

A Study of English Majors' Speaking Anxiety and Influencing Factors

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Abstract: English anxiety plays a key emotional role in English learning, and this study examines English majors' speaking anxiety and influencing factors. Through questionnaire surveys of 76 sophomore English majors using the English Anxiety Scale and the English-Speaking Anxiety Influencing Factors Scale, the study finds that English majors generally have a moderate level of English anxiety, with language skill anxiety being the most significant, followed by test anxiety and negative evaluation anxiety. The study also examines the factors affecting speaking anxiety, and the results shows that learner factors as internal influences are the most significant factors affecting speaking anxiety, while other factors, peer factors, and teacher factors are external and have relatively little effect on English speaking anxiety. The results of this study contribute to an in-depth understanding of English-speaking anxiety among English majors and its influencing factors. This is an important reference for the development of targeted teaching strategies and student support.

1. Introduction

Prior to the 1970s, research on individual learner differences focused mainly on intelligence and linguistic competence, while neglecting the importance of affective factors. With the development of humanistic psychology, the focus of language teaching gradually shifted from how teachers teach to how students learn, and affective factors began to be recognized as playing a crucial role in foreign language acquisition^[1]. Brown innovatively proposed a relationship between affective factors and the ability in second language learning, and emphasized foreign language anxiety as one of the important affective factors^[2]. Anxiety, as one of the individual difference factors affecting foreign language acquisition, is a type of negative emotion that is common to learners, and is closely related to language skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing in foreign languages^[3].

English majors in China often struggle with oral expression due to the emphasis on reading and writing skills. Guo and Xu noted that this results in speaking anxiety for many English majors^[4]. While previous studies have examined speaking anxiety in foreign language learners, there is a lack of research on oral anxiety in English majors, as most previous studies have mainly focused on non-English majors. The study will delve into the level of speaking anxiety among English majors in China and explore the factors that may affect speaking anxiety in order to provide better learning and teaching strategies.

2. Literature Review

Anxiety is a complex psychological phenomenon that has received significant attention in the field of psychology. Researchers have studied anxiety from various perspectives, resulting in multiple definitions. Spielberger and Gorsuch defined foreign language anxiety as neural activity associated with nervous tension, fear, and worry ^[5]. MacIntyre and Gardner described language anxiety as nervousness, apprehension, and fearfulness associated with the language environment ^[6]. In brief, foreign language anxiety refers to the psychological state of tension, uneasiness, or fear that arises from the failure to achieve personal language learning goals. It can also refer to the fearful or uneasy emotions that learners experience when using and expressing a foreign language. Horwitz et al. categorized foreign language anxiety into four dimensions: communication apprehension, test anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and constructed the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) based on these categories ^[1], which helps researchers and educators assess and intervene in different forms of foreign language anxiety.

In research on foreign language anxiety, various dimensions such as reading, listening, writing, and speaking are involved. Mills et al. investigated the relationship between self-efficacy, foreign language anxiety, and French language proficiency at the listening and reading levels ^[7]. The results show that students' reading self-efficacy was positively correlated with reading level, but reading anxiety did not show a significant correlation with reading level. Regarding listening, the study found a positive correlation between listening anxiety and listening level for both male and female students. However, only female students' listening self-efficacy was positively correlated with listening anxiety. Zhou and Tang conducted an empirical study on the effect of foreign language writing anxiety on the writing process. They found a negative correlation between L2 writing anxiety and L2 writing proficiency, which was influenced by the writing process in the native language ^[8]. The above findings offer valuable insights into the manifestation of foreign language anxiety across various language skill, which also provide guidance for educators and researchers to better comprehend and address the anxiety that students may encounter during foreign language learning.

In the study on foreign language speaking anxiety, Wu defined it as a type of situational anxiety, which refers to persistent worry or fear about real or imagined foreign language speaking interactions, performances, and environments ^[9]. This definition emphasizes the relationship between anxiety and specific contexts. Scholars have extensively researched the effects of anxiety on foreign language speaking, its causes, and potential solutions. Woodrow developed the Second Language Speaking Anxiety Scale, which measures the impact of anxiety on the speaking performance of English as a Second Language speakers ^[10]. Mak investigated the factors that contribute to classroom speaking anxiety among Chinese students, which are fear of negative evaluation, fear of communicating with native speakers, negative attitude towards the English classroom, negative self-evaluation, and difficulty speaking the native language in a foreign language classroom ^[11]. Wang utilized Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy to effectively reduce speaking anxiety and developed a model for speaking anxiety reduction ^[12]. Lee discovered that teachers can alleviate foreign language anxiety, particularly speaking anxiety, in undergraduate international students through verbal speech correction. The appropriate use of verbal correction by teachers to encourage students had a positive impact on students' emotion ^[13]. These studies provide insight into the nature of foreign language speaking anxiety, influencing factors, and solving measures, which are important guidance for the fields of language education and psychology.

