Anxiety in EFL Classrooms: Causes and Consequences

Meihua Liu
Tsinghua University, P. R. C.

Emergent since the 1970s, research in affective variables of second/foreign language teaching and learning has caught increasing attention in recent decades (Cheng, Horwitz & Schallert, 1999; Horwitz, 1995; Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986). Language educators have long recognized that learning a second/foreign language is not an abstract exercise of memorizing vocabulary and applying grammatical rules. The learner must also face the stress and ambiguities of communicating within the parameters of an unfamiliar culture.

Horwitz et al. (1986) found that adults who perceived themselves as reasonably intelligent and socially adept individuals often became doubtful and nervous when communicating in a second/foreign language due to uncertain or even unknown linguistic and sociocultural standards. Clinical experience, empirical findings, and personal reports attest to the existence of anxiety reactions with respect to language learning (Sparks, Ganschow & Artzer, 1997; Young, 1991; Zhang, 2001).

With a focus on Chinese undergraduate non-English majors in oral English language lessons, the present study aimed to identify causes for anxiety and coping strategies adopted by students and their teachers in EFL classrooms.

Review of the Literature

Numerous empirical studies have shown that anxiety exists in almost every aspect of second/foreign language learning (Hilleson, 1996; Horwitz et al., 1986; Jackson, 2002; Kitano, 2001; Phillips, 1992; Price, 1991; Young, 1991). Speaking publicly in the target language has been found to be particularly anxiety provoking, even for learners who feel little stress in other aspects of language learning (Horwitz, 1995; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989). The speech of anxious students is often accompanied by blushing, trembling hands, a pounding heart, and headaches (Cohen & Norst, 1989). Anxious students are less likely to volunteer answers or participate in oral classroom activities (Ely, 1986). Some students with high levels of language anxiety may even have a mental block (Tobias, 1979). They also display avoidance behaviors such as skipping classes and postponing their homework (Argaman & Abu-Rabia, 2002).

College students in the US used words such as "horrible," "frightening," "awful," "resentment," and "hated" to describe their experiences and feelings in foreign language (FL) classes (Price, 1991). They identified having to speak the target language in front of their peers, making errors in pronunciation, not being able to communicate effectively, and the difficulty of their language classes as the greatest sources of anxiety. In addition, two personality variables—desire for perfectionism and fear of public speaking—contributed to students' anxiety in FL classes.

Consistent negative correlations have been found between foreign language anxiety and foreign language achievement (Horwitz et al., 1986; Phillips, 1992; Young, 1991). In one study, high-anxious American students studying French were found to receive lower exam grades than their low-anxious classmates (Phillips, 1992). In addition, the high-anxious students demonstrated a negative attitude toward the oral exam. They reported going blank, feeling frustrated at not being able to say what they knew, being distracted, and feeling panicky. The finding that language anxiety has a negative effect on students' oral performance has been further supported by subsequent studies (Aida, 1994; Kitano, 2001; Yan & Wang, 2001; Zhang, 2001).

Bailey (1983) examined the diaries she kept while studying French as a foreign language in a low-level college reading class in the US. Competitiveness caused her to compare herself to other students in the class, which aggravated her fear of public failure. The diaries revealed that she was uncomfortable and extremely anxious about the French class during the first few weeks. Her perceived inability to compete with other students was so strong that she withdrew from the study for a while. Nevertheless, her anxiety also drove her to work harder at times. Thus, the researcher concluded that competitiveness accompanied by anxiety both hindered and facilitated her French learning.

Awareness of performing badly in a second language (English) was related to a loss of self-esteem for international college students in Singapore (Hilleson, 1996). Evaluation by peers and teachers, self-consciousness about pronunciation, difficulty entering into conversations, comprehension ability, and fear of missing important information created anxiety. Anxiety was not as profound for reading and writing tasks. Similar to the Bailey (1983) study, in some cases, anxiety motivated students to work harder.

These findings indicate that anxiety is a serious problem in FL/SL classrooms and can be attributed to a complex set of reasons such as low self-confidence and self-esteem, fear of making mistakes and being laughed at, and competition. However, the degree of and reasons for anxiety may differ according to context. For example, studies in Asian contexts reveal that one reason for Asian language learners' anxiety is the fear

of losing face (Hilleson, 1996; Jackson, 2002). The need to explore FL/SL anxiety in wider contexts with different groups of learners motivated the present research, which investigated anxiety during oral English lessons in Mainland China with a focus on causes for and consequences of anxiety and coping strategies employed by the students and their teachers. To achieve this aim, a triangulated method was adopted and the following research questions were proposed:

1. To what extent do the students experience anxiety in oral English classrooms?
2. What is the impact of anxiety on students' classroom performance in oral English?
3. What factors contribute to student anxiety in oral English classrooms?
4. What strategies are employed to cope with anxiety in the classroom?

