

A Research on Coping Strategies for Speaking Anxiety of Junior High School Students

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Abstract: English speaking anxiety is prevalent among students during English classes. In many provinces, English speaking tests have been incorporated into the high school entrance examination, further emphasizing the importance of oral English proficiency. Currently, there is relatively limited research on English speaking anxiety among junior high school students, with most studies focusing on university students. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate the causes of English speaking anxiety and identify strategies to alleviate it among students. Through literature review, the study identifies key factors contributing to students' English speaking anxiety, including fear of negative evaluation, low self-confidence, a non-supportive classroom atmosphere, etc. The paper also proposes a series of coping strategies for teachers and students based on Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis and the principles of Humanistic Psychology. For teachers, suggestions focus on creating a supportive and low-anxiety classroom environment, designing gradual speaking activities, and fostering collaborative learning. For students, recommendations emphasize self-awareness, consistent practice by using multimedia resources, and positive engagement in challenging speaking opportunities. The study aims to provide teachers and students with practical measures to mitigate speaking anxiety, thereby enhancing the overall efficacy of oral English instruction and learning at the junior high school level.

Keywords: English Speaking Anxiety; Affective Filter Hypothesis; Humanistic Psychology; Coping Strategies.

1. Introduction

The research aims at providing some useful corresponding strategies about how to reduce speaking anxiety of junior high school students. The background and the purposes and significance of the study will be discussed.

1.1. Background of the Research

English is one of the most widely spoken languages in the world. It is not only a learning subject, but also serves as a global bridge for communication across different countries and cultures. Nowadays, many provinces have taken the oral English test into the college entrance examination. For example, Changsha high school entrance examination now features an English human-computer speaking test that makes up 25% of the total score. All of these show that an increasing number of people pay attention to the ability to communicate and oral English has become an essential part of English learning.

However, many students find it challenging to improve their oral English. There are a number of factors influencing students' oral English level, such as vocabulary, environment, grammar, pronunciation, confidence, attitude, etc. More importantly, when students communicate in English, they often feel anxious, which can prevent their oral English progress. For example, some will speak English at a low volume and fast. Some even refuse to discuss or communicate with others in English. What's worse, there are some students avoid answering questions or stay silent. Ashraf [1] argued that anxiety is the most common emotional challenge encountered during second language acquisition. Similarly, Horwitz [2] pointed out that anxiety exerts one of the strongest effects on learners' ability to produce spoken English. Therefore, some measures about anxiety management are needed.

1.2. Purposes and Significance of the Research

English serves as a vital means of human communication and holds a significant place in primary and secondary education in China. And emotional factors play a significant role in shaping students' foreign language learning experiences. This paper takes the speaking anxiety of junior high school students as the research topic. The purpose is to propose some practical and feasible solutions.

As for the significance of this study, both its theoretical and practical implications will be presented.

Theoretically, middle school students' anxiety about speaking English is a significant issue that warrants serious attention, but the extent of speaking anxiety among this age group has not been thoroughly examined. Prior research has largely focused on anxiety among university students, with relatively little attention paid to adolescents in middle school. This study aims to investigate English-speaking anxiety specifically in middle school learners, thereby broadening the theoretical understanding of speaking anxiety in educational contexts.

Practically, the junior high school years represent a crucial stage in which students' cognitive styles and abilities develop rapidly, significantly influencing their future academic and career trajectories. However, oral English instruction has long been a weak point in our country's education system. In many English classrooms, students often remain silent and reluctant to speak, a phenomenon closely tied to their anxiety about speaking English. Therefore, for teachers, this research can support their professional growth. It offers practical suggestions that may encourage them to reflect on their teaching practices and, in turn, enhance their instructional expertise. For students, the study provides valuable insights into understanding and managing speaking anxiety in a constructive way. Learners can adopt a more positive mindset, reduce unnecessary stress, and ultimately improve their English learning efficiency.

2. Literature Review

Anxiety is a unique emotional experience that all individuals face at some point. In the context of foreign language learning, most of learners frequently encounter anxiety when speaking English. There are three parts. The first part defines “Anxiety” “Foreign Language Anxiety” and “English Speaking Anxiety”. The second part describes the two theoretical foundations of this study, that is, Affective Filter Hypothesis and Humanistic Psychology. Finally, relevant research about foreign language anxiety and English speaking anxiety are presented.

