

Speaking Anxiety in Chinese University EFL Classrooms: Causes, Effects, and Pedagogical Strategies

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Abstract: Speaking anxiety is one of the reasons why Chinese university students in EFL situations are unable to learn English speaking well. Although more attention has been paid to communicative competence in higher education recently, many students still suffer from speaking anxiety in class. This paper reviews existing literature on speaking anxiety among Chinese university students, covering its theoretical foundations, causes, impacts and relevant teaching strategies. The review indicates that speaking anxiety is a multi-faceted problem arising from cognitive, emotional, teaching and learning environment and social-cultural reasons, such as the fear of negative evaluation, low self-confidence, lack of speaking opportunities, exam-oriented education, and cultural concerns related to face. It reduces students' classroom participation willingness, leads to less oral output and weakens their communicative competence. To address the above problems, the following measures have been taken: establishing a positive classroom learning environment, task scaffolding, anxiety-sensitive assessments, and technology-assisted learning. Therefore, teaching can help students overcome speaking anxiety by creating various learning environments and adjusting the learning content according to their needs, thus improving their general all-round development.

Key words: Speaking anxiety; Foreign language anxiety; Chinese university students, English as a foreign language; Oral communication; pedagogical implication; Teaching EFL learners speaking

Introduction

English speaking has been widely acknowledged as a central component of language development and communicative competence (Brown, 2007). The need to enhance EFL learners' participation in oral communication has been emphasised in many studies, as speaking skills enable learners to use English effectively in real-life contexts (Richards, 2008). In the context of globalisation, English has become increasingly important in mainland China, associated with mobility, social advancement, and intercultural communication (Xu, 2013), as well as academic success and employability (Guo & Sun, 2014). However, learners' language use is strongly influenced by their willingness to communicate (MacIntyre et al., 1998), while individual differences such as anxiety and motivation play a crucial role in classroom participation (Dörnyei, 2005). Foreign language anxiety is a situation-specific form of anxiety involving fear of negative evaluation, communication apprehension, and test-related anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986), and it negatively affects performance and willingness to participate (Horwitz, 2010), alongside broader emotional influences on engagement (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). In Chinese university EFL classrooms, limited oral participation remains common (Liu & Jackson, 2015), often due to an exam-oriented system prioritising tests over communicative competence. Many students therefore experience anxiety, leading to nervousness and psychological pressure (Liu, 2011). This article examines speaking anxiety among Chinese university EFL learners from an educational psychology perspective. It argues that speaking anxiety is a critical barrier in English education, affecting classroom participation, communicative development, and learners' ability to use English effectively in academic and professional contexts.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Foreign Language Anxiety as a Theoretical Background

Research into second language acquisition has a long history. Among the affective variables that shape second language learning, foreign language anxiety has received sustained academic attention according to its close relationship with EFL learner performance, confidence and classroom behaviour (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner 1994). Previous studies from Horwitz have suggested that foreign language anxiety arises from the emotional and communicative pressure embedded in language learning contexts. It is a distinct form of anxiety instead of a simple extension of general nervousness (Horwitz et al., 1986; Horwitz, 2010). As Horwitz (1986) noted that anxiety might be provoked in language learning settings as learners must communicate despite limited linguistic resources, which makes them especially vulnerable to embarrassment and self-doubt. In the foundational framework proposed by Horwitz et al. (1986), foreign language anxiety could be commonly explained through three interrelated dimensions: oral communication, fear of negative evaluation, and apprehension of negative judgement from others. Thus far, several studies reported that the significance of foreign language anxiety lies in its capacity to affect emotional comfort, linguistic performance and academic outcomes (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994; Teimouri et al., 2019).

