# A Study on College Students' Anxiety to Spoken English

## L'ÉTUDE SUR L'ANXIÉTÉ DES ÉTUDIANTS EN ANGLAIS PARLÉ

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**Abstract：** In recent years, the Chinese college students have made great progress in English study, but their speaking ability is still in a lower class due to the anxiety. By carrying out a survey，the authors study the main factors related to the students' anxiety to spoken English and put forward some countermeasures to help students to improve their spoken English level.

**Key Words:** college students; spoken English; anxiety; factors.

**Résumé:** Ces dernières années, les étudiants chinois ont fait de grands progrès dans l'étude de l'anglais, mais leur capacité de l'oral a toujours un niveau inférieure en raison de l'anxiété. En effectuant une étude, les auteurs étudient les principaux facteurs associés à l'anxiété des élèves à l'oral et présentent certaines contre-mesures pour aider les élèves à améliorer leur niveau de l'anglais parlé.

**Mots-clés:** étudiants; anglais parlé; anxiété; facteurs

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Speaking has been regarded as one of the important parts in foreign language learning. In the past, speaking was not given enough attention by both the teachers and the students. But now, with the increasing need for students with higher oral English ability, many students do their utmost to improve their spoken English level and in many universities, even one in four classes is assigned to the practice of spoken English every week.

Although now oral English teaching has been given great priority, during the teaching process, the authors still find some problems. Among these problems, the most apparent ones are the following two aspects: firstly, many students often complain that they are not given enough chances to practice spoken

English, but in fact, when they are given chances, most of them would not like to act as volunteer. Some would say "I'm sorry" or say one or two sentences in low voices and sit down in haste when they are asked to answer questions. Secondly, some students will suddenly stop in the process of speaking and after some consideration, they will turn to the teacher and ask whether Chinese can be used.

After interviewing with some students and analyzing these phenomena, the authors think these are closely related to the high spoken English anxiety. In order to find out which aspects of anxiety are more influential, and whether those students with higher anxiety to spoken English will have a lower spoken English ability, the authors carried out a survey to find out the answers.

# 2. METHODOLOGY

## 2.1 Subjects

The 82 sophomore of Shandong Jiaotong University have been participants in this investigation. They are randomly selected and have been learning English for 7-8 years. The students have different personalities and different proficiency levels in English.

## 2. 2 Instruments

Instruments used in the experiment are English Test One, a questionnaire on personality designed by Professor Wen Qiufang (1996a), and a questionnaire on the students' anxiety to spoken English designed on the basis of that of Horwitz and Cope (1986). The performance of the students in the test was marked by five teachers according to the criteria given by Arthur Hughes (2002). The questionnaire on personality consists of 15 questions which can help us get a brief idea about the personalities of the students. The questionnaire on the students' anxiety to spoken English consists of five parts. Each part is related to one aspect of the anxiety, to each question, there are five choices:

    1=This statement is never or almost never true of me
    2=This statement is usually not true of me
    3=This statement is somewhat true of me
    4=This statement is usually true of me
    5=This statement is completely or almost completely true of me

## 2.3 Procedures

Firstly, Test One is used to examine the students' spoken English level. Secondly, the students are required to do the questionnaire on personality, and then they are required to do the questionnaire on their anxiety to spoken English,

## 2.4 Data collection

The experiment deals with the data collected as the following: the score of the test will be used as the reference of the subjunctive's proficiency level in spoken English. The questionnaire on personality can present us with the personalities of the students, which can be used to judge whether there is a close connection between the personality and the proficiency level of the students' spoken English. The answers to the questionnaire on the students' anxiety to spoken English given by the students are analyzed by SPSS.

The result of the questionnaire on personality and the answers to the questionnaire on the students' anxiety to spoken English will not be presented here. Instead, we only present the results of the analysis of SPSS here.

# 3. RESULTS & DISCUSSIONS

Generally speaking, the study confirms that the higher anxiety to spoken English a student has, the lower spoken English ability he/she has. And among different reasons that cause the high anxiety, the more influential factors include: the attention to intonation and pronunciation; the motivation, and the interference of mother language. The correlation between the anxiety and grammar and the correlation between the anxiety and the personality are not as significant as imagined. All these points can be seen clearly from the following SPSS14.0 output.