Methods

This study reports part of a longitudinal investigation of students' reticence and anxiety in oral English classroom learning and testing situations.

Participants

Three classes of first year students enrolled in English listening and speaking courses that met once weekly participated in the study. The courses represented three English proficiency levels.[1] Participants included 34 low-proficiency, 32 intermediate-proficiency, and 32 high-proficiency students. With an average age of 18.5, these non-English majors in a key comprehensive university in Beijing came from various departments such as computer science, architecture, management, and Chinese. Twenty students (six low-proficiency, seven intermediate-proficiency, and seven high-proficiency), and their three teachers participated in a semi-structured interview.

Instruments

To investigate students' anxiety in English language classrooms, a triangulation of methods was adopted: survey, observations, reflective journals, and interview, as detailed below.

[1] The students were placed into different band groups ranging from 1 to 3 (Band 1 being the least proficient and Band 3 the highest) according to their scores on the placement test upon entering the University. After a term's successful learning, students are automatically promoted to a higher band.

Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale

A 36-item survey adapted from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), developed by Horwitz et al. (1986), was translated into Chinese and administered to the students to measure their anxiety levels in English language classrooms. The survey was designed on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 'Strongly Disagree' to 'Strongly Agree' with the values 1-5 assigned to the descriptors respectively.

Background Questionnaire

The background questionnaire was designed to obtain demographic data about the participants such as name, gender, age, and department.

Teacher Observation

The teachers of the three classes were asked to keep a weekly record of the most and least anxious/reticent students in different classroom activities during the term.

Reflective Journal

To gather additional data about personal and affective variables in language learning, the students were asked to write reflective journals on a weekly basis for six successive weeks. Students were given detailed prompts based on the following general topics: (a) past learning experiences and general feelings about speaking English; (b) participation in classroom activities and response to the teacher; (c) opinions towards classroom activities such as presentation, pair work, and group work; (d) factors contributing to reticence and strategies to become more active; (e) factors contributing to anxiety and strategies to reduce or overcome anxiety; (f) strategies to learn oral English and suggestions for language learners and teachers. In addition, the students could write about any experience related to their language learning.

Semi-structured Interview

To get a more comprehensive view of anxiety in English language classrooms, two high-anxious, three average-anxious, and two low-anxious students at each proficiency level as well as their teachers were invited for a semi-structured interview. Questions for students covered such aspects as educational experience, personal experience, participation and level of anxiety in university English lessons, self-assessed English proficiency, reasons for feeling anxious, and coping strategies. To complement students' perceptions, interview questions for teachers included their identification of the most reticent/active, confident/anxious students in various classroom activities, general reasons for student reticence and anxiety, and coping strategies. In case the interviewees might have difficulty understanding the questions in English or did not like speaking English, the questions were translated into Chinese.

Classroom Observation

To compare students' self-reports with teacher observations, the three classes were videotaped three times each during the term. Focusing on oral activities, the videotaped observations aimed to identify the students' levels of participation and anxiety in different classroom activities—pair work, group discussion, presentations, and answering questions—and examine their performance in oral English in those activities. Since pair work was the most common activity in all three classes, each student was videotaped at least twice when engaged in pair work. Nevertheless, not all the students were videotaped when performing other types of activities because they were not required in some classes.

Procedures

The study was conducted during the first 14-week term of 2003-2004. The students started journal writing in the second week and wrote for six successive weeks with the topics distributed to them weekly. Students were required to write for only six weeks rather than the full term due to the added work the journals entailed. At the end of the term, 30 low-level, 31 intermediate-level and 32 high-level journals were considered complete and valid for thematic content analysis.

The teachers kept a record of the students' participation and level of anxiety in various classroom activities on a weekly basis from the second to the twelfth week. The students completed the FLCAS in class towards the end of the term. Interviews were held after the final oral exam. Each student interview lasted about fifty minutes and the teacher interviews lasted twenty-five minutes. Interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese and audiotaped. Twenty students and three teachers participated in the interviews.

