

A Study on the Affecting Factors of English Majors' Anxiety in Oral Expression: A Case Study of Panzhihua University

Dan Zheng¹, Shuhan Yang²

¹(School of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Panzhihua University, China)

²(School of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Panzhihua University, China)

Abstract:

Background: The transformation of technology and information has provided great opportunities for the development of China's economy, and currently China needs high-level English talents more than ever before. However, college students usually exhibited anxiety in English oral learning and expression, which was considered a major factor hindering students' classroom participation and speaking activities, and to some extent, it hindered their proficiency in English.

Materials and Methods: In the present study, a questionnaire survey method was used to collect data from the English majors at Panzhihua University, and the data of 186 respondents were eventually analyzed.

Results: The results indicated that there was no significant gender difference in oral expression anxiety among English majors; their oral expression anxiety was significantly different in terms of the location of their home; their communication fear, fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety were significantly affecting oral expression anxiety.

Conclusion: The study was insightful to English teachers and students by investigating the affecting factors of students' oral expression anxiety.

Key Word: Panzhihua University; English majors; Oral expression; Anxiety.

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I. Introduction

Globally, English is the most popular language and the most widely studied second language. As one of the main subjects taught in China, English plays a vital role in Chinese education. According to the English curriculum standards, English teaching aims to improve students' comprehensive ability to use the language, including the speaking skills. However, a widespread phenomenon of "dumb English" exists among the Chinese students¹, indicating that even though many students have large vocabulary and good grammatical foundation, they always feel nervous and anxious and are unable to express ideas clearly in English when in real situations. Accordingly, a number of researchers have agreed that anxiety was the most critical factor related to language learning.

Horwitz suggested that foreign language learning anxiety frequently appeared in listening, speaking, or testing, as well as over-learning or beliefs in foreign language learning². He also developed the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) to measure language learners' anxiety. The scale covered three major dimensions: communicative anxiety, test anxiety, and negative evaluation anxiety. FLCAS scale undoubtedly provided an effective tool for scholars who studied foreign language learning anxiety. Specifically, researchers explored the affecting factors of anxiety in oral expression. Young identified six potential sources of anxiety: personal and interpersonal anxieties, learner perception of language learning, teacher attitudes towards language teaching, teacher-student interaction, design of classroom activities, and testing³. Öztürk & Gürbüz surveyed Istanbul University students and found that female had higher level of foreign language anxiety than male⁴. However, after surveying 149 Pakistani University students, Awan et al. found that female had less oral anxiety than male⁵. Yan & Horwitz claimed that geographical differences, test types, gender, class organization, teacher personality, parental influence and language ability might trigger students' anxiety to a certain extent⁶. Chowdhury investigated the anxiety of foreign language speaking among English learners at universities in Bangladesh⁷, and the results showed that learners' English proficiency, background knowledge, teachers, and social communication environment could have impacts on their anxiety in oral expression. Similarly, Hewitt & Stephenson indicated that learners' prior achievement in English would predict the level of anxiety in oral expression⁸.

In the meanwhile, increasing studies have investigated language anxiety of Chinese learners. For instance, Fan explored the factors that caused high school students' anxiety in oral expression, and divided them into two categories. One was internal factors including learners' personality, self-awareness, and fear, and the other was external factors involving classroom atmosphere, knowledge points, parental expectations, and differences between Chinese and Western cultures⁹. A survey was conducted with 170 non-English majored learners in Jiangxi province and showed that learners' English proficiency was affecting their anxiety in oral expression¹⁰. Shi used FLCAS to measure the anxiety in oral English of 132 first-year students majoring in science and technology, and found their worries about scores and fear of answering questions would produce oral anxiety¹¹. Guo and Xu surveyed 457 university students, and indicated that male had stronger anxiety levels than female¹². This result was conflicting with that from Lv's survey, which showed that there were no significant gender differences in terms of classroom anxiety, test anxiety, or negative evaluation¹³.

Existing studies shed light on the role of anxiety in language learning outcomes, and indicated that no consensus has been reached regarding the affecting factors of anxiety in English oral expression. Given that few studies have been conducted with the English majors in China, the present study attempted to bridge the gap by surveying the English majors at Panzhihua University. The findings would be meaningful and provoking for providing deeper understanding about the phenomenon of "dumb English" of Chinese students and offering ways to improve English majors' language proficiency through alleviating their anxiety in oral expression.

