

A study of Relationship Between College Students' Spoken English Anxiety and Language Learning Strategies- Take First-year Non-English Major students at a Chinese University as an example

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Abstract

Anxiety significantly affects second language learning, while speaking is especially anxiety-prone. Based on Horwitz's Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale and Oxford's classifications of language learning strategies, this study uses the quantitative method to explore the correlation between learners' spoken English anxiety and their frequency of using English learning strategies. 105 non-English major first-year college students were randomly selected as research subjects to fill in the questionnaires.

Results of the study show that non-English major first-year college students have a relatively high level of spoken English anxiety. Furthermore, there is a significant and negative correlation between participants' spoken English anxiety and their use of English learning strategies. The consequences of this research may inspire English teachers and students to pay more attention to spoken English anxiety and strategies to stimulate effective teaching measures to alleviate learners' spoken English anxiety and promote their comprehensive competence.

Keywords: Foreign language learning; Spoken English anxiety; Learning strategy; Correlation

1. Introduction**1.1 Research Background**

Many studies have demonstrated that anxiety profoundly impacts second language learning and performance (e.g., Gardner & Lambert 1972; Phillips E.M 1992). Appropriate anxiety can arouse people's vigilance and cognitive abilities, but excessive anxiety may impede the brain's functions and affect learning outcomes. Given its powerful influence on second language acquisition (SLA), efforts need to be made to manage and prevent anxiety from interfering with language acquisition. Brown (2001) believes that one of the best ways of getting students intrinsically involved in their language learning is to offer them the opportunity to develop their own set of strategies for success. Thus, systematic application of learning strategies is essential for second language learners.

The traditional teaching model in China emphasizes linguistic competence in the English classroom, such as acquiring vocabulary and grammar rather than mastering spoken English skills (Guo yiwen, 2020). Currently, many non-English major students only want to pass compulsory English courses and exams that can help them get their degrees. However, that is far beyond the aim of English education, which requires university students to possess good English speaking proficiency to communicate. Some students are passive, nervous, and reluctant to answer the questions completely in English classes. Therefore, it is the main challenge for teachers to reduce students' anxiety about expressing their opinions in English and instruct them to use appropriate learning strategies to improve their comprehensive skills.

1.2 Significance of the research

Theoretically, this research presents the current situation of spoken English anxiety and the usage of learning strategies among non-English major first-year college students, which will

provide a reference for similar studies. Practically, it is beneficial for researchers and teachers to attach more importance to students' general tendency to spoken English anxiety. Thus, they can help language learners reduce their anxiety and promote their linguistics competence effectively. In terms of university students, it enables them to recognize their learning difficulties and anxiety level better and provides them more opportunities to have a better understanding of using English learning strategies to promote themselves effectively.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Definition and classification of Foreign Language Anxiety

Many researchers define Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) from different perspectives. In Scovel's (1978: 134) definition, anxiety is "apprehension, a vague fear that is only indirectly associated with an object." Then, Horwitz et al. (1986: 128) further explained FLA as "a distinct complex of self-perception, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process." Furthermore, MacIntyre and Gardner (1993: 5) define FLA as "the apprehension experienced when a situation requires the use of a foreign language in which the individual is not fully proficient."

Generally, anxiety is usually classified based on different ways. According to the influence of anxiety on learners, Alpert and Haber (1960) divided anxiety into two categories: facilitating anxiety and debilitating anxiety. In the light of the characteristics of anxiety, MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) classified anxiety into three types: trait anxiety, state anxiety, and situation-specific anxiety. As the study of anxiety penetrates the linguistics field, many linguists begin to study the effects of anxiety on language learning. Horwitz et al. (1986) considered that anxiety in language learning is different from other anxieties, so he proposed that FLA involves communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation.

This research mainly adopts Horwitz's definition, classification, and the questionnaire of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) to further investigate students' spoken language anxiety due to the following reasons. Firstly, Aida (1994) and Horwitz (2016) point out that Horwitz's FLCAS is related to the application of spoken language and measures oral anxiety, which is consistent with the purposes of this study. Furthermore, Horwitz's questionnaire is widely accepted and verified by researchers worldwide.

2.3 Definitions and Classifications of Foreign Language Learning Strategies

Different researchers hold different opinions regarding the definition of learning strategies. Oxford (1989) believes that language learning strategies are behaviors or actions learners use to make language learning more successful, self-directed, and enjoyable. Chamot (1989) thought that learning strategies are techniques, approaches, or deliberate actions that students take to facilitate the learning and recall linguistic and content area information. Ellis (1994) states that the concept of the strategy remains unclear and unspecific. In terms of various definitions of language learning strategies, Ellis lists some classical definitions in his book *The Study of Second Language*

Acquisition. However, the understanding of the definition of language learning strategies is directly related to their classifications.