During the last two months of the term, the researcher videotaped each class three times for a total of 90 minutes, focusing on oral activities. The purpose of the videotaping was to obtain a general picture of what was happening in the class and examine individual students' performance in various activities. Each student was videotaped at least twice when performing an oral activity.

Data Analysis

The mean, standard deviation, median, mode, maximum, minimum, and range were calculated from the survey results to determine to what degree the students felt anxious in oral English language classrooms. The interviews were transcribed, and with the journals and observations, were subjected to a thematic content analysis, which involves analyzing the overt communication behavior of a selected communicator (Krippendorff, 1980). Before analyzing the content of communications, the content is classified into

units, which can be word, phrase, sentence, syntax, proposition, and/or theme (Neuendorf, 2002).

Since the observations, reflective journals and interviews in the present research were conducted according to a set of purposes or key questions, they could be best analyzed according to thematic units. Based on the analyses, frequency and percentages related to certain themes were calculated to determine how many students felt anxious in a certain lesson, how many thought anxiety negatively affected their oral performance, how many believed that a certain factor contributed to their classroom anxiety, and so on.

Limitations

Given the fact that this study was situated in a key comprehensive university in Beijing where students generally enjoy a better English learning environment and have more access to English and native speakers than those in many other places, the findings may not be generalizable to other EFL learning situations. Additionally, differences may exist regarding the complex nature of language learning, coupled with equally complicated individual factors, which require the issue of anxiety to be further explored in various contexts. In spite of these limitations, however, the study provides extensive insights into student and teacher views of anxiety, its effect on language learning in EFL contexts, and how it is currently being addressed.

Results and Discussion

The results of the study are next discussed according to findings related to each of the four research questions.

Anxiety Level

Ninety-eight percent of the FLCAS questionnaires were completed and considered valid for statistical analyses. The total score of the FLCAS revealed the respondent's anxiety in oral English classrooms. The higher the score, the more anxious the respondent felt. Since the FLCAS comprises 36 items, the scores may range from 36 to 180. A total score of more than 144 signifies high anxiety, a score of 108 to 144 indicates moderate anxiety, and a score of less than 108 implies low anxiety in oral English classrooms. The statistical analyses of the FLCAS across levels, presented in Table 1, reveal that students at all levels were moderately anxious in oral English classrooms but that the more proficient in English the students were, the less anxious they felt.

Table 1

Statistical Analyses of the FLCAS

Level	Number	Mean	Standard Deviation	Median	Mode	Mini-mum	Maxi-mum	Range
Low	32	108.56	20.12	108.00	74.00	55	157	102
Intermediate	31	103.45	14.73	105.00	77.00	77	137	60
High	33	98	15.90	97.00	94.00	58	131	73

The students' level of anxiety reported on the survey was also supported by their self-reports in the reflective journals. As can be seen from Table 2, more than 70% of the students at each level reported feeling nervous or a little nervous when speaking English in class, mainly due to poor English and fear of making mistakes, as indicated in the following student journal excerpt:

> I felt nervous every time I was picked to give a talk. If I am asked to speak English without preparation, maybe I can only speak out some easiest sentences. I have no confidence in my English, so I am afraid of it. (Feng, male, high-level)

Lack of confidence in their English and fear of losing face made some of the students anxious even when they were prepared. For instance, a high-level student commented, "I think I'm nervous when speaking English in front of others for the limited vocabulary that I have. So I can't express my real meaning exactly. I am always nervous whether I have prepared or not when speaking English" (Bao, male, journal). A few students were extremely anxious in the class and used words such as "horrible," "frightening," and "awful" to describe their feelings, similar to students in Price's (1991) and Phillips' (1992) studies.

As noted in Table 2, however, the more proficient students tended to be less anxious in English language classrooms. A smaller percentage of them (46.9%) reported being nervous compared to the low/intermediate-level students (70% and 64.5% respectively), and a larger percentage reported not being nervous at all (21.9% compared to 6.7% of the low-level students and 12.9% of the intermediate-level students). This trend holds

true for responses related to feeling nervous with or without preparation. There were also a couple of students at the low and intermediate proficiency levels who did not feel nervous whether prepared or not, mainly because of their strong self-confidence. "I won't feel uneasy whenever I face any situation because I have a firm faith in myself, no matter whether I have prepared for it" (Lei, male, journal, intermediate level).

