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International Conference of Research on Language Education**ASSESSING THE ENGLISH SPEAKING ANXIETY LEVEL OF
STUDENTS IN CHINA**

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Abstract

Emotional variables can either aid or impede the process of learning English. Among these emotional factors, anxiety has the most significant impact on the outcomes of ESL learning. When it comes to speaking anxiety in an English classroom, numerous factors such as age, gender, and personality influence its intensity. The main research aims to investigate the correlation between personality, gender, and English speaking anxiety among middle school students in Jinjiang, Chengdu of Sichuan Province, China. However, this study only reports on the level of English speaking anxiety. Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) was utilized to obtain data from 50 middle schoolers as part of a preliminary study investigating the level of English speaking anxiety. The questionnaire was distributed to 50 third-year middle school respondents. The instrument consisted of 16 items focusing on speaking anxiety extracted from FLCAS, scored on a 5-point Likert Scale with a reliability value of 0.973. The data were quantitatively analyzed. The findings indicate that the middle school students, as a whole, demonstrate a moderate level of anxiety. Middle school students may cause anxiety because of the demanding English speaking teaching environment and their own self-confidence limitations. It is suggested that educators can create a supportive learning environment for students to practice English. This can be achieved by incorporating interactive and collaborative teaching methods and providing personalized support to students. Furthermore, fostering a culture of positive feedback and constructive evaluation can play a pivotal role in facilitating students' growth and proficiency in English speaking.

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1. Introduction

The increasing integration of national economies through trade, known as economic globalization, is progressively impacting various societal levels. Given that the economy serves as the foundation for all aspects of society, this influence naturally extends to cultural, educational, recreational, industrial, and social aspects. However, the most notable impact is observed in the realm of education, as it forms the fundamental basis and driving force behind all industries. Proficiency in spoken English is an essential element of language acquisition, particularly for developing multilingual communication skills, an aspect that both English teachers and students cannot overlook (Liu, 2021). In many countries, English is not the native language, which poses challenges for students learning English as a second language, as they grapple with intricate grammar and vocabulary tests that vary in complexity. This struggle is particularly evident for those encountering the more nuanced aspects of the language for the first time. Moreover, most middle school students (Grades 7-9 in China) have limited time available for practising spoken English.

The most recent Standard of Compulsory English Curriculum, formulated by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, mandates that middle school students must enhance their listening and speaking skills in English (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2022). This requirement aims to enable students to retain information better, be willing to communicate, dare to try, and effectively interact in their target languages. However, the current English teaching environment in China lacks sufficient emphasis on speaking skills, leading to underdeveloped English speaking abilities and emotional attitudes among learners. Consequently, speaking anxiety is common among students, hindering their fluency and reducing their internal motivation to study English (Wang, 2022). Research conducted by Chinese scholars, such as Ju (2022), reveals that students often experience anxiety when expressing themselves in English, irrespective of their excellent overall performance in the language. Numerous studies have examined speaking anxiety among ESL learners from various angles. Jiang and Dewaele (2019) discovered that China's test-oriented educational system contributes to high levels of speaking anxiety in English classes. This indicates that Chinese schools and teachers prioritize paper-based English assessments, while neglecting opportunities for English speaking practice and conversation. Existing literature primarily focuses on strategies to alleviate English speaking anxiety, with most studies conducted on university students and limited research on middle school students' speaking anxiety.

Anxiety, as an emotional factor, commonly manifests in the English learning process of middle school students in China (Liu, 2021). Speaking anxiety, in particular, is the most prevalent form, where students fear expressing themselves in English and experience extreme anxiety. Unfortunately, junior middle schools currently overlook English speaking abilities due to the absence of speaking exams. Another Chinese researcher, Liu (2020), highlights that English language education in China prioritizes textbook-based language knowledge and written exam results. Although many students excel in listening, reading, and writing, they often feel apprehensive about speaking English in class and experience anxiety when communicating in the language. While students value language communication during primary school and participate in various English activities, they struggle with anxiety during middle school,

leading to symptoms such as stuttering, anxiety when responding to questions, and difficulty explaining their thoughts.

