

A Case Study of Students' Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety in Content-based Classroom at UNNC

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, the issue of foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA) has received considerable critical attention in the second language acquisition field (SLA). In 1986, the term 'foreign language learning anxiety' has already defined as 'the unique and complex self-consciousness and emotions that learners experience as a result of foreign language learning' by Horwitz et al., and they also created the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) on this basis. To be more precise, spoken language is the foremost driver of anxiety in classrooms (Young 1986; Phillips 1992). Especially, Xu et al., (2022) argued that FLSA is a common phenomenon among Chinese EFL students. Many research suggested that factors such as fear of negative evaluation, lack of self-confidence, and limited exposure to English-speaking environments might contribute to FLSA (Pan et al., 2022; Zhao, 2023; Fındıklı & Büyükkaracı, 2023). Nevertheless, such expositions are unsatisfactory because they only focus on language learning classrooms. Contrastly, EFL students are required to use English to comprehend and produce subject-specific content in content-based classrooms, thus FLSA might be particularly pronounced (Hwang, 2002).

Although there are some researches on Chinese EFL students' FLSA at Chinese traditional universities (Tianjian, 2010; He, 2017), only a few studies focus on Chinese-foreign cooperatively-run universities, like UNNC or NYU Shanghai, in which there are full English-Medium Instruction (EMI) contexts. Hence, the research project will choose the University of Nottingham Ningbo China (UNNC) as an example of a case study. In addition, the English majors in the fourth year have relatively high English proficiency and they may face some pressures like further education or seeking jobs, so the level of their FLSA may be more significant. This case study also attempts to explore how motivation, engagement and confidence contribute to FLSA. Moreover, one of the core modules in English major was also chosen as the research case, which is the Topics in Language Acquisition (TLA) module. In terms of data analysis, qualitative and quantitative analysis will be conducted together. After investigating the target students' FLSA, this paper will give some suggestions to help solve the problem of FLSA from the perspectives of students and teachers.

2. Literature Review

2.1 English as the Medium Instruction

First of all, the concept of EMI should be clarified, which is

teaching academic disciplines in English but to non-native English-speaking students (Dearden, 2014). In addition to that, he also stated that there are two existing types of English-mediated instruction, which could be principally categorized into partial and full EMI. Numerous literatures showed that recently many universities in some East Asian areas have increasingly adopted EMI, such as Taiwan (Chou, 2018). This kind of actions symbolized the trend of internationalization of universities (Coleman, 2006; Dearden, 2014). In depth, Coleman (2006) investigated EMI in European higher education, and stated that EMI education could provide students with the ability to study on exchange in other EU countries. Namely, it proves English as the Lingua Franca. Likewise, Dearden (2014) found that full EMI educational environments may affect students' motivation and need to learn English. In particular, students who received full EMI education in language classrooms might perform better in English. There is no denying that EMI is a trend, but full EMI may have drawbacks. Correspondingly, it is worth mentioning that partial EMI is common in universities in East Asian countries, but full EMI seems to be a challenge (Chou, 2018). In detail, he explored the practice of EMI in Taiwan, and discovered that full EMI contexts might have some negative impacts. To similar, the same results also were obtained in Hong Kong (Lo & Lo, 2014). Apart from that, full EMI contexts may bring potential emotional factors to students (Shao et al., 2019). Since most of the East Asian students are exposed to learning English at the age of 9 or later, the full EMI context may be anxiety-provoking for them (Ellis, 2008). As Byun et al. (2011, cited in Chou, 2018) said, inadequate Full EMI conditions may negatively impact teaching outcomes in South Korea. Therefore, it could be inferred that in most mainland Chinese universities, ideally, English majors should be involved in a full EMI teaching contexts, but the reality is that this is limited by multiple constraints, such as insufficient teacher and student proficiency in English, or inadequate equipment that cannot support full EMI.

