

Language Anxiety and its Effect on Oral Performance in Classroom

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Abstract:

This study addresses the issues of language anxiety and its effect on the oral performance of students in classroom. Participants were 97 non-English major college students in an ordinary university in China. Participants were first given the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale to measure their anxiety degrees. Based on the results of the measurement, 8 volunteers were chosen to conduct an interview in a classroom context. The interview and comments of high-anxious and low-anxious students were videotaped and transcribed for analyses. It was found that there was a reverse relationship between language anxiety and the quality of oral performance, that is, the higher the anxiety score, the lower their oral performance score. The higher anxious students tended to produce fewer Cus, and the length of their Cus were shorter, their error-free Cus were also fewer than their lower anxious counterparts. Procrastination, fear of evaluation and overconcern of errors were characteristics obviously noticed in their speech. At the end of the paper, some pedagogical implications were also suggested to alleviate students anxiety.

Key words: language anxiety, oral performance, effect

I. Introduction:

Language anxiety is a state of apprehension occurring in the process of a second/ foreign language use owing to the user's incompetence in communication with the language. It's a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviors... arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process. (Horwitz et al., 1991:31)

Language anxiety integrates three related performance anxieties: (1) communication apprehension; (2) test anxiety; and (3) fear of negative evaluation. Due to its emphasis on interpersonal interaction, the construct of communication apprehension is quite relevant to the conceptualization of foreign language anxiety (McCroskey 1977). It is a type of shyness characterized by fear of or anxiety about communication with people. Difficulty in speaking in dyads or groups (oral communication anxiety) or in public (stage fright) or in listening to or learning a spoken message (receive anxiety) are all manifestations of communication

apprehension. Communication apprehension or some similar reactions obviously play a vital role in foreign language anxiety. People who typically have trouble speaking in group are likely to experience even greater difficulty speaking in a foreign language class where they have little control of the communicative situation and their performance is constantly monitored. Moreover, in addition to all the usual concerns about oral communication, the foreign language class requires the students to communicate via a medium in which only limited facility is possessed. The special communication apprehension during the foreign language learning also comes from the personal knowledge that one will almost certainly have difficulty understanding others and making oneself understood. Possibly because of this, many talkative people are silent in a foreign language communication situation.

Test anxiety refers to a type of performance anxiety stemming from a fear of failure (Gordon & Sarason 1955, Sarason 1980). It is the tendency to become alarmed about the consequences of inadequate performance on a test or other evaluation (Sarason, 1984, cited in Oxford, 1999:64). Test-anxious students often put unrealistic demands on themselves and feel that anything less than a perfect test performance is a failure. Students who are test-anxious in foreign language class probably experience considerable difficulty since tests and quizzes are frequent and even the brightest and most prepared students often make errors. Oral tests have the potential of provoking both test and oral communication anxieties simultaneously in some students.

Fear of negative evaluation is defined as the apprehension about other's evaluations, avoidance of evaluative situation, and the expectation that others would evaluate one negatively (Watson & Friend 1969). It's broader in scope than the test anxiety because it may occur in any social, evaluative situation. In the language classroom, fear of negative evaluation is likely to be manifested in a student's over concern with academic and personal evaluation of his or her performance and competence in the target language (MacIntyre & Gardner 1988). Although it's axiomatic that language learning can't occur without errors, errors can be the source of anxiety in some individuals because they draw attention to the difficulty of making positive social impressions when speaking a new language (MacIntyre & Gardner 1988). Like communication anxious individuals, people who fear negative evaluation rarely initiate conversation and interact minimally. Language students who experience this anxiety tend to sit passively in the classroom, withdraw from activities that could increase their language skills, and may even avoid class entirely (Ely, 1986; Gregersen, 1999/2000; Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986).

Although communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation provide useful conceptual building blocks for a description of foreign language anxiety, researches indicate that foreign language anxiety is not simply the combination of those fears transferred to foreign language learning, It's a distinct complex of factors related to classroom language learning in the language learning process(Horwitz et al 1986:30).