## 3.1 Reliability

After testing the frequencies, we find that all students answer the questionnaire according to the directions. Secondly, I test the reliability:

**Case Processing Summary**

|  |  | N | % |
|---|---|---|---|
| Cases | Valid | 82 | 100.0 |
|  | Excluded(a) | 0 | 0 |
|  | Total | 82 | 100.0 |

a  Listwise deletion based on all variables in the procedure.

**Reliability Statistics**

| Cronbach's Alpha | N of Items |
|---|---|
| .682 | 32 |

## 3.2 The correlation between the anxiety and the spoken English level:

**Correlations**

|  |  | test1 | anxiety |
|---|---|---|---|
| test1 | Pearson Correlation | 1 | -.549(**) |
|  | Sig. (2-tailed) |  | .001 |
|  | N | 82 | 82 |
| anxiety | Pearson Correlation | -.549(**) | 1 |
|  | Sig. (2-tailed) | .001 |  |
|  | N | 82 | 82 |

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

From this table, we can see clearly that the significance level is 0.001< 0.01, which means the correlation between the test marks and anxiety to spoken English is very significant. The Pearson Correlation is -0.549, which means, the higher anxiety to spoken English a student has, the lower spoken English ability he/she has.

### 3.3 The aspects of anxiety which play more important role:

### 3.3.1 The correlation between the anxiety and intonation:

**Correlations**

|  |  | anxiety | intonation |
|---|---|---|---|
| anxiety | Pearson Correlation | 1 | .580(**) |
|  | Sig. (2-tailed) |  | .000 |
|  | N | 82 | 82 |
| intonation | Pearson Correlation | .580(**) | 1 |
|  | Sig. (2-tailed) | .000 |  |
|  | N | 82 | 82 |

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

From this table, we can see that the significance level is 0.000< 0.01, which means the correlation between the anxiety and intonation is very significant. The Pearson Correlation is 0.580, which means, the more a student pays attention to his/her intonation, the more anxious he/she will be.

### 3.3.2 The correlation between the anxiety and motivation:

**Correlations**

|  |  | anxiety | motivation |
|---|---|---|---|
| anxiety | Pearson Correlation | 1 | -.554(**) |
|  | Sig. (2-tailed) |  | .001 |
|  | N | 82 | 82 |
| motivation | Pearson Correlation | -.554(**) | 1 |
|  | Sig. (2-tailed) | .001 |  |
|  | N | 82 | 82 |

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

From this table, we can see the significance level is 0.001< 0.01, which means the correlation between the anxiety and interest is very significant. The Pearson Correlation is -0.554, which means, the more a student is motivated, the less anxious he/she will be.

### 3.3.3 The correlation between the anxiety and the concentration on pronunciation:

**Correlations**

|  |  | anxiety | pronunciation |
|---|---|---|---|
| anxiety | Pearson Correlation | 1 | .545(**) |
|  | Sig. (2-tailed) |  | .001 |
|  | N | 82 | 82 |
| pronunciation | Pearson Correlation | .545(**) | 1 |
|  | Sig. (2-tailed) | .001 |  |
|  | N | 82 | 82 |

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The significance level is 0.001< 0.01, which means the correlation between the anxiety and the

concentration on pronunciation is very significant. The Pearson Correlation is 0.545. That is, the more a student concentrates on his/her pronunciation when he/she speaks English, the more anxious he/she will be.

### 3.3.4 The correlation between the anxiety and mother language:

**Correlations**

|  |  | anxiety | ML |
|---|---|---|---|
| anxiety | Pearson Correlation | 1 | .506(**) |
|  | Sig. (2-tailed) |  | .003 |
|  | N | 82 | 82 |
| ML | Pearson Correlation | .506(**) | 1 |
|  | Sig. (2-tailed) | .003 |  |
|  | N | 82 | 82 |

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

From this table, we can see the significance level is $0.003 < 0.01$, which means the correlation between the anxiety and mother language is very significant. The Pearson Correlation is 0.506, which means, the more a student thinks about a question in Chinese at first when he/she speaks English, and then translates the ideas into English word by word, the more anxious he/she will be.