2.1. Definition of Key Terms

This section discusses the two definitions of the key terms of this study. The first is the definition of “foreign language anxiety” and the second is the definition of “English speaking anxiety”.

2.1.1. Anxiety

Anxiety plays a great influence on students’ foreign language learning. And anxiety is a complex emotional and physiological response.

Anxiety is understood as a state of heightened alertness triggered by external or internal stimuli, manifesting through physical, emotional, and mental changes[3]. Spielberger believes that anxiety is an unpleasant emotional state defined by an individual’s perception of tension, fear, and worry, all of which are physiologically mediated by the autonomic nervous system[4]. Importantly, anxiety is not inherently negative. Alpert and Haber proposed a distinction between facilitating anxiety and debilitating anxiety[5]. The former refers to the anxiety which enhances focus and performance under pressure. The latter is the anxiety which overwhelms cognitive resources and impairs functioning. This dual nature underscores anxiety’s role as both a potential motivator and a significant barrier, depending on intensity and context. Young holds that anxiety reflects an individual’s internal psychological shifts and can indicate how they mentally respond when facing challenges[6].

From the above definition and description, we can see that anxiety is a kind of inner feeling of people, which reflects how they cope with uncertain or unknown things. And in this study, the anxiety mostly focus on the detrimental influence on language learning.

2.1.2. Foreign Language Anxiety

Learning a foreign language can be challenging for students, many of whom experience anxiety during the process, which leads the new concept of “foreign language anxiety” is introduced several years ago.

Many scholars have put forward their definitions about foreign language anxiety. Early foundational work by Spielberger described anxiety as “a subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system”[7]. Building on this, Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope were the first to formally conceptualize FLA as “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning”, because they argued that it differs from general anxiety or test anxiety[2]. What’s more, they developed the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), which includes three core components: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation—all of which significantly hinder learners’ willingness to communicate and overall proficiency.

More recently, Li reaffirmed FLA as a situation-specific anxiety that permeates all modalities of language use, including listening, speaking, reading, and translation[8].

In short, foreign language anxiety refers to the tension, fear, anxiety, and self-doubt learners feel in second-language contexts due to fears of falling short of expectations, often leading to frustration, resistance, and a decline or stagnation in English proficiency. Since most students in China study English as a foreign language, foreign language anxiety will be English anxiety in this study.

2.1.3. English Speaking Anxiety

Foreign language learning includes the several parts, speaking, listening, reading, and writing, among which speaking is often perceived as the most challenging skill due to its real-time, interactive, and socially exposed nature.

Different scholars have different understandings about English speaking anxiety. Defined broadly as “a common fear in English learning” [9], it manifests as learners’ subjective feelings of fear, apprehension, and tension specifically tied to oral use of English[10][11]. This type of anxiety goes beyond ordinary nervousness. It is a context-specific form of anxiety characterized by persistent fear or concern about actual or imagined situations involving English interaction and oral performance[12].

In this study, English speaking anxiety is an emotional experience of fear, tension and high physiological arousal caused by the use of spoken English.

2.2. Theoretical Foundations of the Research

The content of this section includes the theoretical foundations of the research, that is, affective filter hypothesis and humanistic psychology. They are important for managing students’ English speaking anxiety and improving foreign language teaching.

2.2.1. Affective Filter Hypothesis

In the early 1980s, Krashen[13] put forward the theory of “language monitoring” which consists of five hypotheses: Acquisition Learning Hypothesis, Monitoring Hypothesis, Natural Order Hypothesis, Input Hypothesis and Affective Filter Hypothesis.

The Affective Filter Theory seeks to explain why language acquisition may still be impeded even when learners are exposed to substantial comprehensible input. Krashen posited that learners’ affective states which include motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety form an ‘affective filter’[14]. When this filter is ‘too high’, comprehensible input fails to effectively enter the Language Acquisition Device (LAD), thereby hindering internalization. Conversely, a low affective filter facilitates the conversion of input into intake, promoting acquisition.(See Figure 1).

