CONFIDENCE INDEX AND ORAL PROFICIENCY

Li Xiaolu
Anhui University

Abstract

Many researchers confirm that confidence factor plays a significant role in oral English training. However, lack of reliable evaluation methods renders teachers impotent in measuring individual confidence variation. They can do little more than form a rough impression on the basis of students' test scores and their personality traits, which proves deceptive and misleading. This paper introduces the notion of confidence index as an evaluation criterion and empirical investigation reveals the wide variation in individual confidence index. Finally, this paper explores the correlation between confidence factor and proficiency.

Key words
confidence index, individual variation, oral proficiency, correlation analysis

Introduction

Second language learning and teaching have now shifted its focus to language learners and research has been done to investigate the influences of affective factors on second language acquisition (SLA). The confidence factor as an important aspect of the affective factors is generally assumed to have a significant role in successful learning. According to Coopersmith (1967), confidence refers to the evaluation which the individual makes and customarily maintains with regard to himself. It indicates the extent to which an individual believes himself to be capable. High confidence is identified more often than not as a facilitating factor in SLA. Brown (1990) also suggests that a person with high confidence is able to reach out beyond himself more freely to be less inhibited. Conversely, Oxford (1990) asserts that unsuccessful learners often have lower confidence than successful language learners, which slows down progress and impedes success in SLA.

However, problems arise when it comes to the measurement of learners' confidence. Teachers can do little more than take it as a rough personality trait, leaving it obscure as to the relationship between confidence and the learning process. In the teaching of oral English, the confidence factor is mentioned and emphasized more often than ever. This study attempts to answer the following two questions:

a. How to evaluate student's confidence?
b. To what extent does the confidence factor influence learners' oral proficiency?

Research Methodology

1. Subjects

The subjects under study are 100 non-English majors in Anhui University. They were randomly chosen from Grade 2002. The subjects comprise 42 females and 58 males ranging from 17 to 20 years old.
2 Instruments

The survey instrument used in this study includes two parts. Part 1 is a listening comprehension test with a Likert scale format. Part 2 is an oral test. The listening comprehension test contains 50 items. For each item, students are asked to listen to a tape-recorded short conversation and then choose the most likely answer. Meanwhile, they have to indicate how confident they are about their choices by circling a number on a five-point scale ranging from "completely sure" to "not sure at all" as in the following example:

- Tape-recorded conversation

  Man: Operator, I'd like to place a call to Athens, Greece. How much will it cost?
  Woman: It will be $0.50 for the first three minutes and $0.20 for each additional minute.
  Third Voice: How much would a ten-minute call cost?

- Students would see on their test papers


The oral test follows the pattern in "Certificates in Communicative Skills in English" by the University of Cambridge Exams Syndicate. It contains three items aiming at assessing the ability to give information, instruction, description, explanation, and comment. The examiners make their judgments from the following aspects that were advocated by Weir in his Understanding and Developing Language Test (1993): (a) Appropriateness in the use of language forms to convey meaning in specific contexts; (b) Accuracy in the production of language forms, grammatical and lexical features; (c) Fluency in expressing or conveying meanings; (d) Clarity of utterances; (e) Pronunciation; (f) intonation and stress. The subject's performance is scored with reference to an analytic marking system. According to the system, each aspect has the total points of 25, which are further divided into five scales: Excellent, good, average, poor, and very poor.

3 Procedures

The experiment was conducted in Anhui University in April 2003. Before the test, all the subjects were told that the tests were only directed to diagnose their weakness in English studying. The scores would not be counted into their term evaluation. The subjects were first assigned into four groups to take the listening test in Audios. To ensure all the machines operated properly, a five-minute pilot listening was allowed for each subject. After the listening test, the subjects were reunited into one group to attend an oral test in order to guarantee marking consistency. Five examiners attended the oral test and scored for each subject. The five scores were averaged and the mean value was taken as the final.

3.1 Results and Analysis

Data analysis shows the results of listening comprehension test reveal a general pattern in which the average rating on correct answers is higher at 4.9 out of 5 than the average on wrong answers at 3.12 out of 5. There is no polarization of confidence ratings in such a way that all correct answers are rated 5 and all incorrect answers rated 1. What underlies the general pattern are two opposite tendencies: a) Relatively low confidence ratings can accompany correct answers. Despite the fact that 78 percent of the subjects answered correctly on Item 16, their average confidence rating is only 3.16. b) The more intriguing is that the average confidence rating for wrong answers was equal to or higher than the average confidence rating for correct answers. A case in point is Test Item 41 in which the average confidence rating for wrong answers at 4.73 contrasts that for correct answers at 3.69 only. See Table 1.