This paper studies the relationship between language anxiety and oral performance in classroom. Koch and Terrell (1991,cited in Oxford ; 1992;65) argued that more than half of their subjects reported oral skits and oral presentations in front of the class as the most anxiety—producing activities. Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986:34) stated that students with high anxiety were afraid of speaking in the foreign language. They had a deep sense of self-consciousness and viewed foreign language production in classroom as a test situation rather than as an opportunity for communication.

In China, people are learning foreign language mainly through classroom teaching. As the focus of FL teaching began to be transferred from teaching to learning in recent years, Many research programs concerning learners' variables have been developed. And researches on language anxiety are no exception.

Wang Yingquan and Wan Yushu (2001:125) provided a quiet comprehensive survey of foreign language anxiety research abroad and concluded that language anxiety will produce a negative impact on the learners' achievements. Hu Hongyan (2003:36) conducted a research on the influence of anxiety and self-confidence on English learning among the English majors in Nanhua University with their MET 4 achievements and concluded that anxiety is negatively related to testing score, and dictation and listening are two skills most closely affected by anxiety and self-confidence. However, the research on the spoken English in class, which was regarded as the most threatening experience by language learners, has not been found to be conducted in the Chinese foreign language learning context.

Therefore, my research will concentrate on the investigation of the foreign language anxiety and its effect on student's classroom oral performance. Two questions to be addressed in the study are: (1) what are the effects of language anxiety on student's oral performance in classroom as measured by the oral performance scores and other variables? (2) What are the characteristics of anxious students' oral performance? And what do the students say about their experience in classroom oral performance ?and the implications of the research?

.Methodology

1.Subjects

97 second- year non-English major college students(two classes) were selected in the International Trade and Management Department of XiangFan University, an ordinary comprehensive university far away from the provincial capital city. The student's ages ranged from 19—21years old. They were going to complete their basic stage of English learning at college. In addition to their college English course for non-English majors, they were also offered listening and speaking, and integrated English courses as English majors during the first two years. They were chosen in the hope of being capable to speak English in the investigation.

2. Instrument

2.1 The FLCAS

The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (Horwitz et al 1986:31) was administered to subjects in the investigation with some minor modifications. For example, the last statement was replaced by the sentence “in the English speaking environments, I can never show myself as smart as I usually am”. The FLCAS, consisting of 33 statements, was scored on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”, with 8 statements scored reversely, that is, “strongly agree” indicating one point and “strongly disagree” indicating five points. The total scores of the scale could range from 33 to 165. All the statements presented were reflective of communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation in the foreign language classroom. The internal consistency as measured by Cronbach's alpha coefficient, was .93, and the test-retest reliability was $r = .83$, $p = 0.001$, $n = 78$. The scale was scored so that the higher the score, the higher the anxiety. Thus Horwitz et al (1991:38) concluded that “foreign language anxiety can be reliably and validly measured “by the FLCAS, and as N.E. Pappamihel(2002:334) also pointed out “The FLCAS was developed for a foreign language population, in other words, the target population included students who were studying another language from the perspective of their native language”. So it is both theoretically and practically proper to use the scale in the investigation.

2.2 Communication Unit (Cu)

Basically an independent clause with all its modifies, Cu had been used to measure the subjects' written language maturity ,but could be extended to measure oral maturity. Phillips(1992:16-17) argued that Cus could measure the quantity of comprehensible output, and the length of Cu can determine the syntactic maturity of the speaker. So I adopted it in my research with the hypothesis that the higher –anxious students would produce fewer and shorter Cus than their lower anxious counterparts. For this purpose, three variables were measured:

number of Cus, average length of the Cus, and number of error-free Cus

2.3 Reaction variables

In describing students' reactions during their oral performance, three variables were applied: procrastination, fear of evaluation and concern over errors. Gregersen & Horwitz (2002:566) contended that students with communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation would often demonstrate a mismatch between their mature thoughts and immature foreign language proficiency. They usually display long delays in completing assignments or repeatedly restart them because they believe that it will help them to do the assignment better. With this unrealistic expectation in mind, they may actually avoid speaking or postpone their assignment till the last minute. They tended to fear the evaluation of their peers, and often compared themselves negatively with their peers and showed an over concern of the errors they made. In this study the three variables were used to describe the characteristics of high anxious students' speech.