II. Materials And Methods

The present study was a quantitative research. This section introduced the research design, including sample design, research tool, data collection and data analysis.

Samples

The survey was conducted among English majors at Panzhihua University, and 186 valid questionnaires were finally used for analysis.

Research methods and tools

A self-administered questionnaire was distributed to the English majors to collect the data.

The questionnaire consists of two parts. The first part is to gain the participants' demographic information, including gender, grade, location of home, and English grade when entering the school. The second part is a scale composed of 33 questions to measure the participants' anxiety level in oral expression. The scale is originated from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) designed by Horwitz et al^{Error!}
Reference source not found. The scale is in the form of 5-point Likert scale, with each question corresponding to 5 options: "1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neither disagree nor agree; 4 = agree; 5 = strongly agree". In addition, 9 positively stated questions (2, 5, 8, 11, 14, 18, 22, 25, 32) are scored in reverse. Considering that the participants are Chinese, the scale was translated into Chinese first and then proofread by 2 English teachers. As shown in Table 1, anxiety in oral expression is measured with 4 dimensions: fear of communication, fear of negative evaluation, test anxiety and other factors.

Table 1: Dimensions of anxiety in oral expression

Variable	Dimensions	Items
Anxiety in oral expression	Fear of communication	1, 4, 9, 13, 14, 18, 23, 24, 27, 29, 30, 32
	Fear of negative evaluation	2, 3, 7, 15, 19, 20, 25, 31, 33
	Test anxiety	8, 10, 21
	Other factors	5, 6, 11, 12, 16, 17, 22, 26, 28

Data collection and data analysis

Pilot study was conducted with a convenient sample of 50 English majors and they were excluded from the final analysis. After determining the reliability of the research tool, the questionnaire was formally distributed among the English majors at Panzhihua University. All of the participants were informed that their identity information was confidential and 10 minutes would be enough. 210 English majors completed the questionnaire and 186 were considered valid. The response rate therefore was 89%. The data was analyzed using SPSS 25.0 (IBM SPSS). Reliability analysis, validity analysis, descriptive statistical analysis, independent sample T-test and correlation analysis were performed.

III. Result

Demographic information

Among the participants were 36 male students (19.35%), and 150 female (80.65%). There were 103 rural students, accounting for 55.38%, and 83 urban students, accounting for 44.62%. Specific demographic information is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Demographic information of the participants (N=186)

Characteristics	Items	Survey Respondents		Mean of English Score
		Amount	Percentage (%)	
Gender	male	36	19.35	58.65
	female	150	80.65	55.41
Location of home	rural	100	53.76	49.23
	urban	86	46.24	58.76

Reliability analysis

Reliability of the scale could be assessed by internal consistency reliability, retest reliability, replica retest reliability, and replica reliability^[14]. In this survey, the authors used internal consistency reliability. As shown in Table 3, the coefficient value (α) of the scale was 0.852, and α value of each factor was greater than 0.7. According to Li, the reliability coefficient of the scale was above 0.7, indicating that the scale had acceptable internal consistency and the survey would be reliable¹⁵.

Table 3: Reliability analysis of the scale

Scale and constructs	Amount of items	Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha \geq 0.7$)
Scale	33	0.852
Fear of communication	12	0.806
Fear of negative evaluation	9	0.738
Test anxiety	3	0.731
Other factors	9	0.753

Validity analysis

Validity refers to how accurately the research tool could measure the variables^{Error! Reference source not found.}. The more consistent the measured results were with the elements to be investigated, the higher the validity would be. There were three types of validity: content validity, criterion validity and structure validity. To evaluate the validity of the scale, the authors analyzed the correlation between the total score of the questionnaire and each construct. The results were shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Validity analysis of the scale

	Score	Other factors	Fear of communication	Test anxiety	Fear of negative evaluation
Score	1				
Other factors	0.860**	1			
Fear of communication	0.847**	0.665**	1		
Test anxiety	0.789**	0.589**	0.614**	1	
Fear of negative evaluation	0.843**	0.665**	0.624**	0.583**	1

** P < 0.01

The analysis suggested that the questionnaire was significantly related to the dimensions, namely, other factors, fear of communication, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. The correlation coefficient was between 0.789-0.860, and the correlation coefficient between the dimensions was between 0.583-0.665, indicating that the scale had a good structural validity.

Gender differences in rural students

To understand the relationship between anxiety in oral expression and gender among rural students, the authors conducted descriptive statistics (Table 5) and T-test for gender difference (Table 6).