Table 1 indicates that any assumption of a straightforward relationship between accuracy and test score in linguistic performance may not be perfectly justified. Test Item 16 reflects that a large proportion of subjects are not very certain about the specific linguistic feature. Test Item 41 suggests that on the whole, subjects' perception of their knowledge is rather misleading because they seemed to be quite confident about their identification when in fact they are wrong.
The previous discussion has been based on the performance of the group learners as a whole. To investigate individual variation further the study presents a reliable way by measuring their confidence index. Specifically, the number of times the subjects choose a rating is divided into right choices and wrong ones and so for the other four ratings. With the results obtained in this way we can calculate the subject's average rating on right answers and that on wrong answers. Subtracting the average confidence rating on wrong answers from that on right answers yields a confidence index. For example, Subject A's choices at the 5 ratings are further divided as shown in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Average rating</th>
<th>Index</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Correct</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>43</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incorrect</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>93</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We first get the correct choice value by adding: 21 \times 5 + 8 \times 4 + 5 \times 3 + 2 \times 2 + 0 \times 1. Then divide the resulting sum by the total number of correct choices and finally get the average confidence value. In the same way we can get the average confidence value for incorrect answers. The gap between the two values is the subject's confidence index. The higher the index the more likely it is that the learner can recognize when he is really making an accurate identification.

A close examination will show that there exists a wide variation in individual confidence index. It is prone to the influences of many factors including linguistic environments, test content, personality trait and so on. What deserves our special attention is the deceptive property of the factor of personality trait. Some students are quite active and often impress others with high confidence but confidence index testing reveals a surprisingly different result. A case in point is SB who is often considered highly confident but his confidence index is as low as 03. See Table 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Average</th>
<th>Index</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Correct</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incorrect</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The example provides the evidence that the evaluation of confidence should not be based primarily on the rough impression of one's personality trait that is sometimes deceptive and misleading. The problem with SB is not that he means to cheat but that his perception of his knowledge is misleading. By measuring subjects' confidence index we are not only testing their knowledge of the language or ability to use the language but also their perceptions of that knowledge or ability. To further investigate the influence of confidence factor on oral English, taking subjects' confidence index and listening test score respectively as independent variables and oral test score as a dependent variable using correlation analysis the output of the SPSS analysis can be obtained in the following table.
Considerable research has been conducted on the role of confidence in SLA. Krashen (1981) compared self-confidence to the “affective filter” in that it enabled the learner to encourage intake or useful input. Yule (1989) in their survey felt that poor learners lacked confidence. But in this study we find it is not necessarily the case that a high score is always accompanied by high confidence or vice versa. As Table 4 shows, confidence index is highly correlated with oral test score ($r = 0.764$) while listening test score although from the same group of subjects has a much lower correlation coefficient ($r = 0.532$). It suggests that high confidence index may have a facilitating influence on the development of oral English. It is reasonably assumed that confidence index rather than test score presents a more objective evaluation of one's ability since it eliminates some deceptive factors in the evaluation. So confidence index can be widely used to diagnose student's weakness and provide instructive information not only in oral English training but in second language acquisition.

Pedagogical Implications

For most English teachers, the most frustrating experience may be the finding that there isn't a fixed methodology that works with all students. They have to make constant adjustment on the basis of learners' needs because at a very practical level there exists a wide discrepancy among individual learners. In the evaluation of the individual variation, traditional test scores may be deceptive and sometimes misleading. Other contributing factors, confidence for example, have to be taken into account as an index in evaluating learners' performance.

The study indicates confidence index is positively correlated with oral proficiency to a great extent. The underlying implication to English teachers is that in the teaching of oral English, one of the most important tasks is to foster a proper self-image and correct self-evaluation in students. For the students with low confidence index, even minus indexes, we should diagnose individually and prescribe accordingly for each case. A positive cycle as is shown in Figure 1 will greatly enhance the learning and teaching of oral English.

![Figure 1](image-url)

Conversely, it can be reasonably assumed that in the absence of correct self-evaluation, the cycle will break and inevitably hamper the progression in oral proficiency.

Continued on p. 20.