Table 2

Student Anxiety Reflected in Journals

		Nervous	A little nervous	Some-what nervous	Nervous even with preparation	Not nervous with preparation	Better with preparation	Not nervous
Level	Number							
		N(%)	N(%)	N(%)	N(%)	N(%)	N(%)	N(%)
Low	30	21(70%)	3(10%)	4(13.3%)	18(60%)	4(13.3%)	6(20%)	2(6.7%)
Inter-mediate	31	20(64.5%)	4(12.9%)	3(9.7%)	16(51.6%)	4(12.9%)	7(22.6%)	4(12.9%)
High	32	15(46.9%)	8(25%)	2(6.2%)	12(37.4%)	6(18.8%)	7(21.9%)	7(21.9%)

Impact of Anxiety on Students' Classroom Performance in Oral English

When asked about the impact of varied levels of anxiety on students' performance in spoken English, though one teacher interviewee was not sure whether it had any positive effect, none of them denied its negative effect. The high-level class teacher explained, "If a student feels nervous when speaking English to others, he doesn't want to contribute much to the conversation. Thus, he has less practice and thus can't improve his spoken English rapidly" (Female, interview).

Similarly, only one student at each level thought that anxiety was "not a bad thing for it can make you more strict with yourself. It will encourage you to perform much better" (Zhao, male, journal, high level). Another student believed that whether anxiety was good or bad depended on "one's attitude toward nervousness" (Chuan, female, journal, low level). The majority of the students, however, believed that anxiety negatively affected their performance in spoken English. For instance, one high-level

student wrote, "Because of nervousness and anxiety, I can't speak as well as I should and this makes me diffident. For example, I usually make mistakes in tense because of nervousness" (Zhen, male, journal). The students' opinions toward the effect of anxiety are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3

Effect of Anxiety on Students Performance in Spoken English

	Journal participants			**Student interviews**		
	Low (Total N=30) N(%)	Intermediate (Total N=31) N(%)	High (Total N=32) N(%)	Low (Total N=6) N(%)	Intermediate (Total N=7) N(%)	High (Total N=7) N(%)
Good effect	1(3.3%)	0	0	0	0	0
Bad effect	28(93.4%)	29(93.6%)	30(93.8%)	6(100%)	7(100%)	6(85.7%)
Can be good or bad	1(3.3%)	1(3.2%)	1(3.1%)	0	0	1(14.3%)
No Effect	0	1(3.2%)	1(3.1%)	0	0	0

As seen in the table, more than 90% of the students in each group, with the exception of the high-level interviewees, stated that anxiety had a negative effect on their performance in oral English. This is indicated in the following journal entry:

> I think the effect is quite great. If you feel nervous when speaking English, your tone and intonation won't sound natural. And you can't fix your attention on thinking about how to express your ideas in English. Then you may not be able to recall the words and sentence structures you need. (Long, male, intermediate level)

In addition to immediate effects, anxiety negatively affected long-term performance. "If you feel nervous, you can't go on. If you can't go on, you don't want to speak any more. Gradually you are not willing to speak English. Thus, you can't improve your English" (Dai, male, journal, low level). This view was shared by students at all levels. Furthermore, they argued that confident students would gradually become better English speakers while anxious students would become less willing to speak the language and therefore speak poorer English.

In general, the students outlined the following outcomes of anxiety in the oral English classroom: (1) fear or hatred of speaking English; (2) inability to say something even on a very easy topic; (3) inability to think clearly; (4) reduced interest in English, (5) more mistakes; (6) stammering during a speech; (7) inability to recall learned words; (8) increased anxiety; (9) fewer chances for practice. Due to anxiety, many students chose not to speak English, which made it harder for them to improve their spoken English. A low-level student reported, "Because of nervousness, I spoke little English and my oral English didn't improve all the time" (Song, male, journal).

The negative effect of anxiety on students' performance in oral English is also confirmed by the correlation analysis of the students' FLCAS scores and their performance scores. The students' videotaped performances (i.e., participation in oral class activities such as pair work) were evaluated by two teachers according to the 15-point scale used by the Department of Foreign Languages at the university where the study took place. The scale measures students' ability to perform a communicative task, and considers features such as grammatical usage, pronunciation, intonation, and fluency. The average of the two scores comprised the final performance score.

The correlation was -.377** ($p < 0.01$), which signifies that the FLCAS was significantly negatively correlated with the students' performance in oral English. The higher the students scored on the FLCAS, the worse they performed in oral English in the classroom. Namely, the more anxious the students were in oral English lessons, the worse they performed in class, which supports findings of previous studies (Aida, 1994; Zhang, 2001).