Table 5: Descriptive statistics of gender and anxiety in oral expression of rural students

Factor	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Total score of anxiety	male	20	80.73	9.64
	female	80	106.78	13.54
Fear of communication	male	20	30.93	3.27
	female	80	43.68	4.96
Fear of negative evaluation	male	20	15.12	2.46
	female	80	18.97	3.80
Test anxiety	male	20	8.29	1.99
	female	80	7.59	1.91
Other factors	male	20	21.41	3.43
	female	80	46.03	3.25

Table 6: T-test for gender difference of rural students

Factor	Gender	T	P
Total score of anxiety	male	0.244	0.808
	female		
Fear of communication	male	-0.644	0.521
	female		
Fear of negative evaluation	male	-0.901	0.370
	female		
Test anxiety	male	1.800	0.076
	female		
Other factors	male	-0.577	0.566
	female		

The data in Table 5 showed that the male students from rural places had lower level of anxiety in oral expression than female students did. Specifically, they felt less anxious about communication, negative evaluation and other factors than the girls. However, their score in test anxiety was higher than that of the girls.

The T-test results in Table 6 showed that P-value for gender difference was greater than 0.05, indicating that for the students from rural places, there was no significant difference between the groups.

Gender differences in urban students

Moreover, to understand the relationship between anxiety in oral expression and gender of urban students, the authors conducted descriptive statistics (Table 7) and T-test for gender difference (Table 8).

Table 7: Descriptive statistics of gender and anxiety in oral English of urban students

Factor	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Total score of anxiety	male	16	72.08	8.81
	female	70	75.78	11.38
Fear of communication	male	16	20.93	5.17
	female	70	30.47	6.17
Fear of negative evaluation	male	16	23.64	4.10
	female	70	23.84	3.44
Test anxiety	male	16	7.25	2.17
	female	70	7.68	2.26

Other factors	male	16	10.25	3.15
	female	70	11.73	3.01

Table 8: Gender difference test of anxiety variables in urban students

Factor	Gender	T	P
Total score of anxiety	male	-1.325	0.190
	female		
Fear of communication	male	-2.003	0.059
	female		
Fear of negative evaluation	male	-0.214	0.831
	female		
Test anxiety	male	-0.789	0.433
	female		
Other factors	male	-0.729	0.469
	female		

Table 7 showed that the male students from urban places whose origin was the city were at lower level in anxiety of oral expression than female students from urban places. Out of note was that the score for fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety was almost equal for the two groups.

The T-test results of Table 8 showed that P-value for gender difference of the urban students was greater than 0.05, indicating that for the students from urban places, there was no significant difference between the groups.

Differences in location of home

Table 9: Descriptive statistics of home location and anxiety in oral expression

	Location of home	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Total score of anxiety	rural	100	107.14	12.20
	urban	86	83.60	10.13
Fear of communication	rural	100	41.28	5.11
	urban	86	31.82	5.80
Fear of negative evaluation	rural	100	29.53	4.16
	urban	86	23.73	3.78
Test anxiety	rural	100	10.01	1.98
	urban	86	7.45	2.20
Other factors	rural	100	25.76	3.97
	urban	86	20.54	3.47

The above table showed that urban students scored lower than rural students in English class for both total score of anxiety and the score of each dimension. It might explain why the mean of urban students' English score was higher than that of the rural students' (Table 2).

Table 10: Gender difference for anxiety in different location of home

	Location of home	T	P
Total score of anxiety	rural	12.519	0.000**
	urban		
Fear of communication	rural	10.444	0.000**
	urban		
Fear of negative evaluation	rural	8.722	0.000**
	urban		
Test anxiety	rural	7.386	0.000**
	urban		
Other factors	rural	8.363	0.000**
	urban		

* P < 0.05, ** P < 0.01

T-test was used to compare the means of different groups and the results in Table 10 showed that the p-value for each category was 0.000**, indicating that the difference between the two groups were significant at the level of 0.001. Accordingly, the results are statistically significant.

Correlation analysis

To assess the correlation between the variables, correlation analysis was performed. The results of correlation analysis showed that the correlation coefficients of English classroom anxiety, fear of communication, fear of negative evaluation, test anxiety, other factors, and English achievement were -0.555, -0.510, -0.491, -0.400, -0.473 respectively, and the P-value was lower than 0.01, suggesting that the variables were significantly related. However, the correlation coefficients in the table were all negative, indicating that the lower achievement in English the students gained, the more anxious they would feel in oral expression.

