have also become important objects of research. In the affective hypothesis proposed by Krashen in 1981, he believed that affective factors affecting second language acquisition include confidence, motivation and anxiety [1]. Among these, anxiety has a significant impact on the process of learning a foreign language. It has an impact on learners that is both positive and bad.

With the accelerating process of globalization, the importance of English as a global language has rapidly risen to an unshakable position, and it has become a second language that most people need to learn. However, for English learners in China as example, speaking English has always been an area of disadvantage for most English learners, even though China has been carrying out a relatively extensive and comprehensive English education for the past forty years. The impact of language

anxiety is most obvious in the acquisition and practice of speaking. College students commonly suffer from speaking anxiety in college classrooms, which is manifested in panic or nervousness when being asked questions in English classes; not choosing to take the initiative to speak in English classes; feeling embarrassed when speaking, or making more mistakes in speaking due to anxiety; and feeling anxious about the upcoming English speech in class. From the study of Damayanti, M. E., and Listyani, L., the main personal reasons for triggering anxiety are fear of negative evaluations, fear of communicating using spoken English and anxiety about exams [2]. Meanwhile, in the teaching process of teachers, teachers' lack of knowledge about students' real speaking levels leads to the teaching content being too difficult for some students, which leads to students' intimidation and resistance is the main reason for students' speaking anxiety. The research theme of this article is to clarify the causes and their effects on students from the phenomenon of college students' speaking anxiety, so as to help students better cope with their own anxiety and find more effective solutions; and to help teachers use more efficient teaching methods in the teaching process. In the end, it will reduce the speaking anxiety of college students.

## **2. Speaking Anxiety in a Second Language (L2) Classroom**

It is acknowledged that English is a foreign language in China. However, the significance of it cannot be ignored. According to Liu and Braine, although there are numerous people learn English as a second language in China, students have little access to communicating with native English speakers [3]. Students are forced to present their ideas orally in front of a group or take part in group discussions in today's foreign language classes. These speaking exercises assigned by professors may cause students to become uneasy while speaking in the target language and negatively impact them. Therefore, when it comes to in-class activities, those related to spoken English are the most stressful for college students. Furthermore, Young once proposed that oral target language can be recognized as the most anxiety-inducing experience for learners [4].

Actually, foreign language speaking anxiety has been studied extensively. For example, Price figured out that the cause of feeling anxious was afraid of committing pronunciation errors [5]. Therefore, it is worth praising learners who have faith in delivering a foreign language speech in front of the public. What's more, Koch and Terrell found that speaking in front of the public can produce much pressure and anxiety compared to other activities [6]. In addition, MacIntyre and Gardner using 39 French students as a sample, try to find out their attitudes toward foreign language classes [7]. The results of this study support the idea that students who are highly anxious perform worse than those who are peaceful and relaxed. Naudhani, M., Wu, Z., and Naudhani, S. conducted a study with 101 Chinese students, including 51 English majors and 50 non-English majors, to determine which of three foreign language anxiety factors—such as speaking anxiety, anxiety in a foreign language classroom, and anxiety caused by teachers—led to the most anxiety [8]. Finally, it can be concluded that when it comes to speaking anxiety and foreign language anxiety, non-English majors were more anxious than English majors. At the same time, both groups showed anxiety feeling when speaking to their teachers.

In this situation, students need to overcome their feelings of anxiety so as to learn foreign languages and acquire knowledge. Otherwise, students are not brave in expressing themselves or delivering a speech in public, in turn, teachers may find it challenging to let students answer questions in oral English class.

## **3. Causes for Speaking Anxiety**

In the case of speaking English as a second language, the first thing that comes into people's minds is the findings by Horwitz and Cope. Their findings are recognized as the most referential and

influential since more and more researchers conduct their research based on those theories and results. Horwitz et al. claim that there are three aspects to foreign language classroom anxiety, including communication anxiety, exam anxiety, and dread of receiving a poor grade [9]. According to Horwitz et al., communication apprehension is "the shyness indicates fear or anxiety about interpersonal communication [9]. Sarason defined test anxiety as "the tendency to look warily at the consequences of underperformance in the context of assessment" [5–10]. Test anxiety stems from a dread of failure. Fear of negative evaluation is an anxiety about how others will see them, since students don't want to look foolish in front of their professors or peers. The causes of foreign language anxiety, according to Zhang and Zhong, are learner-induced, classroom-related, skill-specific, and imposed by some civilizations in various contexts [11].

#### 4. Consequences of Speaking English Anxiety

Anxiety is a significant element in the affective aspects and learning mentality of foreign language learners, and it has a detrimental effect on academic performance and learning motivation. Liu, M. showed that students with high speaking anxiety always avoid expressing their opinions and insights in foreign languages in the classroom, feel nervous and panicky when answering questions, and their brains are blank, unable to think clearly and incoherent [12]. The situation is that students feel nervous and panicky when answering questions. Some students may even have some physical symptoms, such as sweaty palms, rapid heart rate and even dizziness. As the research showed earlier, some causes contribute to students' speaking anxiety. First of all, students consider their speaking level is not high enough, so it is easier for them to make grammatical errors and then be negatively evaluated. What's more, it will lead them become panic about speaking foreign languages in the classroom with some physical symptoms, be resistant to speaking in the classroom and even become less self-confident, making it more difficult to improve their speaking skills. From the study of Suleimenova Z, it was also shown that in the classroom, students are unable to concentrate, perform poorly in class, and even skip class because of their resistance to speaking [13]. Ultimately, this leads to a decline in students' speaking levels, weakened learning motivation, and affects their academic performance. At the same time, the effect of speaking anxiety also extends beyond the classroom, affecting students' self-identity and self-confidence to a certain extent.

For another part of the students, they are less confident in their own speaking performance, and they are worried that mistakes will affect their impression in the minds of teachers and classmates. In order to maintain a good image of themselves in the minds of others, they will try to avoid making mistakes, and therefore will be very active in oral practice. This is beneficial to their speaking learning to a certain extent, but it is not conducive to their speaking development in the long run: students are under greater psychological pressure when they speak, and their interest in oral learning will be greatly reduced when there are no assessment standards and presentation requirements in the future.

#### 5. Strategies to Solve Speaking Anxiety

Though a number of research have been conducted on the strategies to overcome speaking anxiety, most of them only focus on general strategy use. Additionally, research demonstrates how learning a second language or a foreign language is impacted by both language anxiety and language strategy use. The relationship between speaking a foreign language and using a strategy is the most clear, despite the fact that speaking is thought to be the activity that causes the greatest fear. Among numerous research, two strategies are provided to help students solve speaking anxiety. From the perspective of instructors, they should provide support and motivation. In other words, instructors should let learners dare to express themselves orally in class, and point out students' mistakes as gently as possible, so that learners will not be embarrassed or laughed at by other students in class.

From the perspective of learners, if learners can master more knowledge and practice more, they can be more confident and more willing to deliver a speech in English in front of the public.

## 6. Conclusion

Through a systematic review of literature related to speaking anxiety when learning English among Chinese college students, it can be summarized that there are a few main causes of English speaking anxiety among Chinese college students who speak English as a second language. Understanding these causes will help teachers and students identify the challenges they will face during English-speaking classes and develop a more effective plan to lower their students' speaking anxiety, thus helping the students who study English as a foreign language reduce their psychological pressure and distress in learning spoken English.

## Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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