2.2 Speaking Anxiety in EFL Classrooms

Among the four language skills: reading, writing, speaking and listening, speaking has consistently been identified as one of the most emotionally demanding aspects of language learning (Woodrow, 2006; Gregerson & Horwitz, 2002). It tends to generate the highest level of learner anxiety as it requires immediate and public performance (Woodrow, 2002). Moreover, the constant possibility of error during oral interaction heightens learners' emotional pressure (Woodrow, 2006). Observed in classroom settings, speaking anxiety often manifests behaviourally through silence, withdrawal, reduce fluency, as well as excessive self-monitoring (Woodrow, 2006, Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002). Therefore, various research suggested that anxious learners may underperform in oral tasks, even when learners possess the relevant knowledge (Woodrow, 2006). Accordingly, understanding speaking anxiety requires more than just descriptive observation; it also needs theoretical explanation of why oral communication has become emotional difficulty for EFL learners.

2.3 Theoretical explanation of Speaking Anxiety

2.3.1 Situation-Specific Anxiety Theory

Situation- specific accounts of foreign language anxiety proposed that speaking anxiety is contextually produced rather than an inherent learner deficiency (Horwitz et al., 1986; Horwitz, 2010). Speaking activities in classroom settings are especially compatible with this framework because learners are placed in immediate, public and evaluative communicative situations (Horwitz et al., 1986). From this perspective, learner hesitation or silence may represent an adaptive emotional reaction to a demanding interactional environment rather than a simple lack of motivation and knowledge.

2.3.2 Cognitive Interference

A second influential perspective suggested that anxiety affects language performance by disrupting the cognitive process required for successful real-time oral communication (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). Thus, under conditions of anxiety, learners may become overly occupied with error, mistake, self-monitoring or anticipated judgment, thereby reducing attention required for speech production. The cognitive interference framework is particularly useful for explaining why some EFL learners possess relevant linguistic knowledge but struggle to orally demonstrate it.

2.3.3 Willingness to Communicate (WTC)

Willingness to communicate is another crucial framework for interpreting learners' participation. It concerned a learner's readiness to initiate communication in a given situation. A significant insight of WTC theory is that it conceptualised communication behaviour as a dynamic outcome shaped by context, confidence, and emotion rather than as a stable personality feature. Moreover, the framework showed that speaking anxiety may become behaviourally visible

through silence, withdrawal, or communicative hesitation. Research in Chinese university EFL contexts proposed that willingness to communicate has been closely tied to classroom climate, learner beliefs, and self-confidence, making WTC highly relevant to speaking anxiety research (Peng & Woodrow, 2010).

2.4 Speaking Anxiety in Chinese University EFL Context

Although speaking anxiety has been widely studied, its expression varies across educational and sociocultural contexts. A context-sensitive perspective is therefore essential, as speaking is shaped not only by individual psychology but also by classroom practices and educational expectations (Liu, 2006; Liu & Jackson, 2008). In Chinese university EFL settings, research has shown a mismatch between communicative aspiration and actual participation, often due to anxiety (Liu & Jackson, 2008; Liu & Jackson, 2011). One key factor is learners' concern about embarrassment, peer judgement, and public exposure of linguistic inadequacy (Liu & Jackson, 2008).

However, these patterns should not be reduced to cultural stereotypes. Instead, attention should be given to how learners' affect interacts with classroom ecology and communicative expectations. Studies indicate that oral participation is strongly influenced by teacher support, classroom environment, and perceived communicative safety (Peng & Woodrow, 2010), while the growing importance of English in higher education further intensifies the perceived consequences of speaking inadequately.

2.5 Research Gap and Conceptual Positioning

There is substantial evidence that anxiety is closely associated with reduced language achievement, lower participation, and weaker communicative performance (Teimouri et al., 2019). Although foreign language anxiety has been widely discussed, it is often treated as a broad construct rather than focusing on the dynamics of speaking anxiety. A further gap lies in the limited research on Chinese university EFL learners in relation to the contemporary realities of higher education, including classroom ecology and communication expectations. Therefore, further research in this context is needed. This article conceptualises speaking anxiety as a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by cognitive, interactional, social, and contextual factors.