Table 11: Correlation analysis

		Total score of anxiety	Fear of Communication	Fear of negative evaluation	Test anxiety	Other factors
English score	r	-.555**	-.510**	-.491**	-.400**	-.473**
	P	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000

* P<0.05, ** P<0.01

IV. Discussion

This study showed that there was no significant gender difference for anxiety in oral expression among rural and urban students. This finding was consistent with that of Lv¹³, but different from those of Guo & Xu¹², Awan⁵, Öztürk & Gürbüz⁴. Öztürk & Gürbüz contended that female had higher level of anxiety in foreign language learning than male⁴, while the other researchers had opposite views. The difference might be caused by the samples. The present study collected the data from the English majors, and the number of female students were much bigger than that of male students. In comparison, the numbers of male students and female students in the study of Guo & Xu¹² were about equal. Furthermore, Öztürk & Gürbüz⁴ and Awan⁵ studied university students in Istanbul and Pakistan, whose nationalities might lead to the difference.

Regarding the difference in anxiety caused by the location of home, the results showed that there existed differences between rural students and urban students. Rural students' score was higher than urban students' in both the total and in each dimension. This finding indicated that rural students felt more anxious about English oral expression than urban students. This finding was consistent with the findings of Horwitz & Xiu^{Error! Reference source not found.} and Chen¹⁷, who held that students' place of origin was influencing their anxiety in oral expression. This finding revealed the gaps in education between cities and the villages in the remote regions. For instance, the rural students were usually taught English with the traditional teacher-centered mode, while urban students were learning with student-centered mode and were encouraged to construct knowledge actively. In addition, students in cities had sufficient teaching equipment, such as audio-visual classrooms, language labs, internet, etc. to facilitate their English learning, whereas the teaching equipment and teaching condition for rural students were not complete enough. As a result, rural students were learning English passively, lacked authentic language environment, and had fewer opportunities to practice English speaking, which inevitably caused a higher level of anxiety in oral English expression.

Among the dimensions anxiety in oral expression, the mean for fear of communication was the highest. The major reason was that English teaching in China was grammar-based and test oriented. The students aimed to gain high score in the entrance exam and get into the university. Comparatively, they were less proficient in listening and speaking. They were not confident enough to communicate in English. Accordingly, high level of anxiety in communication caused the phenomenon of "dumb English"¹. Secondary to fear of communication was fear of negative evaluation. This finding indicated that students felt anxious about oral expression because of the negative evaluations, which was in good agreement with Chen's finding¹⁷. Chen explained that most English students felt anxious in oral communication because they worried that their performance would be negatively evaluated or ridiculed¹⁷. Besides, Jin & Bao pointed out that Chinese students would not speak English until they mustered up courage, and once they received an unapologetic evaluation, they thought they had lost their self-esteem, and they would become silent in English classes again¹⁸. Similar to Young's findings³, the present study found that the participants had anxiety about test, even though the level was lower than fear of communication and fear of negative evaluation. Such anxiety might be caused by the wide adoption of formative assessment by most teachers. Many students were not confident enough to answer questions or speak English in class, which was decisive for whether they would fail in the test.

In addition, the results of correlation analysis showed that there was a significant negative correlation between anxiety in oral expression and English achievement. This was true for both urban and rural students. This finding was consistent with Luo's finding that English proficiency was an important factor influencing students' oral expression of anxiety¹⁰. The weaker the student's English ability was, the higher level the anxiety in oral expression would be.

V. Conclusion

This study systematically investigated the factors affecting English majors' anxiety in oral expression by conducting a survey with 186 English majors at Panzhihua University. The findings indicated that the major elements of anxiety in oral expression were fear of communication, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety, which would be significantly related to the location of their home and their prior achievement in English, but were not strongly related to their gender. As a result, the authors suggested that measures should be taken to alleviate the learner's anxiety in oral expression to promote their proficiency in English.

Despite the implications, several limitations should be addressed for the present study. First, the research was based on statistical analysis and tended to be descriptive rather than explanatory, and the findings might not give a profound insight into the causal relationship between the variables. Future research was therefore suggested to further investigate the causal relationships. Secondly, the present study was limited by the samples and the findings would not be generalized. The authors suggested that more efforts should be made to investigate the affecting factors of students' anxiety in English oral expression with larger samples from the universities in different regions.

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