

# CAUSES OF ENGLISH SPEAKING ANXIETY AMONG TAIWANESE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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## Abstract

This survey focuses on the factors leading to students' speaking anxiety in an EFL class in the East Asian educational context. Eighty first-year students from a private university in southern Taiwan are surveyed. All of them are EFL majors. Respondents are asked to answer two questions about the frequency of their fear of speaking in an English class and the causes of that fear. The findings show that over half of the respondents feel speaking anxiety in English classes either all the time or almost all the time. The major causes of student English speaking anxiety belong to three interrelated and intersect groups: psychological, educational, and socio-cultural. With regard to the main psychological cause, the overwhelming majority of first-year students noted they feel reluctant to speak English aloud for fear of not understanding or misunderstanding the teacher's question or task. The second group of speaking anxiety causes is related to the students' current and pre-university English learning experience. In this group, the most frequently mentioned factors are lack of fluency, making errors, poor knowledge of vocabulary, and insufficient oral practice in class. Hence, lack of confidence leads to fear of public failure and/or ridicule. In respect of the third group, including socio-cultural factors, the main cause turns out to be the traditional shyness of the Chinese people and their dislike of speaking in public. The paper concludes with a number of suggestions on how to reduce learners' fear of speaking during English classes.

Abstract text must be in one column and Arial font, 10 point, normal, justified alignment with single-spaced interline spacing.

**Keywords:** EFL (English as a Foreign Language), English speaking anxiety.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In recent years, English has been embraced by East Asian countries as the number one foreign language taught and learned in the educational institutions of all levels. At the same time, it is not a comfortable language to many Asian students as its system strikingly differs from those of their native languages. EFL (English as a Foreign Language) instructors often note that their students tend to be reticent, unwilling to respond, participate in a conversation or express opinions in class discussions. They seldom volunteer to answer the simplest questions even though they know the answer. Studies show that such verbal behaviour is typical of students coming from many Asian countries and has roots in their culture (Rao, 2001). Most Taiwanese students admit openly that such activities as answering a teacher's questions aloud, expressing their opinion, and discussing something in the English classroom are connected with a lot of discomfort and various challenges. That is why they feel speaking anxiety and display noticeable communication apprehension, which, by all means, hinders their progress in learning English.

The direct result of learners' fear of speaking in a foreign language is their communication apprehension which is an "individual level of fear or anxiety associated with real or anticipated communication with another person or persons" (McCroskey, 1977, pp. 79-80). It interferes with the acquisition of a foreign language by causing anxiety and unwillingness to communicate in that language. The factors leading to that fear or anxiety are various: e.g., shyness or reticence (Friedman, 1980, p. 6), previous negative experience (Price, 1991, p.105), attitude of classmates, cultural stereotypes etc.

Having to deal with a foreign teacher in English classes may be another stressful factor to many university students in the Taiwanese educational context. Though foreign EFL instructors (both native and non-native speakers) are not uncommon in Taiwan nowadays, a great number of students say they met a

foreign teacher for the first time in their lives when they came to the university.

## 2 BACKGROUND

The government of Taiwan puts a strong emphasis on fostering the English language education in the country in order to develop the country's ties with the world community in various spheres, especially business, tourism, and culture. English is the main foreign language taught at all secondary and higher educational institutions around the country. All students learn English for 8-10 years before entering colleges and universities.

Foreign EFL instructors working in Taiwan often point at their students' low ability to communicate in English in spite of years of learning English. At the same time, the students may be very successful at doing various tests, especially when they don't have to write their own answers but have to select them from the options given. Historically, the traditional Chinese system of education was (and still largely is) based on memorization and "getting knowledge" (Rao, 2001). Hence, testing is relied on as the major method of "measuring one's knowledge". In Taiwan, the learning of English is also more test-oriented rather than communication-oriented. Many students believe that high scores for English tests raise their chance to get a good job in the future. In addition to such international tests as TOEFL, IELTS, TOEIC etc., there is a local test set up by the country's ministry of education and called GEPT (General English Proficiency Test) which has several levels and is compulsory for all college students.

## 3 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The primary purpose of this work was to find out the main factors that may give rise to students' speaking anxiety during English classes.

The motivation for this work is the current educational policies of the Taiwanese government promoting learning English not only as a means of intercultural communication but also as a means of strengthening the country's position among the members of the world community. There is a need to help EFL instructors, especially those coming from foreign cultures, overcome obstacles they may encounter while structuring assignments for developing their students' communication skills.

Two research questions were considered:

1. How often do first-year students feel anxiety when they speak English in class?
2. What are the most frequent causes of the students' English speaking anxiety?

## 4 METHODOLOGY

The qualitative research tradition with an addition of a quantitative component was used in this survey, and the participants' experiences and feelings were in the focus of attention.