3. Causes of Speaking Anxiety

3.1 Communication Apprehension and Self-Perceived Oral Inadequacy

Among the numerous causes of speaking anxiety, communication apprehension is one of them that has been studied and recorded most frequently in research. It is the feeling of anxiety or apprehension learners have when they need to speak in the target language. According to studies, the anxiety of students in the classroom is often due to a fear of public speaking, especially when they are under time constraints (Horwitz et al., 1986). Anxiety can also manifest in other ways during daily class life, such as answering questions, participating in group work, or speaking in front of the class (Young, 1991; Woodrow, 2006). Communication apprehension can be used to explain why some learners do not speak up even when they have ideas and linguistic ability, as a result of pressure during communication rather than lack of desire to participate. It is also related to the fear of negative evaluation and thus increases speaking anxiety.

3.2 Fear of Negative Evaluation and Perfectionism

The social aspect of classroom speaking is relatively pronounced, and learners are often anxious about being judged negatively by their teachers or peers. Horwitz and others (1986) identified fear of negative evaluation as one of the reasons for foreign language anxiety; that is to say, learners are worried about being judged negatively. Anxiety will rise if one sees errors as indicators of failure instead of as learning chances (Liu & Jackson, 2008; Young, 1991). Thus, speech may take on the form of an identity-performance rather than merely serving to communicate. Additionally, perfectionism may cause anxiety in students if they have set unreasonably high expectations for themselves and are thus too sensitive to minor mistakes (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002). As a result, even if a learner is competent, they may not speak out due to an excessive sense of social cost for mistakes. The above are related to students' sense of their own lack

of language ability.

3.3 Limited Linguistic Resources and Low Speaking Self-Confidence

Perceived weaknesses in grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and fluency are often the reason for speaking anxiety in EFL classrooms. Research shows that anxiety is often associated with learners' sense of their own speaking English's inaccuracy or lack of fluency for communication (Woodrow, 2006; Liu, 2008). Research also indicates that low self-efficacy in speaking ability can lead to increased anxiety during oral participation (Dörnyei, 2005; Oxford, 1999). Therefore, speaking anxiety may be caused by a lack of linguistic knowledge or a demand for speed.

Cognitive studies have shown that anxiety can interfere with retrieval and processing during the speaking task, leading to lower scores for students who are aware of what they need to express (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). Therefore, the source of anxiety is not only actual deficiencies but also how learners perceive these deficiencies. These internal problems may be exacerbated by classroom behaviour, and thus the circumstances of learning can affect a student's speaking anxiety.

3.4 Classroom Application, Teacher Behavior and Task Design

Speaking anxiety is caused by a combination of problems with the learners and the teaching environment, such as abnormal behaviour from teachers or poor task design. These reasons will reduce or worsen the students' emotional problems. Young (1991) believed that the class rules might cause some young children anxiety due to their lack of predictability, pressure or public exposure. Teacher behaviour is also significant; learners may be anxious when they feel that their contributions are being closely monitored or repeatedly corrected in a way that harms their self-esteem (Young, 1991; Horwitz, 2001).

Task design can also increase anxiety if the activities are too demanding, not sufficiently supported or not appropriate for learners at their current level (Young, 1991; Peng & Woodrow, 2010). The climate of the classroom also affects it; that is to say, how willing students are to speak depends on whether they feel supported and psychologically safe (Peng & Woodrow, 2010). The above indicate that more supportive and organised teaching and learning can help reduce speaking anxiety.

3.5 Test Pressure, Performance Requirements and Public Speaking Situations

Performance pressure is another type of anxiety that affects learners' speaking, and they may be more anxious if they think it is for a test. Oral examinations and presentations can be very anxiety-inducing because they require speaking skills, are observed by others, are time-limited, and carry the pressure of performance (Woodrow, 2006). Performance-oriented speaking tasks may cause anxiety in learners if they perceive them as occasions for evaluation rather than chances to communicate or learn (Woodrow, 2006). Based on the above, it can be seen that speaking anxiety is not solely caused by the act of speaking, but is also related to the level of risk associated with it; thus, some students who are comfortable speaking casually may still experience high anxiety in a formal oral examination.

3.6 Contextual Causes in the Chinese University EFL Classroom

Speaking anxiety should be understood in the context of the actual situation of Chinese university English learning, rather than only according to general SLA theories. Anxiety in the EFL context of Chinese universities is often related to classroom experiences and academic pressure. Research has shown that the circumstances of social interaction, such as peer influence, behavioural expectations, and talk topics, also affect students' shyness when speaking (Liu & Jackson, 2008; Peng & Woodrow, 2010). Liu and Jackson (2008) have found that many learners wish to improve their spoken English but are unwilling to speak in class.