There are various systems of classifying learning strategies according to different standards or from different angles. Oxford (1989) classifies foreign language learning strategies into two categories: direct strategies and indirect strategies. On the one hand, direct strategies consist of memory strategies, cognitive strategies, and compensation strategies. On the other hand, indirect strategies are composed of metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. According to strategy use, Cohen (2000) divides language learner strategies into language learning strategies and language using strategies.

Currently, there are no unifying classification standards of language learning strategies. However, Oxford's classifications of L2 learning strategies have been widely accepted by scholars worldwide for many years. Therefore, the author's study will adopt her definition, classification, and the related questionnaire to conduct this research.

2.4 Related studies on the Relationship between Foreign Language Anxiety and Foreign Language Learning Strategies

Although many researchers investigate learners' foreign language anxiety and language learning strategies, studies on their relationship are rare. Warr and Downing (2000) examine the interaction between Junior high school students' overall anxiety level and their language learning strategies. The result reveals that students who apply particular strategies are more motivated and less anxious than others. Noormohamadi.R. (2009) conducted an empirical study to identify the relationship between high school students' second language learning anxiety and their use of strategies. The result shows that metacognitive strategies and memory strategies were used frequently by the participants. Xiong Suchun (2011) combines qualitative and quantitative methods to explore the relationship between foreign language learning anxiety and the use of learning strategies in the computer-based environment by investigating students at Nanchang University.

From above, though many scholars intended to explore the relationship between foreign language anxiety and foreign language learning strategies from different perspectives, some suggestions should be provided for further research. Firstly, research subjects are mainly confined to middle and high school students. However, it is very instructive for first-year college students to learn how to reduce language anxiety through learning strategies because they are more likely to feel stressed and anxious when faced with new content and the different teaching styles of teachers. Besides, many scholars emphasized foreign language learners' overall anxiety level, ignoring the significance of foreign language speaking anxiety. Therefore, the present research investigates the relationship between first-year college students' spoken English anxiety and language learning strategies.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Subjects

The subjects of this study are 105 non-English major first-year students at a research-oriented university located in northwest China. The students were selected randomly, and there were 58 males and 47 females. Besides, all the participants have learned English for at least seven years before entering the college, and they have taken part in the College English Test Band Four (CET-4) before. Furthermore, they all took a semester-long compulsory course called *College Spoken English* in their first year, which lasted from the first week to the sixteenth week.

3.2 Research Questions

This study attempts to explore the relationship between college students' spoken English anxiety and language learning strategies by addressing three research questions:

1. What is the general situation of non-English major first-year college students' spoken English anxiety?
2. What types of language learning strategies do non-English major first-year college students employ, and with what frequency in their language learning?
3. What is the relationship between Non-English major college students' spoken English anxiety and their use of English learning strategies?

3.3 Research Instruments

In order to examine the research questions, this paper adopts Horwitz's FLCAS to investigate participants' spoken English anxiety. The FLACS was introduced in China in 1988 and has been widely used and verified by many researchers (e.g., Lv hongyan, 2010; Xiong suchun, 2012) to test Chinese students' foreign language speaking anxiety. Besides, the instrument for measuring college students' English learning strategies was based on Oxford's Foreign Language Learning Strategy questionnaire (FLLS) because its reliability and validity are very high.

In a word, the present study was conducted through two questionnaires distributed to the non-English major first-year students after they had finished the course in spoken English. In order to avoid misunderstanding, both questionnaires are presented in Chinese.

3.3.1 Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS)

Questionnaire one consists of three parts. The first part is about personal information, including the participants' major and years of learning English. In the second part, 33 items based on FLCAS advanced by Horwitz (1986) were designed to measure college students' spoken English anxiety, including four dimensions: comprehensive anxiety, communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. The participants were asked to rate their level of agreement on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1= "Strongly disagree" to 5= "Strongly agree." Some items were negatively worded to ensure the validity of the questionnaire, so the responses and scores were reversed. The overall internal consistency coefficient of the questionnaire is 0.942, and the

value of KMO reaches 0.87, indicating that the questionnaire has good reliability and validity and can be used for further analysis.