Causes for Anxiety in Oral English Lessons

When asked about the reasons for student anxiety in oral English lessons, the participants invariably believed that it could be attributed to a range of factors such as

low English proficiency, lack of practice, difficulty of the task, lack of confidence, fear of making mistakes, and incomprehensible input. The factors mentioned in student journals and teacher interviews are summarized in Table 4. (The causes described by the student interviewees were basically the same as those in their journals and thus are not listed.) The table indicates that the three main factors contributing to student anxiety in English language lessons, identified by students at all proficiency levels and by teachers, were lack of practice (70%, 67.7%, 75%, and 100% respectively), lack of vocabulary (50%, 51.6%, 53.1%, and 66.7% respectively), and low English proficiency (43.3%, 29%, 31.3%, and 66.7% respectively).

Table 4

Causes for Student Anxiety in Oral English Lessons

	Low (Total N = 30) N(%)	Intermediate (Total N = 31) N(%)	High (Total N = 32) N(%)	Teacher (Total N = 3) N(%)
Lack of practice	21(70%)	21(67%)	24(75%)	3(100%)
Lack of/limited vocabulary	15(50%)	16(51.6%)	17(53.1%)	2(66.7%)
Low English proficiency	13(43.3%)	9(29%)	10(31.3%)	2(66.7%)
Personality	13(43.3%)	9(29%)	8(25%)	1(33.3%)
Fear of making mistakes	9(30%)	13(41.9%)	6(18.8%)	1(33.3%)
Lack of preparation	6(20%)	4(12.9%)	10(31.3%)	2(66.7%)
Incompre-hensible input	2(6.7%)	8(25.8%)	7(21.9%)	0
Inadequate grammatical knowledge	6(20%)	5(16.1%)	3(9.3%)	

Table 4 (continued)

Causes for Student Anxiety in Oral English Lessons

	Low (Total N = 30) N(%)	Intermediate (Total N = 31) N(%)	High (Total N = 32) N(%)	Teacher (Total N = 3) N(%)
Fear of being laughed at	2(6.7%)	8(25.8%)	3(9.3%)	1(33.3%)
Lack of confidence	5(16.7%)	1(3.2%)	8(25%)	1(33.3%)
Difficulty of the task	3(10%)	3(9.7%)	3(9.3%)	0
Poor/bad pronunciation	1(3.3%)	2(6.5%)		0
Lack of familiarity with partners/class-mates	0	3(9.7%)	2(6.3%)	0
Lack of familiarity with the topic	1(3.3%)	0	1(3.1%)	2(66.7%)
Fear of being negatively evaluated	3(10%)	0	0	0
Fear of being the focus of attention	0	3(9.7%)	1(3.1%)	0
Fear of speaking Chinese English	0	1(3.2%)	0	0
Inability to find proper words to express ideas	0	3(9.7%)		0

Table 4 (continued)

Causes for Student Anxiety in Oral English Language

	Low (Total N = 30) N(%)	Intermediate (Total N = 31) N(%)	High (Total N = 32) N(%)	Teacher (Total N = 3) N(%)
Inability to express oneself	0	0	2(6.3%)	0
Eagerness/ desire to speak English fluently	0	1(3.2%)	1(3.1%)	0
Poor memory	0	0	1(3.1%)	0
Lack of familiarity with the type of activity	0	0	2(6.3%)	0
Family communication pattern	0	0	1(3.1%)	0
Lack of familiarity with the environment	1(3.3%)	1(3.1%)	1(3.2%	1(33.3%)
English is not the student's mother tongue	0	1(3.2%)	0	1(33.3%)

As reported in their journals and interviews, the majority of the students did not practice speaking any English in the middle school, which was strongly exam oriented. Most of them became used to working hard at written English while neglecting spoken English in order to get high marks on written exams. When they started to speak English in class at the University, it was unavoidable for them to become nervous, especially because the University did not offer them many chances to access spoken English either. As a high-level student described:

> I think the bigger problem is practice. When we were senior high school students, our only goal is to enter a university. As the College Entrance Examination doesn't require spoken English, most students seldom practice speaking English in three years. I was one of them. Even after I entered the University, I still find that I have little time to practice. So my English is becoming poorer and poorer instead of making progress. As I didn't practice speaking English in the past few years, my pronunciation is poor. So I am afraid to stand up and give others my opinion. (Xia, female, journal)

This view was held by the majority of the participants. In addition, as a foreign language, English was seldom needed in daily life. These students had even less contact with English outside the classroom. This was worse for the science students, most of whom reported that they had "little time to study English" (Xiao, male, journal, intermediate level).