A reason for the anxiety is that there are few low-risk situations where students can speak in class. Learners may also be anxious about speaking because they are concerned about their self-image and ability (Yan & Horwitz, 2008; Liu & Jackson, 2008). As a result, people believe that to succeed in their studies and careers, good speaking ability is necessary, so they are more willing to take exams.

4. Effects on Learning and Participation

4.1 Effects of Cognitive Processing and Language Learning

A substantial body of literature suggested that speaking anxiety can negatively influence the cognitive processes required for effective language learning, which refers to the disruption of mental processes involved in speaking and language development. Anxiety can interfere with cognitive processing by consuming attentional resources that would otherwise be available for language comprehension, retrieval and production as proposed by MacIntyre and Gardner (1994). Teimouri et al. (2009) proposed that language anxiety is linked to poorer language achievement, reinforcing that view that anxiety function as a meaningful obstacle to learning. The cognitive consequences of anxiety therefore help explain why some EFL learners struggle to benefit fully from communicative classroom activities. The next issue discovers how speaking anxiety affects learners' performance.

4.2 Effects on Oral Performance

One of the most visible consequences of speaking anxiety is reduced effectiveness in oral language performance. Evidence from oral assessment research found that anxiety may suppress learners' spoken performance, particularly in situations where communication is publicly evaluated. Speaking anxiety, therefore, reduce fluency, spontaneity, and clarity of expression by making it more difficult for learners to organise or retrieve language under pressure (Woodrow, 2006; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). In addition, anxiety create a gap between learners' underlying language knowledge and their observable oral performance, thereby obscuring their actual language abilities (Phillips, 1992; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). The effects are particularly significant in communicative classrooms, where oral participation has been often perceived as a visible indicator of language ability. However, beyond affecting how learners speak, anxiety may also influence their classroom participation such as how often and how willingly they speak in class.

4.3 Effects on classroom Participation and Interaction

A common consequence of speaking anxiety is decreased participation in oral classroom activities. Studies have shown that speaking anxiety manifests in observable classroom behaviour, including reluctance to answer questions, hesitation to initiate interaction, and reduced oral participation (Woodrow, 2006; Liu & Jackson, 2008). Reduced participation may in turn limit learners' access to interactional opportunities that are key for practicing and developing spoken language such as feedback, communicative practice, and negotiation of meaning. Moreover, findings from Chinese EFL contexts proposed that speaking anxiety weaken active classroom engagement even among learners who value oral English highly (Liu & Jackson, 2008). These participation-related effects are especially serious in communicative pedagogy, where interaction is perceived as a central pathway to language learning. The decline in participation is accompanied by broader changes in learners' self-beliefs and communicative readiness.

4.4 Effects on Confidence, Motivation, and Willingness to Communicate

Recent research suggested that speaking anxiety should be understood not only as a performance-related variable, but also as a factor that effectively shapes EFL learners' communicative confidence and motivational orientation. Recent theoretical developments emphasised that communication confidence emerges from the interaction between perceived competence and anxiety, which indicated that heightened speaking anxiety could directly undermine learners' readiness to initiate communication (MacIntyre, 2020; MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2022). Research has continually shown that students with higher levels of anxiety tend to demonstrate lower willingness to communicate, particularly in classroom contexts where oral speaking is socially and academically evaluated (Peng & Woodrow, 2010; MacIntyre, 2020).

4.5 Long-Term Effects on Learner Development and Engagement

Beyond momentary discomfort during speaking activities, speaking anxiety may have more enduring consequences for learners' confidence, participation patterns, and communicative development. Research has proposed that anxious learners tend to engage in harsher self-evaluation of their speaking, suggesting that anxiety distorted oral performance is

interpreted at the personal level (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002). When such self-critical interpretations occur repeatedly, students may gradually come to associate oral English use with embarrassment or failure. Over time, speaking anxiety could lead students to anticipate future oral activities negatively, thereby reinforcing low expectations of communicative success.