3.3.2 Questionnaire of Foreign Language Learning Strategy (FLLS)

The second questionnaire Foreign Language Learning Strategy (FLLS), employed in the study, was adapted according to Oxford's design of SILL, with the overall internal consistency coefficient of 0.872 and the value of KMO reaching 0.870. The questionnaire contains 37 items with six strategy categories: four items of memory strategies, five items of cognitive strategies, seven items of compensation strategies, nine items of meta-cognitive strategies, seven items of affective strategies, and five items of social strategies. In addition, FLLS also adopted the five-point Likert scale, ranging from "never or rarely true of me" to "always or almost always true of me." The higher the overall average scores are, the more frequently the learners use the strategy.

3.4 Research Procedures

A questionnaire on foreign language speaking anxiety and a questionnaire on foreign language learning strategies were given to non-English major first-year university students after an English class. Before they filled in the questionnaire, instructions were given clearly to ensure all the participants understood how to complete the questionnaire. In addition, they were informed that the results are only used for research, and the result of the questionnaire would not be related to their final grades. It took the subjects about 20 minutes to finish the two questionnaires. In total, 110 questionnaires were distributed and collected, and 105 were considered effective because five copies of the questionnaires were not fully completed.

After collecting questionnaires, all the data were analyzed by SPSS22.0. Descriptive analysis was conducted to get a general picture of university students' spoken English anxiety and strategies. Finally, after finishing the regular distribution test, a Pearson Correlation analysis was made to investigate the correlation between students' speaking anxiety and their use of learning strategies in English learning.

4. Results

4.1 The general situation of college students' spoken English anxiety

As the descriptive statistics presented in table 1, participants' spoken English anxiety is relatively high (mean=3.14, SD=0.650). Among all the categories of spoken English anxiety, learners' fear of negative evaluation ranked first (mean=3.57, SD=0.745), followed by communicative apprehension and test anxiety.

Table 1 Descriptive statistics of spoken English Anxiety

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Test anxiety	1.33	5.00	3.07	.883
Negative evaluation anxiety	2.00	4.83	3.57	.745
Communicative apprehension	1.64	5.00	3.26	.740
General anxiety	1.65	5.00	3.14	.650

Besides, participants were divided into different levels of spoken English anxiety based on their anxiety scores. According to Horwitz et al. (1986), scores above 115 fall into the group of high anxiety levels. Participants who scored between 99 and 115 were in the moderate anxiety level; lower than 99 indicates that participants have low levels of spoken English anxiety. The detailed information on the participants' language anxiety levels is illustrated in table 2. It can be seen clearly that most of the students were in the high anxiety group, taking up 38% of the whole population. Besides, the number of students with moderate anxiety was 32.2%, and only 29.5% of students scarcely felt anxious. It is instructive that different students should be trained in various ways to cope with Spoken English anxiety more efficiently.

Table 2 Descriptive statistics of spoken English Anxiety in different groups

		Students' number	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
High Anxiety level		40	116.0	156.0	156.0	9.552
Average Anxiety level		34	99.00	115.00	106.59	4.665
Low Anxiety level		31	67.00	93.00	79.68	7.513

4.2 The general situation of college students' use of English learning strategies

The current situation of non-English major first-year college students' use of English learning strategies in the classroom is presented in table 3, which shows that first-year university students used English learning strategies at a moderate frequency level (Mean=3.01, SD=0.438).

Table 3 Frequency of using English learning Strategies

	Mean	SD	Rank Order
Memory Strategies	3.19	.789	2
Cognitive Strategies	3.11	.812	3
Compensation Strategies	3.39	.568	1
Metacognitive Strategies	2.95	.612	4
Affective Strategies	2.48	.737	6
Social Strategies	2.94	.651	5

Among all six strategy categories, compensation strategies rank the first with a mean of 2.95 (SD=0.568); both memory strategies and cognitive strategies are frequently used by participants, followed by metacognitive strategies, social strategies, and affective strategies.

4.3 Correlation between spoken English anxiety and English learning strategies

Table 4 presents the result of the Pearson correlation test between non-English major first-year college students' spoken English anxiety and how often they use these English learning strategies. As shown in Table 4, spoken English anxiety significantly and negatively correlated with memory, cognitive, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies ($p=0.000, <.05$).

Table 4 Pearson correlation of spoken English anxiety and strategies used.

	Memory Strategy	Cognitive Strategy	Compensation Strategy	Metacognitive Strategy	Affective Strategy	Social Strategy
Pearson Correlation	-.710**	-.375**	-.472**	-.313**	-.660**	-.532**
Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
Students' number	105	105	105	105	105	105

5. Discussions

5.1 Different categories of Spoken English anxiety

The findings are consistent with Lv Hongyan's (2010) and previous research, which believed that participants have a mediate or high level of foreign language speaking anxiety.