To summarize, foreign language anxiety is a complex psychological phenomenon that is common in the process of learning a foreign language, which involves a variety of emotional and psychological factors and can affect all aspects of language skills. Despite numerous studies on the topic, speaking anxiety as a manifestation of foreign language anxiety has been less studied in English majors.

Therefore, it is crucial to gain a deep understanding of the causes and manifestations of speaking anxiety in English majors to take targeted measures to help students overcome it and improve speaking abilities.

3. Research Methods

3.1 Research Questions

This study aims to answer the following questions:

- (1) What types of anxiety do English majors experience in their language learning?
- (2) What factors contribute to English majors' speaking anxiety?

3.2 Research Participants

The study involves 72 sophomore students majoring in English at a Xi'an university. The survey includes 7 male students and 65 female students, due to predominant female student population in the English major. The participants are Chinese native speakers who have been studying English in China for at least 10 years.

3.3 Research Instruments

The questionnaire survey uses two scales: the English Anxiety Scale and the English-Speaking Anxiety Influencing Factors Scale. The English Anxiety Scale is composed of two parts: the first part contains background information on the participants. In the second part, the FLCAS is used to measure foreign language anxiety, which is widely recognized for its high reliability, validity, and relevance^[4]. Horwitz et al. categorized the foreign language anxiety scale into communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation^[1]. English classroom teaching in China emphasizes language skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Therefore, the present study classifies English anxiety into three categories: negative evaluation anxiety, test anxiety, and language skill anxiety. A total of 18 variables are assessed on a five-point Likert scale, with 1 to 5 scales indicating strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, strongly agree.

Previous studies have shown that foreign language anxiety is categorized into four main groups: learner-influenced, teacher-influenced, peer-influenced, and other influences^[14]. Based on this, the FLCAS was modified to create the English-Speaking Anxiety Influence Factor Scale. The scale consists of 25 items, also on a Likert scale. In total, 152 valid questionnaires were collected, 76 for each of the English Anxiety Scale and the English-Speaking Anxiety Influence Factor Scale. The questionnaire data were analyzed statistically with SPSS 19.0.

4. Research Results

4.1 Foreign Language Anxiety among English Majors

According to Oxford and Burry-Stock's criteria for classifying the Likert scale, a mean score of 3.5 and above was categorized as high-level anxiety, whereas a mean score of 2.4 and below was regarded as low-level anxiety, and those between 2.4 and 3.5 were categorized as medium level anxiety^[15]. Based on these criteria and the participants' level of anxiety when speaking English, they were categorized into three groups: low anxiety, medium anxiety, and high anxiety. Table 1 shows the overall situation of the participants' English anxiety. As seen in the table 1, the mean score for overall anxiety was 3.06, which falls between 2.4 and 3.5 and is classified as medium anxiety. The data shows

that 65.79% sophomore English majors experience moderate anxiety while learning English. Additionally, 21.05% students experience high anxiety, which is higher than the 13.16% students who experience low anxiety. These findings suggest that English anxiety is a common issue among sophomore English majors.

Table 1: General Situation of English Anxiety

| Anxiety Groups | N | Percent | Mean | SD |
|----------------------|----|---------|------|------|
| Low Anxiety Group | 10 | 13.16% | 2.10 | 0.34 |
| Medium Anxiety Group | 50 | 65.79% | 2.95 | 0.29 |
| High Anxiety Group | 16 | 21.05% | 3.80 | 0.25 |
| Total | 76 | 100% | 3.06 | 0.58 |

Notes: N: Number of participants; SD: Standard deviation.

The study finds that among English majors, language skill anxiety has the highest mean value of 3.17, followed by test anxiety with a mean value of 2.82. Negative evaluation anxiety had the lowest mean value of 2.73. Among the various dimensions of language skill anxiety, listening anxiety was the most prominent with a mean value of 3.31, followed by speaking anxiety with a mean value of 3.21. The mean values for reading anxiety and writing anxiety were 3.09 and 3.07, respectively. Therefore, listening anxiety had the highest level among the language skill anxieties, followed by speaking anxiety, while reading anxiety and writing anxiety had relatively low levels.

English majors' high level of anxiety regarding language skills may be attributed to the educational emphasis on English reading and writing skills during preparation for the college entrance examination. This resulted in the students being proficient in English reading and writing, but relatively weak in listening and speaking skills. Test anxiety may arise from learners' incomplete understanding of the material they need to master and their fear of failing the test, or from past experiences of failure or poor performance on tests. Negative evaluation anxiety may arise when learners lack confidence in their English proficiency and fear negative evaluation from teachers, parents, or peers. These show that emotional and social factors also contribute to English anxiety.