3. Procedures

In April 2003, all the 97 students were asked to answer the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale. After completing the FLCAS, 8 students (4 with lower anxiety scores and 4 with higher anxiety scores) were selected voluntarily into two groups to participate in the second phase of the study-----the oral interview.

The interview was held in a classroom context, that is ,a teacher was giving the class, with all other students attended , but only the 8 students selected were supposed to speak. And a video camera and recording devices were used to record the process, with three raters invited to evaluate the subjects' oral performance.

In the interview, participants were acted in a one-to-one oral interview designed to elicit a sample of their conversational English ability in classroom. Each interview lasted 5-8 minutes and the oral interview was conducted by the author during which, the participants were asked to respond in English to common conversational prompts:

1. Where are you from?
2. Can you tell us something. about your hometown?
3. What are you going to do in the future? Why?
4. How do you normally spend your weekends?

The topics were chosen from among everyday questions to build some familiarity in students. they were required to answer these questions and to make a relatively complete speech for 2-3 minutes in whichever topic they thought they could perform the best.

Meanwhile, three raters evaluated the participants and gave proficiency scores

respectively. The final scores of the interviewees got from the mean scores of three raters when the whole interview was finished.

Then, the videotaped conversations were used to examine the reactions of the subjects. All 8 students were immediately invited to review their videos with the author and again, all agreed. In this part of the study, the participants watched their videotaped interviews and were asked to reflect on their own performances. It was conducted one by one and the students were given the option to comment either in English or Chinese. We noticed that two interviewees commented in Chinese. (High-anxious students No.2 and No.3) When the videotape ended, the interviewer prompted the students with such question as “what do you think of your performance?” “Are you satisfied with it? why ?” “Are you afraid of making mistakes in speaking English?” etc.

III. Results and discussion

3.1 The effect of language anxiety on oral performance in classroom

Table 1 FLCAS scores

Mean	96.2
Mode	95(5persons)
Standard Deviation	16.9
High-Anxious Student No.1	129
High-Anxious Student No.2	129
High-Anxious Student No.3	120
High-Anxious Student No.4	115
Low- Anxious Student No.1	50
Low- Anxious Student No.2	57
Low- Anxious Student No.3	66
Low- Anxious Student No.4	68

Table 1 shows the FLCAS scores of the interviewees. The mean FLCAS score of the 97 students was 96.2; The Mode was 95(5 persons) and the SD(standard deviation) was 16.9. The highest anxiety score of the selected participants was 129 and the lowest was 50. The range was 79. The results (SD and the range) indicated that the degrees of language anxiety among students varied greatly to two extremes. Most students seemed to experience mild to severe anxieties as the mean and mode were a bit higher than expected. Still, this is true to the reality of the students. The university is an ordinary university. Most of its students did not earn high scores in the university-entrance examination compared with the scores of students in other key universities, and as some students commented that they entered this university mainly because of their lower scores in English. As a result, English had been regarded by them as the most

threatening course.