2.2 English Speaking Anxiety in Classrooms

Horwitz's FLSA model has been widely used in research to investigate language anxiety and its impact on language learning. In fact, there are many studies focused on examining the relationship between academic performance and anxiety (Shakir, 2014; Azeem, 2018). As Horwitz (2001) acknowledged that anxiety is a foremost cause of poor language learning. Woodrow (2006) also said that foreign language anxiety might bring negative effect on speaking performance. At the same time, she identified the FLSA as one of the most important predictors of students' oral achievement. Notably, in her study, those participants believed that

interacting with native English speakers was the most troubling and anxiety-provoking in the classroom. However, anxiety does not always inhibit academic or oral performance. Dörnyei (2005) proposed that there are two types of anxiety: beneficial anxiety and inhibitory anxiety. In other words, when anxiety reaches a certain level, it may promote students to study harder. According to Horwitz et al. (1986), there are three main factors behind foreign language anxiety: communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative comment. Based on this, the majority of Chinese EFL students might feel shy or they might worry about other's evaluation when they speak English, which are relevant to the FLSA in classrooms. Correspondingly, this fear of judgements could lead to anxiety when speaking English in front of peers or instructors, as Chou (2018) supported that, Chinese culture places a strong emphasis on face-saving and avoiding embarrassment to some extent. That means Chinese EFL students may suffer from FLSA problems compared with other EFL students who are in Westernized Asian countries. Thus, it could be inferred that UNNC's Chinese EFL students might have a higher level of FLSA than other international students.

2.3 Individual Differences That Influence FLSA

There are many studies showed that FLSA will be affected by personal variables (Horwitz, 2001; Wang et al., 2021; Pan et al., 2022). For instance, the individual differences like learners' motivation, their engagement in the classroom, and whether they are confident in what they are learning will be primarily focused. Notably, these studies mostly on the interdisciplinary field of psychology and education have utilized a questionnaire combined with interviews as the method of investigation. In terms of motivation, Şahan & Sahan (2023) conducted research in Turkey and found that students' level of the FLSA might decide their future employment choices. As Hall (1998, cited in Gibbons, 2003) noted students' motivation plays an active role and the teacher's responsibility is to provide the individual learner with 'official participation right'. As for engagement, Chien-Yuan & Cheng-Huan (2018) showed that the students who take the initiative to speak up and engage in the classroom, then their FLSA might be lower than others. In contrast, engagement does not only depend on students, but teachers and the content of the classroom are also crucial (Chou, 2018; Xu et al., 2022). Lastly, the relationship between confidence and FLSA as well was explored. Horwitz (2001) showed the fear of making mistakes or being misunderstood might further intensify FLSA. Nonetheless, Hanton & Connaughton (2002) put forward that self-doubt could help the improvement and outcome of learning. For example, if a learner is not very confident in his spoken English, some may trend to catch every opportunity to speak in class to improve their speaking skills (Moneva & Tribunalo, 2020).

Unfortunately, based on above literatures, the classrooms where the specific content is taught are neglected. Also, a few articles looked at how motivation, engagement and confidence affect FLSA at the same time. To fill these gaps, the following research questions will be examined:

1) What is the level of FLSA of UNNC's fourth-year English

major Chinese EFL students in the Topics in Language Acquisition (TLA) module classrooms?

2) How do the learner variables (motivation, engagement and confidence) influence FLSA among these fourth-year English major Chinese EFL students in TLA module classrooms?

3. Methodology

The study will be conducted using mixed methods, a combination of quantitative and qualitative. This is because quantitative makes it easy to analyze individual differences in participants, whereas qualitative can be a good way to summarize the features of the study results.

3.1 Data Collection

This FLSA questionnaire will be sent to the 50 participants online, and it was adopted from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (Horwitz et al., 1986). In detail, the target questionnaire maintains 18 questions from the original one, and there are also 7 new questions to explore the learner variables that may influence FLSA, which were adopted from Chou's survey (2018). Specifically, questions 1 to 18 focus on the feelings of the TLA module participants when they are asked to use English to communicate or answer questions, and the following questions are more related to personal emotions. The study ended with one open-ended survey question that asked participants to state what drives them most to speak or communicate in English in the TLA module classroom. To protect the participants' privacy, their names will be anonymized. Last but not least, the questionnaire will be in Chinese to prevent some language barriers (Appendix 1).

3.2 Participants

In terms of the reasons for choosing UNNC, firstly, UNNC is the overseas campus of the University of Nottingham (UNUK) in China, thus even if UNNC is located in China, its teaching language is also English, namely, UNNC is a full EMI context. Moreover, in most of UNNC's content-based classes, English is a communicative tool as the Lingua Franca so that the participants can discuss academic issues. In the same way, for UNNC's Chinese EFL students, it is essential to comprehend teachers' instructions and feedback given in English. Apart from that, compared with the other two core modules, this TLA module has the most participants among the fourth-year Chinese EFL students in English major, thus it could provide reliable results of the FLSA. Furthermore, the sample population of English majors has a better foundation in the English language than other students. Meanwhile, they may face more challenges since they might need to use more complex and professional English. Thus, investigating their FLSA could obtain more accurate results.