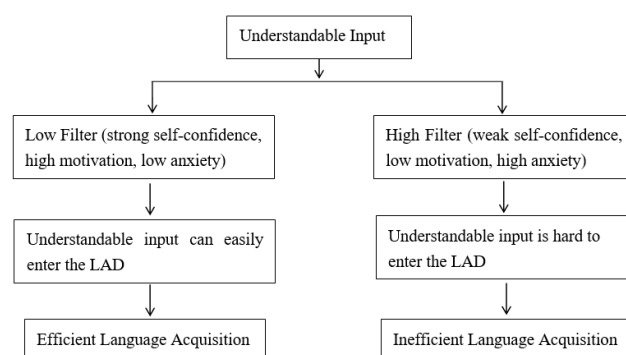


Figure 1. The Role of Affective Factors on Language Acquisition

2.2.2. Humanistic Psychology

Humanistic psychology emerged in 1960s. Human nature, interests, and dignity are emphasized. Representatives Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow emphasized that every individual possesses an innate drive toward self-actualization[15][16]. They strongly criticized traditional teacher-centered instruction and advocated educational practices that honor the learner's autonomy and emotional world.

According to Chen and Wang, the features of humanistic psychology in education field are as follows:

First, student-centered teaching places learners at the core of the educational experience. Humanistic educators believe that students should be treated as whole persons whose intellectual, emotional, and social dimensions all matter. Second, the integration of emotion into teaching is considered essential. Humanistic theory holds that affective factors, including confidence, motivation, anxiety, and self-esteem, profoundly influence cognitive engagement and learning outcomes. Finally, humanistic psychology calls for a supportive and egalitarian teacher-student relationship. Rather than assuming an authoritarian role, the teacher acts as a facilitator who trusts in the learner's capacity for growth[17][18].

2.3. Relevant Research on English Speaking Anxiety

Recently, there is an increasing number of research about English speaking anxiety from other aspects.

In the terms of causes of English speaking anxiety, various researchers have different understandings. Faye and Sultan, in a study of 85 female university students in Saudi Arabia, found that common causes include fear of making errors, mandatory classroom participation, inadequate vocabulary, limited opportunities for oral practice, weak grammatical knowledge, concerns about mispronunciation, teachers' negative attitudes, and the pressure of delivering oral presentations[19]. These stressors reflect a complex interplay of internal and external pressures. Further supporting this, Hutabarat and Simanjuntak emphasized that the core driver of speaking anxiety is learners' fear of negative evaluation and a perceived low proficiency in English[20]. Similarly, Guo highlighted the role of the classroom environment, noting that teacher behaviors, peer dynamics, and academic demands significantly shape students' anxiety levels[21]. Together, these studies suggest that speaking anxiety does not stem from a single source but arises from a confluence of learner-intrinsic vulnerabilities and contextual triggers.

From the correlations between English speaking anxiety and various factors, scholars also have explored how speaking anxiety correlates with other variables. Li, through questionnaire and classroom observation, revealed a significant negative correlation between personality traits and English speaking anxiety: specifically, more introverted students tend to experience higher levels of anxiety when speaking English[8]. Moreover, the study of Hamid, Hanif, and Idrus demonstrated a strong positive correlation between listening anxiety and speaking anxiety among rural secondary school students in Malaysia[22]. Guo's work further supports this systemic view by showing that foreign language anxiety is closely associated with relational factors, such as the quality of teacher-student relationships and peer interactions[21].

To sum up, these findings underscore that English speaking

anxiety is not an isolated phenomenon but is deeply intertwined with learners' personality, language competence, social context, and broader affective experiences in the language classroom.

3. Problem Solution

Based on the theoretical foundations and previous research, this part proposes some practical strategies to help junior high school students manage and reduce their English speaking anxiety from both the teacher and the student's perspectives.

3.1. Suggestions for Teachers

From the teacher's view, the following aspects should be paid attention to.