Table 2:A comparison of scores in language anxiety and oral performance

Students	AS	OPS	Mean
HA1	129	1.5	2.7
HA2	129	3.2	
HA3	120	2.8	
HA4	115	3.4	
LA1	50	3.5	3.9
LA2	57	4.2	
LA3	66	4.6	
LA4	68	3.3	

- . HA1: High-Anxious Student No.1 LA1: Low- Anxious Student No.1
- HA2: High-Anxious Student No.2 LA2: Low- Anxious Student No.2
- HA3: High-Anxious Student No.3 LA3: Low- Anxious Student No.3
- HA4: High-Anxious Student No.4 LA4: Low- Anxious Student No.4
- AS: anxiety score OPS: Oral performance score

Table 2 presents the proficiency scores of the interviewees in the two groups. The mean score of the Low-Anxious students group was obviously higher than that of the High-Anxious students group. It seemed to indicate that the anxiety about speaking a foreign language could affect the quality of oral production. It appeared to show that in general , as the anxiety increases, the quality of oral performance decreases. However, viewed from the aspect of individuals, the language anxiety scores student obtained were not so consistent with the oral scores. The least anxious student(LA1)was not the best in the oral performance; and students (HA2 & 4) achieved higher oral scores with high anxieties. The actual oral performance scores demonstrated by the students during the interview were not so highly related to language anxiety as we hand expected in these learners before. It might be assumed that the language anxiety may not be the only variable affecting the oral performance.

3.2: Language maturity and characteristics measured

Table 3:Performance variables in measuring language maturity.

Students	NC	ALC	EFC
HA1	5	8	2
HA2	8	10.3	5
HA3	8	9.0	4
HA4	9	11.5	6
LA1	12	14.2	7

LA2	10	13.1	8
LA3	13	12.8	6
LA4	12	13.6	6

NC: number of Cu ALC: Average length of Cu EFC: Error-free Cu

Three variables measured in the study revealed a significant reverse relationship between the students' degrees of language anxiety and their ability in oral performance. The high-anxious group of students' tended to say less, produced fewer Cus (with average number of Cus 7.5 against 11.7 of their lower anxious counterparts), and shorter Cus (with the mean number of words in each Cu 9.7 against 11.7 of their counterparts), and their error-free Cus are significantly fewer than that of the low-anxious students (4.2:6.5). Therefore, it is safe to say that the higher the anxiety, the lower their language maturity

Table 4: Frequency of reaction variables in oral performance

Student	P	F	O	T
HA1	4	3	3	10
HA2	5	2	2	9
HA3	3	3	3	9
HA4	2	2	1	7
Mean	3.5	2.5	2.25	
LA1	1	0	1	6
LA2	2	1	1	4
LA3	2	1	2	5
LA4	3	2	1	6
Mean	2.	1.3	1.66	

P: Procrastination

F: Fear of evaluation

O: Overconcern of errors

T: Total

Procrastination, fear of evaluation and over concern of errors may be regarded as three important criterion for distinguishing anxious and non-anxious students. Anxious students often demonstrate long delays in completing assignments or repeated restarted them because they expected to behave better the second time. For example, HA2 behaved nervously in answering the question, she paused for a long time before she begin to speak and restated her story two times as she was struggling for a better beginning. HA3 said that every time he tried to speaker better, only to find he looked so foolish as he believed his second trying would have made more mistakes. The common point for this group of students was their avoidance in their language expression. they looked nervously and usually paused for some time or even took a long breath before they began to speak. On the other hand, low anxious group were happy to discuss their performance. They recognized

their imperfectness in the oral performance, but were more realistic and seemed proud of their achievement. Low-anxious students(LA1 & 2) told author that they had never seen themselves on TV before, and they felt very satisfied with result. LA1 felt some difficulty in finding proper words in her speech but viewed it as natural to a student like her..

The two groups of students took very different views about the being evaluated in their oral performance. For high anxious students, they could display a frustration towards such evaluation, they expressed their horror about waiting for criticisms and often compared themselves negatively with their peers. They had no confidence in pronunciation and intonation, and were afraid of ‘being spotlighted’ or “ being laughed at”, as high anxious students(HA1 &2) told author, and an trifle sign given by their classmates in the process of their speaking would be regarded as a mocking signal. They became very sensitive, as HA4 said: “I am so bothered about speaking in front of class and feel shameful because I sense that every body is looking at me. I’m looking like fool. Although sometimes I know what I am thinking is not the case. I cannot stop thinking that way”. On the other hand, low anxious students had more confidence in speaking in class.LA1 told the author that she did not feel nervous in speaking English in class: ”I do not care how other people think of me, I just say what I know in class”. And all other Las made same comments on their performance in class. The feeling of fear of being evaluated clearly distinguishes high-anxious and low-anxious foreign language learners.