3.3 Data Analysis Plan

The data were analyzed through descriptive statistics (means) to show the results of FLSA among the target students. In addition, inferential statistics were employed to find out how correlations existed between FLSA and motivation, engagement or confidence factors.

4. Findings and Discussion

To answer research question 1, participants were asked to evaluate the level of their FLSA by a Likert Scale. Table 1 shows the data for the top and bottom five:

Table 1

Question	6	11	7	4	8
Score	4.11	4.05	3.95	3.92	3.92
Question	12	9	17	16	18
Score	3.32	3.29	3.05	2.97	2.97

Notably, question 6 has the highest point, which is approximately 4.11. That means, if the teacher gives examples in Chinese to explain the subject's concept, the majority of students may feel much more relaxed and be willing to engage in classrooms since they could get a better understanding of the content of the classroom. In other words, using Chinese when it is necessary in the classroom can build a rapport between the student and the teacher, and this familiarity may make the student more likely to answer the teacher's questions. Next, most respondents reported that their hearts raced when they felt they would be asked a question by the teacher. Interestingly, however, they were less anxious if they were sure that they would be the next person to answer questions. On the other hand, the mean scores for both questions 21 and 23 do not exceed 3.0, which suggests that most of the participants believed that they did not feel ashamed to speak English in public, and it also shows that they have some confidence in their ability of English. The other remaining questions scored in the 3.0 to 4.0 range, generally speaking, these respondents were in a state of relatively moderate FLSA when they had the TLA module.

To answer research question 2, correlation tests were conducted between the level of FLSA and its three factors: motivation, engagement and confidence.

Table 2

Personal variables	motivation	engagement	confidence
Correlation coefficient	0.59	0.57	0.38

Firstly, there is a positive and significant correlation between motivation and anxiety level, but it is less than a strong correlation. It follows that the correlation coefficient between anxiety and class participation is similar to motivation, yet not as influential as the effect of motivation. Remarkably, the data 0.38 representatives that a low correlation between confidence and FLSA. Ultimately, everyone gave roughly similar answers to the last open-ended question, with ninety per cent saying that they have to use English in this classroom because of the school's policy. At the same time, a small number of people thought that using English for discussion could be a way to gain the teacher's favour, and it could be a way to practice their English skills.

Although many studies have emphasized the importance of motivation, engagement, and self-confidence in SLA, and it would be expected that all three factors would show a strong positive correlation with FLSA, however, the results did not support this. Comparing the results with some studies (He, 2013, 2017; Chou, 2018), UNNC's fourth-year students majoring in English have relatively low levels of FLSA. He (2013) found that English majors indicated that they were less anxious than science and engineering majors, but these

English majors all scored at a moderately high level of anxiety (greater than 3.0 points) on each of these items. Interestingly, UNNC's results are relatively similar to those of Çağatay (2015) study on Turkey, probably because the target population had already received more than three years of full EMI education so they did not present a high level of anxiety overall. Also, this case study has some implications for teaching and learning at UNNC. According to the target participants, the ideal classroom in which the teacher and classmates are friendly and tolerant of inadequate skills in English speaking. Hence, teachers should create a free-talk setting to encourage more engagement. However, there are still some limitations of this research project. In terms of ethics issues, some participants might choose fake options to hide their true feelings. Apart from that, the scope of the sample for this survey was too narrow, and only a select number of fourth-year students majoring in English at UNNC were chosen as the sample. Nevertheless, it is not determined if the results would still be consistent with a larger sample.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this research project examines the FLSA of UNNC's fourth-year English majors in TLA module classrooms, as well as show motivation, engagement and learning confidence affect their FLSA. The results indicate that the levels of FLSA in these students are at a moderately normal level. Another surprising finding is that these three factors did not play an equally essential role in FLSA. The final salient result is participants like Chinese examples, which could help them understand the content better. It tells teachers that in addition to fulfilling the role of English as a lingua franca, it is also important to focus on the specific needs of the students, which means that the full EMI is not rigid but should be adapted according to the needs of students. Ultimately, students should be brave enough to participate in classroom interactions, practice makes perfect and then their FLSA could be reduced.

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