Among all the categories of speaking anxiety (Mean=3.57, SD=0.745), the score of negative evaluation anxiety is the highest one. It refers to the state of anxiety when individuals think that other people will have a negative evaluation of themselves. Item15 gets higher points than other items, telling us that students were afraid of negative evaluation from their classmates and teachers. Besides, item 19 indicates that students may have pressure and feelings of discomfort when teachers are correcting their mistakes. According to Aida (1994), people who are strongly sensitive to others' evaluations are likely to avoid or withdraw from situations in which others might view

them negatively. The possible reason might be that these first-year students hardly have opportunities to practice their oral English before entering the university. Therefore, they fear making mistakes, losing face, and lacking self-confidence in the spoken English classroom.

The second category of anxiety is communicative apprehension. According to McCroskey (1977), it is an individual's actual or imaginary fear or worry about communicating with others or groups. The mean score of communicative anxiety is 3.26, reflecting a relatively high anxiety level among all categories because they are afraid of being called on by English teachers. Horwitz et al. (1986) propose that the learner has mature thoughts and ideas but immature second language vocabulary to express them. This inability to express oneself or comprehend another person leads to their frustration and apprehension.

In recent years, test anxiety has been recognized as a significant problem, manifested by students being likely to be nervous, sweat, and even shake during exams. Compared with all the categories of anxiety, the lowest one is test anxiety (Mean=0.36, SD=0.883). The mean score of item 8, "I am usually nervous when I take a spoken speaking test," is remarkably higher than other items, indicating that students will feel panic and anxious once oral activities are evaluated. There might be several reasons for students' strong feelings of test anxiety. Firstly, the students tend to be more anxious in evaluative settings than in traditional classroom settings (Hancock, 2001). If students fail the final exam, they must take the course next semester, which is a time-consuming and energy-consuming preparation process. Furthermore, Chinese students are faced with intense pressure to take some tests such as CET4 and CET6 (Wang jing, 2007). If they do not pass them successfully, it will likely harm their further development.

To sum up, the results confirm Horwitz's (1991) and Koch and Terrell's (1991) belief that speaking in a foreign language probably produces the greatest amount of anxiety in language learners. It can be concluded that non-English major first-year college students in Chinese Universities have a relatively high spoken English anxiety in classrooms. Khaldieh's (2000) research shows that teachers' positive evaluation and continuous encouragement can reduce students' anxiety and feelings of frustration. Thus, foreign language teachers should permit students to use English with less perfect performance and give sincere praise to students in English classrooms. (Wang jing, 2007)

5.2 Different categories of English learning strategies

As mentioned above, participants of this research always used compensation strategies in the English classroom. The result of the questionnaire is in accordance with Oxford's (1990) explanation of compensation strategies and the current situation of Chinese students. Item 11 and item 12 reflect that students often fail to express themselves clearly in English, so they always use gestures, mother tongue, and descriptive explanations to convey their meanings. Furthermore, the results of Item 13 demonstrate that when learners are required to communicate in English, they tend to choose conversational topics with which they are familiar consciously. Nevertheless, the compensation strategies are not very good for English learners in the long run (Elkhafafi, 2005).

Students must overcome stumbling blocks and limitations caused by inadequate knowledge of grammar and vocabulary in the future.

Memory strategies and cognitive strategies are also used by participants in this research frequently. Memory strategies are helpful strategies, including producing mental linkages, providing images and sounds, and using action (Oxford, 1999). Based on the questionnaire result, it can be figured out that students have their unique method of memorizing new knowledge of languages, such as associating words with context or pronunciation. However, when they feel very anxious in the second language classroom, it is hard for them to employ memory strategies. The reasons can be explained from a cognitive psychological perspective. According to the cognitive theory of learning, a learner often uses memory strategies at the processing stage. Tobias (1986) suggested that anxiety impaired cognitive processing, which would result in the demands on processing time. In the foreign language learning context, anxious students tend to have exaggerated self-awareness and cannot fully concentrate on the task.

As can be seen from table 3, participants seldom employ metacognitive strategies. (Mean=2.95, SD=0.612). According to Oxford's (1999) division, metacognitive strategies involve three sub-group: centering one's learning, arranging one's learning, and evaluating one's learning. Based on the questionnaires, only a portion of first-year college students clearly set their English learning plans. Xiong suchun (2011) explained that the metacognitive strategy seems to have long been underestimated and overlooked by many students. From primary school to senior high school, students' learning is not dependent on themselves but, to a large extent, controlled by their teachers by helping them to set goals, make plans, and supervise their study process. Therefore, plans and management should always be their teachers' concerns in students' minds.