English speaking anxiety prevails among Chinese middle school students in compulsory education (Chen, 2022), possibly influenced by various contemporary factors in middle school English language instruction. Firstly, despite the promotion of quality education, traditional examination-oriented approaches persist. Schools place great importance on junior high acceptance rates, resulting in English teaching that focuses more on grammar explanations and exercises while neglecting the development of middle school students' speaking skills (Fang, 2019). Furthermore, there is a lack of conducive environments for practicing English speaking, especially in primary and middle schools, where both teachers and students assign less value to spoken English (Jian, 2022). Secondly, most middle school students lack an authentic environment for second language (English) speaking practice (Gao, 2022). Teachers often fail to integrate speaking English with real-world requirements, resulting in a lack of attention to spoken English in actual teaching practices (Wu, 2019). Moreover, many middle school English teachers employ a single teaching method, lacking flexibility and variety, which diminishes students' motivation to learn speaking skills (Song, 2020). Students in rural areas face additional challenges, as teachers with varying skill sets, particularly in English, struggle to provide an authentic English-speaking atmosphere. As a result, students experience difficulties in basic English skills, pronunciation, intonation, and develop strong feelings of inferiority (Fang, 2019). Due to these disparities among rural teachers, students become hesitant to express themselves publicly, fearing their pronunciation, grammar, and ability to be understood are lacking. This mental block discourages students from using spoken English (Lin, 2020).

Finally, the teaching of speaking skills in middle school English textbooks lacks a dedicated section, unlike reading and writing skills training (Wen, 2020). In many places, middle schools do not conduct English-speaking tests, and even at the college level, undergraduate students must pass CET-4 and CET-6 exams that lack a speaking component. These factors contribute to a neglect of speaking English by teachers (Wen, 2020). Consequently, some middle school English teachers fail to conduct classes entirely in English, resorting to a combination of Chinese and English, or relying more on Chinese than English. This approach hampers the development of students' English thinking and speaking abilities (Fang, 2019). Given the aforementioned discussion, it is crucial to examine the prevalence of speaking anxiety among middle school students enrolled in ESL classrooms in China. Fewer studies have focused on English speaking anxiety among middle school students compared to college students and high school seniors. However, during this phase of education, the emphasis on English instruction should be on speaking abilities rather than solely on listening, reading, or writing skills (Jian, 2022). The author suggests that further research is necessary to enhance students' English-speaking abilities. Consequently, this study aims to investigate the current state of speaking anxiety among middle school students in English classrooms in China as part of the initiatives to identify the underlying causes.

2. Research Questions

The following question was formulated for this study:

- i. What is the level of English-speaking anxiety in English classes of middle school students?

3. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this paper is to identify the English speaking anxiety among middle schoolers in the district of Jinjiang, Chengdu in Sichuan province. This study yields preliminary findings for the main project aiming at identifying the real causes affecting China's middle schoolers' speaking anxiety.

4. Research Methods

This quantitative research study adopted Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). Horwitz et al. (1986) developed FLCAS, the most commonly used measure of anxiety in the foreign language classroom, which is divided into three dimensions: communicative anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. Several researchers, including Latif and Binti (2015), An et al. (2022), Guo (2021), and Liu (2021), have widely utilized this scale to investigate foreign language anxiety during the learning process.

As the English level of middle school students is not very high, Wang (2003) translated all the questions into Chinese. For clarity, the terms "language" and "foreign language" were replaced with "English" in the questionnaire. In this study, the focus will be on the 16 items related to "speaking" in the questionnaire, which include items 1, 3, 4, 9, 13, 14, 18, 20, 23, 24, 27, 29, 30, 31, 32, and 33. The questionnaire was sent to the students by English teachers in S middle school in Jinjiang district by conducting face-to-face interactions. Md Nor (2013) suggested that the data obtained from the pilot study could be utilized to assess the reliability and quality of the collected data. For this study, it yielded 0.973. The obtained data were quantitatively analyzed. The questionnaire was conducted in the respondents' native language, Chinese. The research maintained anonymity, with participants only indicating their gender and age.

4.1. Participants

The participants were 50 third-year students of a middle school in Jinjiang, who enrolled in English course in the 2021/2022. Table 1 is the basic information of the respondents, including 26 females, accounting for 52% and 24 males, accounting for 48%.