4.2 Influencing Factors of English Majors' Speaking Anxiety

Table 2: Factors of English Majors' Speaking Anxiety

| Factors | Subfactors | Mean | SD | Overall Mean |
|-----------------|------------------------------|------|------|--------------|
| Learner Factors | Learning Strategy | 2.98 | 1.34 | 2.79 |
| | Self-Efficacy | 2.92 | 1.05 | |
| | Confidence | 2.83 | 1.13 | |
| | Motivation | 2.81 | 1.12 | |
| | Personality | 2.81 | 1.12 | |
| Teacher Factors | Teaching Method | 2.30 | 0.97 | 2.19 |
| | Teacher-Student Relationship | 2.17 | 0.88 | |
| | Personality | 2.11 | 0.97 | |
| | Professional Attitude | 1.95 | 1.04 | |
| Peer Factors | Peer Competition | 2.69 | 1.13 | 2.40 |
| | Peer Cooperation | 1.85 | 0.86 | |
| | Peer Relationship | 1.85 | 0.86 | |
| Other Factors | Social Demand | 2.89 | 1.15 | 2.56 |
| | Cultural Factors | 2.69 | 1.10 | |
| | Curriculum | 2.61 | 1.13 | |
| | Environmental Factors | 2.41 | 1.03 | |

This study examines the factors that contribute to speaking anxiety among English majors,

including learner, teacher, peer, and other factors. The statistical results of the English-Speaking Anxiety Influencing Factors Scale, shown in Table 2, indicate that learner factors have the highest mean value, with a mean value of 2.79. Other factors, with a mean value of 2.56, come in second place, followed by peer factors with a mean value of 2.40, and teacher factors with a mean value of 2.19.

Learner influences mainly include learning strategies, self-efficacy, confidence, motivation, and personality. The study finds that the use of learning strategies has a significant impact on foreign language anxiety, as indicated by the highest mean value of 2.98. The large standard deviation suggests that there are significant differences among students, which may be attributed to variations in individual learning styles. The impact of self-efficacy on foreign language anxiety, which ranked second, indicates that students' expectations of their speaking abilities can greatly affect their speaking anxiety.

Along with other factors, social demand, cultural factors, curriculum, and environmental factors all contribute to speaking anxiety. The highest mean score is for social demand, which is 2.89. This suggests that the social expectation of English-speaking ability creates psychological pressure on students. The impact of cultural factors on foreign language anxiety ranks second with a mean value of 2.69, indicating that cross-cultural communication and cultural differences between English-speaking countries and China have a great influence on speaking anxiety.

Peer factors encompass peer competition, peer cooperation, and peer relationships. Peer competition, with a mean value of 2.69, has the greatest effect on speaking anxiety. This may be due to students' fear of being compared and judged by peers, leading to increased anxiety. The mean values of peer cooperation and peer relationship are relatively low, which may suggest that cooperation and support in speaking learning can moderate students' speaking anxiety.

Teacher factors include the teacher-student relationship, teacher personality, professional attitude, and teaching methods. The mean value for teaching methods is 2.30, which suggests that some students may not be satisfied with the current teaching methods or that there may be a mismatch between the teaching methods and the development of speaking ability. The relationship between teachers and students, as well as the personality and professional attitude of teachers, can have an impact on students' speaking anxiety. Teachers who are affable and supportive may be able to reduce students' anxiety and improve their confidence in oral expression.

5. Conclusion

This study examines the English anxiety experienced by English majors and the factors that contribute to their speaking anxiety. In the study of English anxiety, the study surveyed 76 sophomore English majors using the English Anxiety Scale. The results indicate that English majors generally experience a moderate degree of English anxiety, which suggests that most students feel nervous, uneasy, and fearful during the English learning process. Of the three types of anxiety related to English, language skill anxiety has the highest level, followed by test anxiety, while negative evaluation anxiety is the lowest. Specifically, language skill anxiety is ranked as listening anxiety, speaking anxiety, reading anxiety, and writing anxiety.

In terms of the influencing factors of English-speaking anxiety, the questionnaire survey, which used the English-Speaking Anxiety Influencing Factors Scale, reveals that the most significant factor contributing to English speaking anxiety is the learner's abilities. Other factors and peer influence followed, while the teacher's influence is found to be the least significant. Learner factors play a significant role in English learning, as the student's learning process is intrinsic to the teaching and learning activity. Speaking anxiety in English learning is mainly influenced by internal factors related to the learner's own learning process, rather than external factors such as peer or teacher factors.

Overall, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of English majors' anxiety towards the English language and its influencing factors. The findings serve as a valuable reference for developing targeted teaching strategies and providing student support. Future research can explore ways to reduce students' anxiety towards spoken English by optimizing teaching and learning environments to facilitate more effective language learning.

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