The results in Table 3 also demonstrate that the investigated participants rarely use affective strategies (mean=2.48, SD=0.737) and social strategies(mean=2.94, SD= 0.651). Affective strategies allow the learners to control their emotions, and the employment of social strategies can help learners learn through interaction with others (Oxford, 1990). However, college students do not use affective and social strategies frequently for the following reasons. Firstly, the traditional English classroom in China seldom provides students opportunities to cooperate with others, and it is also difficult for them to regulate their emotions (Guo yiwen, 2020). In addition, Horwitz (1986) has pointed out that language anxiety seemed to be strongly based on the fear of poor communication. An anxious learner is unwilling to cooperate with peers, for he is too concerned with others' evaluation and troubled by self-deprecating thoughts. The majority of first-year university students are only onlookers, and they are expected to receive key messages from teachers. The more anxious a learner is, the less often he will employ affective and social strategies.

5.3 Relationship between College Students' Spoken English Anxiety and Language Learning Strategies

The present study demonstrates the correlation between non-English major first-year college students' spoken English anxiety and their use of English learning strategies. It is consistent with

the previous studies of Warr and Downing (2002) and Lv Hongyan (2010), which concludes that there is a significant negative relationship between spoken English anxiety and the use of learning strategies, and the employment of language learning strategies is beneficial to alleviate students' anxiety. Specifically, if the non-English major first-year university students employ these English learning strategies more frequently and regularly, their spoken English anxiety might be lower and vice versa.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Major Findings

Regarding the first research question that focuses on the current situation of non-English major first-year college students' spoken English anxiety, the result shows that they have a relatively high (mean=3.14, SD=0.65) level of the spoken English anxiety in the classroom when compared with previous studies. It also demonstrates the fact that "speaking" is the most anxiety-provoking aspect of second language learning. Furthermore, the result of the data indicates that participants' negative evaluation anxiety (mean=3.56, SD=.745) ranked first among all the categories, followed by communicative apprehension, classroom anxiety, and test anxiety. As for the negative evaluation anxiety, anxious students may feel discomfort when teachers correct their mistakes because they are afraid of making mistakes and being ridiculed by teachers and peers. In terms of communicative anxiety, generally speaking, students with high anxiety are scared of being called on by teachers in the English classrooms, so they tend to be silent or reluctant to respond in the classroom.

Regarding the second research question, which pays attention to the current situation of English learning strategies used by non-English major first-year students, the result demonstrates that the participants employed compensation strategies most frequently, followed by memory strategies, cognitive strategies, and metacognitive social strategies, and affective strategies. Specifically, college students prefer to use body language, their native language, and synonyms to compensate for their lack of ability to communicate successfully with others in English. In addition, learners were reluctant to use emotional strategies because they rarely relieved their anxiety by encouraging and motivating themselves emotionally.

The third research question is mainly concerned with the relationship between non-English major first-year college students' spoken English anxiety and their frequency of using English learning strategies. With the help of the Pearson correlation analysis, the consequences of the research imply that there is a significant and negative correlation between learners' spoken English anxiety and their frequency of employing English learning strategies. In other words, a good command of English learning strategies can reduce English learners' anxiety about spoken English.

5.3 Implications for further research

Based on the major findings of the current research, some implications for college English teaching and learning are listed as follows. To begin with, foreign language teachers should pay full

attention to students' psychological states and help them build up their confidence in the learning processes. When students make mistakes in the oral exercises, teachers should find out the correct part of students' expressions and give positive affirmation, which can alleviate their communicative anxiety and negative evaluation anxiety. In addition, teachers must be aware of the importance of developing and increasing students' awareness of using and choosing appropriate foreign language learning strategies.

As for foreign language learners, the author suggests that they should emphasize the following items since the individual's internal efforts play an essential role in overcoming anxiety. Firstly, students should not have the stereotype that they would be laughed at or even be looked down upon by their classmates if they made some mistakes in the foreign language classroom. Furthermore, students need to be proactive in discussing and communicating with peers and teachers in the language learning process.

5.4 Limitations and Suggestions

Although this research has been designed and administered carefully, there are still some limitations in the present study; accordingly, some suggestions are provided for further studies. First and foremost, small samples selected in the study can not generalize the findings, so the results are not nationally representative. In addition, this study focuses on the correlation between learners' spoken English anxiety and their use of English learning strategies. However, many other factors may influence the learning and expression of spoken English, which need to be further explored by subsequent researchers.

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