Another big obstacle was the lack of vocabulary, which made the students anxious when speaking English in class. As one participant remarked, "[Students] don't know how to express themselves, can't call the name of an object, act and so on. They don't know enough adjectives and adverbs to express their opinions" (Min, male, journal, intermediate level). Worse still, inadequate vocabulary made the students increasingly nervous.

For about one-third of the students at each level, anxiety was also due to their low English proficiency. This was vividly described by an intermediate-level student:

> Because I don't think I speak English well, I am afraid of speaking English in any situation except when I am alone. Naturally, I am nervous when speaking English in front of others. I'd like to be killed better than to be asked to speak English without preparation. (Miao, male, journal, intermediate level)

More than 60% of the teachers held the same view because they often observed that nervous students spoke broken English.

The next three main causes for anxiety were personality, mainly introversion and shyness (43.3%, 29%, 25%, and 33.3% respectively), fear of making mistakes (30%, 41.9%, 18.8%, and 33.3% respectively), and lack of preparation (20%, 12.9%, 31.3%, and 66.7% respectively). Other factors varied and are noted in the table along with the varying weights assigned to them by students at the different proficiency levels.

Another factor evident in the reflective journals that may have contributed to anxiety was students' low estimation of their own English proficiency. Though all the teacher interviewees felt that the students of the 2003 class were the best in English so far at the University, students rated their own abilities moderately, as indicated in Table 5.

Table 5

Self-assessment of Overall English Proficiency and Spoken English

Level (total No. of participants)		Advanced N(%)	Pretty Good N(%)	Good N(%)	Just so-so N(%)	Elementary/ poor N(%)
Low (30)	OE	0/0	0/0	7(23.3%)	2(6.7%)	21(70%)
	SE	0/0	0/0	3(10%)	2(6.7%)	25(83.3%)
Intermediate (31)	OE	0/0	0/0	13(41.9%)	0/0	18(58.1%)
	SE	0/0	0/0	6(19.4%)	0/0	25(80.6%)
High (32)	OE	0/0	1(3.1%)	25(78.1%)	3(9.4%)	3(9.4%)
	SE	0/0	2(6.3%)	11(34.4%)	3(9.4%)	16(50%)

Note: OE → Overall English Proficiency; SE → Spoken English proficiency

None of the students, even those at the most proficient level, rated their overall English or spoken English as advanced. As can be seen from the table, except for 78.1% of the high-level students who considered their overall English proficiency to be good, fewer than half of both the low/intermediate-level students rated their English ability as good. The majority of them rated it as poor or elementary. The ratings of spoken English proficiency are even more conservative. More than half of the students at each level (70%, 83.3%, and 50% respectively) assessed their spoken English proficiency as poor or elementary. Furthermore, 18 out of 20 interviewees said that they were not successful in learning spoken English given the time and effort they had put into it.

On the other hand, most students desired to use English as naturally as a mother tongue or as perfectly as a native speaker. Only then did they think they were successful in learning English and could be confident speaking English in class. A low-level student stated, "We should be able to express ourselves in English very fluently and use the exact words to express the ideas" (Dai, male, journal). Like the participants in

Price's (1991) study, this pursuit of perfection irritated and upset the students, who became less confident and more reserved due to the fear of making mistakes.

Strategies Adopted to Cope With Anxiety in Oral English Lessons

As described above, many students felt anxious during oral English lessons and thought that anxiety negatively affected their oral performance. In order to make the students feel more comfortable in class, all the teacher interviewees tried their best to be friendly and nice to the students. They intentionally set more time for pair work so that the students could become familiar with each other and get used to speaking English. Besides, they recommended learning methods and introduced conversation skills to the class in the first lesson. Meanwhile, they avoided embarrassing the students when they made a mistake. Instead, they tried to help them in a comfortable way. For example, the intermediate level teacher waited to point out and correct students' mistakes until the whole class became familiar with each other. She explains:

> At the beginning of the term, if a student made a mistake in his speech, I generally didn't interrupt him. Instead, I commented on that after he finished his talk so that the students felt freer to speak English in class. As we got more and more familiar with each other, I might interrupt and urged the student to correct his mistakes if he made any. (Female, interview)

In addition, some of the teachers tried to create opportunities for the nervous students by asking them to read texts or answer simple questions in class. They also intentionally praised them even if their performance was not quite satisfactory. Nevertheless, because of the large class size and limited contact between the students and the teacher, the teachers could hardly do more than encourage the students to become less nervous and more confident with the help of routine expressions such as "Don't be nervous," "Don't be afraid of mistakes," and "Take the chance and you'll speak better and better." As a result, they hoped that the students would practice more to alleviate anxiety when speaking English to others.