5. Pedagogical Responses to Speaking Anxiety in University EFL Classrooms

5.1 Creating a Supportive and Low-Threat Classroom Climate

Based on the above research, it can be assumed that a negative emotional environment in the classroom may lead to a reluctance to speak among students. Early foundational work on foreign language anxiety proposed that learners experience more anxiety in classroom environments where there is a focus on judgment and error exposure (Horwitz et al., 1986). It has also been reported by learners that when their teachers are warm and caring, patient, and supportive in other ways, they feel less anxious (Gregersen, 2005; Dewaele et al., 2019). In Chinese EFL classrooms, a favourable classroom atmosphere is needed because students are more aware of how they and their peers are viewed (Liu & Jackson, 2008). Thus, it can be seen that a supportive classroom climate acts as a prevention mechanism rather than a reactive response.

5.2 Adaptation of Speaking Task Design and Participation Structure

Task Structure and Participation Mode significantly affect learners' anxiety in speaking activities. Pair and small-group activities are often conducted to reduce anxiety in speaking because they are less intimidating than whole-class speaking and evaluate. Woodrow (2006) has also noted that speaking tasks with a personal connection, familiarity or meaning are less anxious than those that are highly abstract and linguistically challenging. Thus, the organisation of tasks can be used to reduce anxiety.

5.3 Strengthening Learners' Confidence Through Preparation and Strategy Training

A second way to educate is to provide students with the means and readiness to tackle the speaking task more fearlessly. To help the students feel more confident and less anxious when participating in the oral-expression activities, some have started to organise a short preparation and rehearsal time. Trained learners in communication strategies are more likely to feel capable of dealing with difficulties in expression and reduce their anxiety about speaking (Nakatani, 2010). Strategy instruction can help reduce anxiety by allowing students to observe their own feelings and manage the stress of performance (Oxford, 2017). Therefore, the above ways may help students gain a sense of control over their studies and reduce speaking anxiety.

5.4 Providing Constructive Feedback and Anxiety-Sensitive Assessment

Feedback and assessment practices are also prone to causing or relieving speaking anxiety, as evaluation itself can be a reason for this anxiety. Young (1991) thought that correction behaviour that is too critical or too public will increase the anxiety of students when speaking. Therefore, alternative oral assessments, such as portfolios, recorded presentations or repeated low-stakes tasks, may be less anxiety-inducing than a single high-stakes speaking event. Overall, anxiety-sensitive assessment can improve the well-being of learners and also enhance the reliability of oral performance assessment.

5.5 Technology and other Speaking Methods

Digital-speaking forms can offer other ways of participation for anxious learners. According to the research of Satar and Ozdener (2008), technology-assisted speaking activities can reduce the pressure of real-time performance and thus enable students to speak more confidently. Anxiety about speaking in a social setting can be reduced by creating a low-pressure, non-judgemental speaking environment for students through AI tools to practise speaking in private repeatedly. Such tools can offer some support for learners who are hesitant to speak in class at the moment. Technology should not

be regarded as a replacement for live speaking but rather as a supporting tool.

5.6 Promoting Long-Term Emotional Resilience and Learner Agency

Sustainable anxiety reduction requires helping learners develop long-term coping capacities rather than relying solely on situational accommodations. Recent research highlighted that learners with stronger emotional resilience appear better able to recover from speaking setbacks and remain engaged despite anxiety-provoking experiences (Lin et al., 2025). Structured reflection on emotional challenges may strengthen learners' awareness of anxiety patterns and coping strategies. Long-term resilience could be especially valuable in university contexts where communicative demands continue beyond the classroom.

6. Implications for Chinese University English Teachers

6.1 Reconceptualising Speaking Anxiety as a Pedagogical Issue Rather Than a Learner Deficit

The literature discussed in previous chapters suggested that speaking anxiety should not be treated solely as a personal trait or confidence problem, but as a pedagogical relevant classroom phenomenon. Speaking anxiety has been widely understood as emerging from the dynamic interaction of personal, pedagogical as well as contextual factors (Dewaele & Li, 2020). More recent research conceptualised classroom emotions as influenced by interactions between learner characteristics, instructional practices, and contextual conditions rather than by learner disposition alone (Dewaele & Li, 2020). These studies indicated that speaking anxiety is partly mediated by pedagogical choices, suggesting that teachers are not neutral observers but active contributors to classroom emotional climate.