High-anxious and low-anxious students also took different views on the errors they had made in oral performance. HA1said: “I have made so many mistakes, in persons, tenses, and other grammatical point... Oh. That is a silly mistake!” HA4 complained: “... Oh. I made mistakes in so many places! Verbs! Pronouns! Prepositions! I don’t know why...”!In classroom performance, she stopped several times to correct her grammatical mistakes in the speech.HA1 corrected her speech time and again, first, she changed “he” into” she”, and then the tenses. By contrast, LA3 committed” I made some mistakes. I think that is natural. I think I have done well”. LA4 said: “ I feel calm and easy when the topic seems good to me, and I don’t notice my mistakes when I am speaking. Now I see myself on TV, and I notice my mistakes, not too many. It’s OK.” When they spoke in class, they seldom stopped to correct mistakes. Their attitudes towards errors in the speeches were in a sharp contrast.

IV . Pedagogical implications

Generally speaking, EFL learning is a very sophisticated process and language

anxiety, as a major learner's variable, affect the learning process in a very subtle way. Teachers may have already seen or sensed in their students many or all of the indications discussed in the paper. Extremely anxious students were highly motivated to avoid engaging in some classroom activities they fear the most: such as making dialogues or role-plays. They may choose to sit in the back row or avoid eye-contact with teachers. Therefore, teachers should keep in mind that anxiety is responsible for the students' habitual behaviors in class. Brophy(1999) suggested seven measures for teachers to deal with perfectionist students, some may be suggested here to reduce the students' language anxiety:(1)building a friendly, supportive learning environments;(2) establishing the expectation that mistakes are a normal part of the learning process; (3)presenting themselves as helpful instructors concerned primarily with promoting students learning, rather than an authority figure concerned primarily with evaluating students' performance....

However, it is not enough only for the teachers to make such efforts to promote students learning process. Experts should be also asked to provide help for anxious students, especially for those highly anxious ones. In this case, some specific psychological techniques shall be applied. Above all, it is important for students to remember the value of controlling their emotional state and remaining calm when speaking English. Usually most of them feel relaxed when making mistakes in speaking their mother tongue, therefore, it is beneficial for them to really understand that errors are a normal and acceptable part in everyone's process of learning a language, particularly a foreign language.

V. Conclusion

The results of this study indicated that many students experienced varied language anxiety and language anxiety could affect the quality of oral English performance. In general, as the anxiety increases, the quality of oral performance decreases. However, variables affecting speech may be complicated and language anxiety can not be regarded as the only one. The students with high anxiety seemed to produce fewer Cus, and their length of Cus and error free expressions were also affected by the degree of language anxiety. Procrastination, fear of evaluation and over concern of errors can be regarded as three characteristics displayed in high anxious students oral performance.

Several limitations to this study must be noticed. Firstly, only a small group of learners in a specific language-learning context were examined, which limits the generalizability of the findings. It's entirely possible that other language learners in the same or different learning situations would have different reactions. For example, if the oral interview is administered as an official test, it's possible that

anxiety will increase and the results of this study would be different. What's more, when this study is conducted in less advanced students, who account for a large part in my university, the results will be different. Therefore, it is not an easy task to describe the relationship between language and oral performance in just a couple of sentences. Therefore, it should be examined in a variety of learning groups at various stages of language learning with various learning goals. Finally, the study was to show the indications of high anxious students, and it was thus designed to detect such instances, while high-anxious and low-anxious language learners likely differ in many important ways other than the characteristics examined here.

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