This survey was limited to students of only one university campus, namely Shih Chien University, Kaohsiung campus, Taiwan. The data were collected from three groups of first-year students. The freshmen students were chosen deliberately, as they say they are nervous and feel scared when they have to speak English in class more often than students of other levels (sophomores, juniors, and seniors). There were 80 interviewees. All of them were English majors. They were offered a questionnaire the purpose of which was to find out how often they felt fear or anxiety when they had to communicate in English during classes and what caused that anxiety.

In order to find out the causes of students' English speaking anxiety, a questionnaire was used as the study instrument for the survey. The questionnaire was divided into two sections and included the following questions.

*A. Do you feel uneasy, nervous, or scared when you have to speak English aloud in your English class? Please check only one answer.*

*all the time*

*almost all the time*

*sometimes*

*rarely*

*never*

*B. Sometimes, you feel nervous and even scared when you have to speak English during your English*

classes. Why does this happen? Please check as many reasons as you can. You can also write your own ideas in the blank space.

1. *I feel nervous because I am afraid that I didn't understand or misunderstood the teacher's question or task.*
2. *I feel embarrassed because my teacher is a foreigner; I am not used to communicating with foreigners.*
3. *It is sometimes hard for me to concentrate on the content of the class.*
4. *I have had no experience of speaking in class when other students are listening.*
5. *I make noticeable mistakes and do not know the necessary vocabulary.*
6. *My English is not fluent.*
7. *Chinese teachers of English never/seldom encourage me to speak English in class.*
8. *Even some foreign teachers do not get students to speak English in class.*
9. *I don't have enough practice; two hours of oral English per week is not enough for me.*
10. *I am not very interested in English.*
11. *Chinese people are shy; they don't like to speak in public.*
12. *I do not want to look foolish and "lose my face" in front of the whole group.*
13. *Parents have always told me to be quiet and silent when a teacher is talking to me.*
14. *In our culture, students should listen and memorize what the teacher says.*
15. *In our culture, people do not like to express their opinion in public.*
16. *Others (write your ideas): \_\_\_\_\_*

The survey questions 1, 2, 3, and 4 in part B were specifically formulated to elicit information regarding some psychological factors that affect the students' communication behavior during English classes. Questions 5 - 10 included factors based on students' learning experience and motivation, while the last 5 questions focused on some socio-cultural concepts and stereotypes. It is hardly possible to draw a border line between the psychological factors and the other two groups. They are interwoven and interconnected.

The respondents were asked to answer the survey questions honestly and openly. In order to ease any possible anxiety, they were also told to answer the questions anonymously. The students were given as much time as they needed for answering the questions during one of their English classes. They could use dictionaries in case they needed to look up the meaning of some words that they didn't know.

## 5 STUDENT ANSWERS AND RESULTS

With regard to the first research question, the results were as follows. 8 students (10%) chose the answer "all the time" while the answer "almost all the time" was chosen by 40 students (50%), "sometimes" – by 24 students (30%), and "rarely" – by 8 students (10%). Therefore, all students pointed out that they felt anxiety when they had to speak English aloud in class. The majority of them (60%) indicated they felt it all the time or almost all the time.

With regard to the second research question, the major causes of speaking anxiety during English classes, noted by 50% to 70% of students, are the following: "because I am afraid I didn't understand or misunderstood the teacher's question or task" (55); "my English is not fluent" (44), "Chinese people are shy; they don't like to speak in public" (40); "I make noticeable mistakes and do not know the necessary vocabulary" (40); "I don't have enough practice; two hours of oral English per week is not enough for me" (39). The other frequently stated causes were: "because my teacher is a foreigner; I am not used to communicating with foreigners" (33); "in our culture, students should listen and memorize what the teacher says" (32); "I do not want to look foolish and "lose my face" in front of the whole group" (32). All the other factors included in the survey were mentioned as well but less frequently: i.e., absence of experience of speaking in class (26); dislike of Chinese and Taiwanese people to express their opinion in public (23); inability to concentrate on the class content (12); the fact that Chinese teachers never or seldom encourage students to speak English in class (10); the fact that parents tell them to be silent and quiet while a teacher is talking to them (8); lack of interest in English (6); the fact that even some foreign teachers do not get students to speak English in class (4).

The results show that the major factors causing Taiwanese first-year students' English speaking anxiety in a classroom belong to all the three domains (psychological, educational, and socio-cultural) which are interrelated and intersect.

As for the psychological factors, the overwhelming majority of students (68.7%) feel reluctant to speak English aloud for fear of not understanding or misunderstanding the teacher's question or task. Freshmen students often complain that foreign teachers "speak too fast" and use "too many difficult words". One possible explanation of this behavior is lack of previous experience of communicating in English. Another reason may be the teacher's English accent if the teacher is a foreigner. In Taiwan, many freshmen students meet with foreign teachers of English (both native and non-native speakers) only when they come to colleges or universities. It is worth mentioning that there are not many foreigners living and staying in the country, especially in its remote parts. Local people are not accustomed to see westerners often. Students constantly complain they have very few opportunities to communicate with foreigners outside the university. Thus, 41.3% of the survey participants indicated the following reason for their stress and anxiety during English classes: "because my teacher is a foreigner; I am not used to communicating with foreigners". Besides, "keeping face" is very important for Chinese and Taiwanese people (Iftimie, 2006, p. 293). Most students remain silent because they don't want to look foolish and "lose their face" in front of classmates. 40% of the respondents mentioned that factor.