6.2 Balancing Communicative Expectations with Learner Readiness

While communicative competence has been increasingly emphasised in higher education, expectations for oral participation should be calibrated to learners' development and emotional readiness. It is suggested that communicative approaches may be less effective when participation demands exceed learners' current confidence linguistic knowledge, and coping capacity (Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014). Therefore, teachers may need to sequence communicative demands progressively rather than assuming immediate readiness for high stakes oral interaction.

6.3 Addressing Cultural and Contextual Constraints in Chinese Classrooms

Chinese university teachers should consider how local educational and sociocultural conditions may have an impact on learners' anxiety experiences. Students in Chinese classroom may be particularly sensitive to public error and negative peer evaluation due to sociocultural concerns surrounding face and performance (Liu & Jackson, 2008). In Chinese classroom settings, learners' previous exposure to grammar-and exam-oriented English learning may leave them underprepared for communicative speaking demands at university. Pedagogical recommendations should therefore remain sensitive to local cultural and institutional conditions.

6.4 Supporting Students' Long-Term Communicative Development Beyond Examination Goals

Given the growing importance of spoken English in academic and professional contexts, teachers are suggested to consider speaking anxiety to broader communicative development. Research on graduate employability had highlighted English oral communication as an increasingly valued competency in internationally oriented academic and professional environments (Knight, 2012; Jackson, 2015). In addition, as discussed in previous chapters, speaking anxiety can contribute to ongoing avoidance of oral participation, its effects may accumulate over time and influence students' broader communicative development (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994; Gregerson & Horwitz, 2002). Overall, it suggests that oral English instruction should be linked explicitly to learners' future communicative needs beyond assessment and coursework. From this perspective, addressing speaking anxiety becomes part of preparing students for participating in internationalised academic and workplace environment.

6.5 Developing Teacher Awareness and Reflective Practice

A further implication for Chinese university English teachers suggests that effective anxiety-sensitive pedagogy depends not only on instructional techniques, but on teachers' ability to recognise, interpret, and respond to learner anxiety appropriately. Research proposed that anxious learners' classroom behaviours may be misinterpreted by teachers as disengagement or lack of preparation, obscuring the emotional basis of participation difficulties (Gregersen, 2005). Moreover, as teachers' beliefs inform classroom routines and interactional expectations, they can indirectly contribute to either the exacerbation or reduction of learner anxiety (Mercer & Gregersen, 2020). Thus, systematic reflection on instructional choices enables teachers to recognise pedagogical patterns that contribute to students' emotional discomfort during speaking tasks. This suggests that anxiety-sensitive pedagogy depends as much on teacher perception and reflection as on specific instructional techniques.

7. Conclusion

In short, this paper has investigated speaking anxiety among Chinese university EFL learners, explored its theoretical basis and causes, analyzed its impact and educational responses, and put forward corresponding suggestions for English teachers in higher education. According to research on SLA, foreign language anxiety, and classroom pedagogy, it has been proposed that speaking anxiety is an all-encompassing phenomenon caused by cognitive, emotional, pedagogical and sociocultural factors.

Research has shown that speaking anxiety generally stems from the fear of negative evaluation, low self-perceived language proficiency, perfectionism, limited speaking opportunities and anxiety over making public errors. The above reasons are further aggravated by other circumstances, such as exam-oriented education, face-related cultural issues, and a lack of real interaction opportunities. As a result, anxiety will reduce participation in class, oral expression, self-confidence and willingness to communicate, etc., thereby hindering long-term development.

To address these challenges, the article highlights strategies such as supportive classroom environments, task adaptation, scaffolding, anxiety-sensitive assessment, and technology-mediated practice. However, it argues that effective intervention requires contextually informed and emotionally responsive pedagogy that recognises speaking anxiety as embedded within broader classroom and sociocultural dynamics.

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