### 3.4 The insignificant factors:

### 3.4.1 The correlation between the anxiety and grammar:

**Correlations**

|  |  | anxiety | grammar |
|---|---|---|---|
| anxiety | Pearson Correlation | 1 | .235 |
|  | Sig. (2-tailed) |  | .174 |
|  | N | 82 | 82 |
| grammar | Pearson Correlation | .235 | 1 |
|  | Sig. (2-tailed) | .174 |  |
|  | N | 82 | 82 |

The correlation between the anxiety and the grammar is not significant.

### 3.4.2 The correlation between the anxiety and the personality:

**Correlations**

|  |  | anxiety | personality |
|---|---|---|---|
| anxiety | Pearson Correlation | 1 | -.124 |
|  | Sig. (2-tailed) |  | .493 |
|  | N | 82 | 82 |
| personality | Pearson Correlation | -.124 | 1 |
|  | Sig. (2-tailed) | .493 |  |
|  | N | 82 | 82 |

The correlation between the anxiety and the personality is not significant.

# 4.  COUNTERMEASURES

From the above analysis, we can see the anxiety to spoken English indeed affects the students' speaking ability to a great extent. After some periods' experiment, the author finds it is feasible to do as the following:

## 4.1  Cultivate the students to be accustomed to listening to English and thinking in English.

As far as this aspect is concerned, the most important thing for the College English teachers to do is to teach English in English instead of Chinese. Some teachers think it is easy for the students to follow them in Chinese and Chinese can help students to understand the content very well. But according to some survey, most students would like their teacher to give lectures in English, when it is necessary, Chinese can be used sometime but not too much. Many students say in the first class when the teacher speaks English, they feel puzzled. After some period, when they find the teacher will not give them Chinese explanation, they begin to concentrate on the lessons in class, and find they can understand something, which makes them feel happy and try their best to follow the teacher and search for success. Deep down, they feel such teaching method can help them to form the habit of thinking in English and can help them get rid of the interference of mother language. Then they can gradually form the habit of understanding, judging and expressing the ideas in English.

## 4.2  Ask students to imitate the intonation of the recordings.

In order to help students overcome their difficulty in the bad intonation, teachers should ask students to read after the recordings, imitate the intonation of the native speakers. In addition, there are multimedia in most of the university classrooms nowadays, teachers also can make good use of the equipment to help students. After some period of imitation, they will make great progress in their intonation, and then they will have greater confidence to speak loudly.

## 4.3  Correct their pronunciation

Many students have bad pronunciations because they have very strong dialect. Under such circumstance, the English teacher should ask help from the Chinese teacher who can help them to read Chinese in mandarin at first; at the same time, the English teacher can help them start from the very beginning of pronunciation. Although it is a hard and boring job and occupies some after-class time, students like it very much. The authors once had an interview with students, most of whom said their middle school teachers read English in very strong dialect, so they were greatly influenced and in fact they really admired those who could speak good English. With such good intention, they will certainly follow the teacher if they can learn Standard English.

## 4.4  Force students to speak English in class to enhance their motivation.

College students have learned enough English words to express their ideas, so the English teacher can demand students speak English in class whether when they ask questions or when they answer questions. Tell students if they do not know how to say a word in English, please use other words to explain the word. Day after day, they will form the habit of using English, and then they will never think about losing face or something like that.

# 5. CONCLUSION

On the whole, in speaking aspect, the greatest task for most Chinese English learners is to overcome the anxiety to spoken English. To speak English as a foreign language takes a great deal of psychological preparation and efforts. Effective communication needs students to throw off L1 interference. Meanwhile, oral fluency in English requires lowered inhibition, enhanced self-confidence, intrinsic motivation, greater ambiguity tolerance, realistic personal goals, and most of all, adventurous risk-taking. Only through great efforts, can they improve their spoken English level.

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