The second group of speaking anxiety causes is related to the students' current and pre-university English learning experience. 55% of the survey respondents feel speaking anxiety because they think their English is not fluent. 50% of them have fear of making mistakes and demonstrating poor knowledge of the vocabulary. In other words, lack of confidence makes students remain silent for fear of failure and ridicule. Quite a great number of freshmen students (48.8%) pointed out that they didn't have enough practice of speaking English in class. That is true. The analysis of the curriculum shows that the 1<sup>st</sup> year English majors studying at the Department of Applied English of Shih Chien University have two hours of oral English per week. Some students may find this amount of time insufficient for improving their English communication skills provided the other chances to practice them are very limited. Besides, many EFL teachers still prefer lecturing to interactive methods of teaching. This is true about both the students' pre-university learning experience and the current situation, as 32.5% of them mentioned a complete absence of experience of speaking English in class.

The third group of factors that lead to English speaking anxiety includes socio-cultural factors. Quite a number of the survey participants (50%) connected their communication apprehension in English classes with the shyness of the Chinese and their dislike to speak in public. That might be true. In Asian cultures, influenced by Confucianism, shyness and silence have a positive connotation. Moreover, students are expected to respect and not to challenge their teachers (Lim, 2003). There are other cultural stereotypes that may hinder the process of learning English communicatively. For example, out of respect for their teacher, Chinese students usually refrain from saying something or voicing opinions in class (Hu, 2002). A teacher has always had a high authority in Chinese culture. That is why many students focus on what the teacher says rather than try to say their own ideas (Rao, 2001). The assertion "in our culture, students should listen and memorize what the teacher says" was chosen by 40% of students. Besides, 28.7% of them indicated that Chinese and Taiwanese people don't like to express their opinion in public. Some students (10%) mentioned that parents told them to be silent and quiet while a teacher was talking to them. This "problem of parents" seems to be characteristic of traditional Taiwanese families. It was even discussed on one of the local TV channels recently in regard to learning English.

The less frequently mentioned causes of speaking anxiety in an English class were inability to concentrate on the class content (15%) and lack of interest in learning English (7.5%). In large classes, typical of Taiwanese private universities, students have mixed ability levels. There are always a few students in a group whose English proficiency level is lower compared to the rest of the group. The class content may be too difficult for them. Consequently, they cannot concentrate on it and, eventually, can lose their interest in English. Another reason is low motivation.

A few respondents (12.5%) noted that they felt speaking anxiety because Chinese teachers never or seldom encouraged students to speak English in class. What is more, even some foreign teachers did not aim at getting students to communicate in class, which was mentioned by 5% of the respondents.

## 6 APPLICATIONS FOR EFL TEACHING

The results of the survey show that all English major students of the first year participating in the survey stated they felt speaking anxiety in their English classes more or less frequently. The major aim of the study

was to investigate the causes of that anxiety.

The study of causes leading to English speaking anxiety among Taiwanese first-year students has helped identify a number of problematic areas. These causes are a combination of psychological, educational, and socio-cultural factors, which are interrelated.

In accordance with the students' answers and results, the following strategies could be made use of by foreign teachers of English to reduce speaking anxiety among Taiwanese first-year students in EFL classrooms:

1. *An instructor tries to lessen a student's anxiety in class by using a clear and simple language and speaking somewhat more slowly than usual while asking questions, setting tasks, giving explanations etc.*

2. *A teacher reminds the students that it is natural to make mistakes and errors, and all students in the world make them. The teacher also indicates that the more students practice the more proficient they become.*

3. *It is extremely important to create a warm and relaxing atmosphere to motivate the students to learn English. This can be accomplished by dealing with language problems through speaking in pairs or small groups of students who trust one another, telling jokes or some personal stories, correcting students' errors in a very friendly way etc.*

4. *Foreign teachers could provide a few extra opportunities for students to communicate in English, since they might be the only foreigners their students know. This may be done by attending after-class activities, staying in the classroom during the break time and having a chat with students, asking them to tell about the local culture, give advice, or teach some Chinese words and so on. By shortening the distance with the students, the teacher helps them gain a positive attitude to learning English.*

Finally, it is worth mentioning that a certain degree of speaking anxiety during English classes is normal and acceptable, but, in case it is too high, it interferes with the progress in learning English. If the English speaking anxiety problem was dealt with at earlier stages of learning, its troublesome consequences could be notably reduced at the university level.

## 7 CONCLUDING REMARKS

Our findings have implications for English language teaching at the universities of Taiwan. Nevertheless, it is recommended that further research be carried out in order to investigate the causes of English speaking anxiety among EFL students involving different ages of learners, levels of study, achievements, degree of motivation etc.

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