The students, on the other hand, seldom intentionally took any measures to reduce anxiety during the term, as reported in their journals and interviews. A few students tried to tell themselves, "Don't be nervous, don't be nervous," at the beginning of a talk, but this was ineffective. An intermediate-level student reported, "After I stopped saying, "Don't be nervous," I immediately became nervous and more and more nervous as my speech went on" (Shuo, male, interview). Meanwhile, they offered some suggestions for English teachers and fellow students. All of them indicated that they would become less nervous when speaking English if the teachers could prepare interesting topics, create a relaxing classroom environment, encourage them to speak, and give them more chances

to practice speaking. All the participants commented that they should have more practice, be more prepared, and not fear making mistakes in order to become confident when speaking English. "In order to overcome anxiety, one should get rid of his fear of making mistakes first. Everyone makes mistakes. If you say something wrong, don't feel ashamed, just correct it and go on speaking" (He, female, journal, high level). In addition to not being afraid of making mistakes, students suggested telling themselves, "I can do it, I can manage it" (Zhao, male, journal, high level) in order to be more self-confident. Moreover, exposure to English was also viewed as critical:

> As a student, they can expose themselves to English as much as possible. In one way they can improve their English. In other way they will get used to the pure English environment. These will make them overcome anxiety and become more confident and active. (Cai, male, journal, high level)

Conclusions and Implications

In light of the results, several conclusions can be drawn about anxiety in Chinese EFL classrooms. At least one-third of the students at all proficiency levels self-reported feeling anxious in oral English lessons, though most were only moderately nervous. Others became so tense that their mouths or legs were shaking. This anxious feeling made many students unwilling to volunteer to speak English in class.

Concerning the impact of anxiety on the students' oral performance in class, the majority of participants believed that anxiety detrimentally affected their performance in oral English, which was further supported by the negative relationship between the students' FLCAS scores and their performance scores. Most of the students thought that the more confident students would gradually speak better English.

A range of factors was revealed to contribute to anxiety such as low English proficiency, lack of practice, personality, fear of making mistakes and being laughed at, competition, and lack of confidence. Low self-estimations of ability may have also contributed to anxiety. Nevertheless, when confronted with anxiety, neither the teachers nor the students seemed to have effective coping strategies. Except for routine speech such as "be brave" and "take it easy," the teachers encouraged the students to become less anxious by suggesting more practice to build self-confidence. The students hoped their teachers would take measures to help them become more confident such as creating a friendly classroom atmosphere and providing interesting topics and practice time for speaking English.

The results of this study indicate that anxiety is a serious issue in Chinese EFL classrooms and is not yet being addressed by many EFL teachers and learners. To help

students become confident users of English, EFL teachers must be aware of the existence of anxiety in classrooms and make students aware of it as well. Secondly, since many students did not have much exposure to spoken English before entering the University, it might be beneficial for EFL teachers to state course objectives and introduce communicative language teaching to their students. In this way, students may have a better idea of their roles, thus consciously becoming more active and less anxious to use the target language to fulfill the course objectives, as recommended by Jones (1999).

Moreover, as found in the study, when students were not familiar with the English learning environment (especially the classroom environment), they were less willing to speak to others and felt anxious when doing so. Thus, as suggested by Donley (1998), EFL teachers have the responsibility to help students become familiar with the new environment. In addition, to help students become less anxious and more willing to speak the target language in oral English lessons, teachers need to create a relaxing and supportive classroom environment so that students' interest in and motivation to speak English may be enhanced, as suggested by the participants in the present research and previous studies (Horwitz et al., 1986; Yan, 2003). It would also be helpful for EFL teachers to explain to their students that it is unavoidable for a second/foreign language learner to make mistakes and that it is extremely difficult to speak English like a native speaker in a short time (Price, 1991). These practices would help students set achievable goals.