Firstly, a supportive classroom atmosphere is crucial for reducing anxiety. According to Humanistic Psychology, learning is most effective when students feel safe, respected, and valued. Teachers should strive to build a relaxed classroom environment where mistakes are thought as natural steps in the learning process. For instance, when a student struggles to express an idea, the teacher can offer supportive prompts ("Do you mean...?") or rephrase the student's incomplete sentence positively ("So, you're saying that... That's an interesting point!"). This practice can lower the "filter" created by fear of negative evaluation according to Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis.

Secondly, gradual and low-stakes speaking activities are also important. Students often feel anxious when they attract others' attention or required to produce perfect language immediately. Activities should be designed to build confidence of students progressively, starting from controlled practice and moving towards freer communication. For example, instead of starting with impromptu speeches, a unit on "My Hobbies" can follow this sequence. First, the teacher presents simple sentences (like "I like swimming." and "My hobby is painting."), and the whole class repeats. Then, students interview a partner using a given questionnaire (such as "What's your hobby?" and "When do you do it?"), and fill in a form. They just need to read the questions and note down answers. Next, students use their notes to tell another pair about their partner's hobby. Finally, students can choose to prepare three sentences about their own hobby to share with a small group.

Thirdly, teachers need to promote collaborative learning and peer interaction. Working with peers can feel less intimidating than speaking in front of the whole class or the teacher. Take "Information Gap" activities for example. In pairs, Student A has a picture of a busy park, and Student B has a similar picture with several key differences. Without showing each other the pictures, they must describe their pictures and ask questions to find all the differences. This reduces self-consciousness about language form.

3.2. Suggestions for Students

In order to relieve speaking anxiety, students themselves should do the following.

Firstly, self-awareness and positive self-talk are essential. Students should be aware of their anxiety triggers, such as certain grammar points or speaking topics. Once they identify these triggers, they can engage in positive self-talk. For example, if a student is anxious about making grammar mistakes, they can tell themselves that making mistakes is a normal part of learning and that each error is an opportunity to improve.

Secondly, consistent practice is key. Students should set aside regular time for English speaking practice. And they can practice speaking by using multimedia. For instance, they can watch English movies and TV shows, and then try to imitate the pronunciation and intonation of the characters. They can also listen to English podcasts and repeat what the hosts say.

Finally, students should embrace challenges. For example, they can participate in English debates or public speaking competitions. Although these activities may initially cause high levels of anxiety, they also offer valuable opportunities for growth. Through facing these challenges, students can develop the ability to handle stress and perform well under pressure, which is crucial for effective English speaking.

4. Conclusion

The analysis and strategies presented above demonstrate that reducing speaking anxiety is not a simple task but a systematic endeavor. The following are conclusions and reflections on the research.

4.1. Summary

This research begins with an analysis of the background and the importance of the research. The literature review clarified the core concepts of anxiety, foreign language anxiety, and specifically English speaking anxiety, while establishing Affective Filter Hypothesis and Humanistic Psychology as the foundational theoretical lenses.

Building upon this theoretical framework, the study proposes a series of coping strategies from the perspectives of both teachers and students. For teachers, they can transform the classroom into a psychologically safe space, implement scaffolding and low-pressure speaking tasks, and design peer collaboration to relieve English speaking anxiety. For students, the strategies include recognizing anxiety triggers, employing positive self-talk, engaging in regular and diverse practice, and embracing speaking challenges. Collectively, these measures aim to lower the affective filter, foster a learner-centered environment, and empower students to manage their anxiety constructively.

4.2. Limitations of the Present Research

Although this study provides a structured analysis and strategies, it has some limitations.

Firstly, the strategies proposed are primarily derived from theoretical deduction. They lack empirical validation through direct classroom experimentation or systematic data collection within a specific junior high school context.

Secondly, the study treats "junior high school students" as a relatively broad category and it may not fully explain the differences in speaking anxiety across different grades, proficiency levels, or regional and school cultures.

4.3. Suggestions for the Further Study

To address the limitations and advance, future research can proceed in the following directions.

Firstly, empirical and action-oriented studies are strongly recommended. Researchers could conduct action research projects in real junior high school classrooms, using quantitative and qualitative methods.

Additionally, longitudinal studies would be valuable to understand the long-term impact of anxiety-reducing practices on students' oral proficiency development.

Investigating these areas will provide a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of how to best

support junior high school students in overcoming the challenge of speaking anxiety.

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