This study clearly establishes the reality of anxiety and its detrimental effects in EFL classrooms. It also identifies causes for anxiety and demonstrates the limitations of existing coping techniques. Considering the importance of spoken English and the common existence of anxiety, further research is needed to study its effects on language learning and identify coping strategies to help students become more confident and active EFL/ESL learners both in and outside classrooms, thus ultimately promoting their learning of oral English.

References

Aida, Y. (1994). Examination of Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope's construct of foreign language anxiety: The case of students of Japanese. *The Modern Language Journal, 78*, 155-168.

Argaman, O., & Abu-Rabia, S. (2002). The influence of language anxiety on English reading and writing tasks among native Hebrew speakers. *Language, Culture and Curriculum, 15*(2), 143-160.

Bailey, K. M. (1983). Competitiveness and anxiety in adult second language learning: Looking at and through the diary studies. In H. W. Seliger & M. H. Long (Eds.), *Classroom oriented research in second language acquisition* (pp. 67-103). Rowley, MA: Newbury House Publishers, Inc.

Cheng, Y., Horwitz, E. K., & Schallert, D. L. (1999). Language anxiety: Differentiating writing and speaking components. *Language Learning, 49*(3), 417-446.

Cohen, Y., & Norst, M. J. (1989). Fear, dependence, and loss of self-esteem: Affective barriers in second language learning among adults. *RELC Journal, 20*(2), 61-77.

Donley, P. (1998). Ten ways to cope with foreign language anxiety. In A. Mollica (Ed.), *Teaching and learning language* (pp. 109-110). Welland, Ontario, Canada: Soleil Publishing Inc.

Ely, C. M. (1986). An analysis of discomfort, risk-taking, sociability, and motivation in the L2 classroom. *Language Learning, 36*, 1-25.

Hilleson, M. (1996). "I want to talk with them, but I don't want them to hear": An introspective study of second language anxiety in an English-medium school. In K. M. Bailey & D. Nunan (Eds.), *Voices from the language classroom* (pp. 248-282). Cambridge University Press.

Horwitz, E. K. (1995). Student affective reactions and the teaching and learning of foreign languages. *Journal of Educational Research, 23*(7), 569-652.

Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M., & Cope, J. (1986). Foreign language classroom anxiety. *The Modern Language Journal, 1*, 125-132.

Jackson, J. (2002). Reticence in second language case discussions: Anxiety and aspirations. *System, 30*(1), 65-84.

Jones, J. F. (1999). From silence to talk: Cross-cultural ideas on students' participation in academic group discussion. *English for Specific Purposes, 18*(3), 243-259.

Kitano, K. (2001). Anxiety in the college Japanese language classroom. *The Modern Language Journal, 85*, 549-566.

Krippendorff, K. (1980). *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.

MacIntyre, P. D., & Gardner, R. C. (1989). Anxiety and second-language learning: Toward a theoretical clarification. *Language Learning, 39*, 251-275.

Neuendorf, K. A. (2002). *The content analysis guidebook*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Phillips, E. M. (1992). The effects of language anxiety on students' oral test performance and attitudes. *The Modern Language Journal, 76*, 14-26.

Price, M. L. (1991). The subjective experience of foreign language anxiety: Interviews with highly anxious students. In E. K. Horwitz & D. J. Young (Eds.), *Language anxiety: From theory and research to classroom implications* (pp. 101-108). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Sparks, R. L., Ganschow, L., & Artzer, M. (1997). Language anxiety and proficiency in a foreign language. *Perceptual and Motor Skills, 85*, 559-562.

Tobias, S. (1979). Anxiety research in educational psychology. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 71*(5), 573-582.

Yan, Y. (2003). Language anxiety and the teaching of spoken English. *Journal of Liaoning Technical University, 5*(4), 73-74.

Young, D. J. (1991). The relationship between anxiety and foreign language oral proficiency ratings. In E. K. Horwitz & D. J. Young (Eds.), *Language anxiety: From theory and research to classroom implications* (pp. 57-63). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Zhang, L. (2001). The effect of foreign language anxiety on speech fluency among international learners of Chinese. *Applied Linguistics, 3*, 44-49.

About the Author

Dr. Meihua Liu is a lecturer of English at the Department of Foreign Languages, Tsinghua University, P. R. C. Her research interests mainly include EFL teaching and learning in the Chinese context, classroom research, and second language writing.