Table 1. Respondents' Demographic Information

Item	Option	Number of respondents	Percentage
Gender	Male	24	48%
	Female	26	52%

5. Findings

5.1. What is the English speaking anxiety level of the middle school students in China?

There are 16 items for English speaking anxiety in this construct as presented in Table 2. According to the evaluation criteria of the Likert scale (5-point) items (Genc, 2023), the scores falling between 1.00 and 1.79 are categorized as very low level, scores between 1.80 and 2.59 are considered low

level, scores between 2.60 and 3.39 are classified as moderate level, scores between 3.40 and 4.19 are regarded as high level, and scores between 4.20 and 5.00 are considered very high level. In these 16 questions, the average anxiety scores for 15 of them fall within the range of 2.6-3.39, indicating a moderate level of anxiety. Only one question has an average anxiety score between 3.40-4.19, indicating a high level of anxiety. This suggests that for most items, students experience a certain degree of anxiety. Based on the comparison of means, the items with higher mean scores, such as Q4, Q11, and Q13, suggest that students feel more nervous and confused when they are unprepared to speak, when speaking in an English class, and when in the presence of native English speakers. These areas seem to elicit greater anxiety among the students. Furthermore, the standard deviation values indicate some degree of variability in students' scores on each item. This is basically consistent with the results of Liu's (2021) research on the items of anxiety. Higher standard deviations suggest that there is a greater variation in students' feelings of anxiety across these items. This implies that some students may experience higher levels of anxiety in certain areas, while others may experience lower levels.

Table 2. Items on English Speaking Anxiety

Items	N	Mean	Standard deviation
Q1:I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my English class.	50	3.28	1.278
Q2: I tremble when I know that I'm going to be called on in English class.	50	3.32	1.058
Q3: It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in English.	50	3.32	1.347
Q4:I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in English class.	50	3.54	1.110
Q5: It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my English class.	50	3.34	1.154
Q6:I would not be nervous speaking English with native speakers.	50	3.20	1.195
Q7:I feel confident when I speak in English class.	50	3.22	1.183
Q8:I can feel my heart pounding when I'm going to be called on in English class.	50	3.26	1.157
Q9:I always feel that the other students speak English better than I do.	50	3.16	1.218
Q10:I feel very self-conscious about speaking English in front of other students.	50	3.30	1.055
Q11: I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in English class.	50	3.38	1.193
Q12:I get nervous when I don't understand every word the English teacher says.	50	3.28	1.144
Q13:I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules you have to learn to speak English.	50	3.38	1.159
Q14:I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak English.	50	3.18	1.137
Q15:I would probably feel comfortable around native speakers of English.	50	3.20	1.212
Q16:I get nervous when English teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance.	50	3.28	1.179

Table 3 displays the total scores, number of students, and percentages of students' English speaking anxiety. Firstly, the FLCAS scores were calculated for each student, and then they were divided into three groups: low, moderate, and high anxiety based on their anxiety scores. Table 3 also presents the score ranges for each group. The scoring system of the instrument was used, with the 25th and 75th percentiles as the cutoff points for the three anxiety groups. Descriptive statistics were used to calculate the total number of students and percentages for each level. Among the 50 students, 22% (n = 11) have total scores of 66 or above, indicating high anxiety. This suggests that these students may experience relatively high levels of speaking anxiety. 68% (n = 34) of the students have total scores ranging from 30 to 65, indicating moderate levels of English speaking anxiety for these 34 participants. 10% (n = 5) have scores ranging from 16 to 29, indicating that these students have some degree of English speaking

anxiety, but the impact may be subtle. Overall, the majority of students (68%) have moderate levels of anxiety, while a relatively smaller number of students had low or high levels of anxiety. Therefore, it can be concluded that the overall anxiety level of the students is at a moderate level. To compare the anxiety level of this group with other groups of middle school students, the authors examined previous research results that used FLCAS to measure students' English speaking anxiety levels. The findings of this study regarding the overall status of English speaking anxiety among middle school students are consistent with many other research results, such as Guo (2021) and Chen (2022), in which more than 65% of students are at a moderate level of anxiety and a certain percentage of students are at a high level of anxiety. The proportion of high anxiety students in this study (22%) is higher than in the other two studies (14.5% and 18.33%). The difference in results may be due to the different characteristics of the participants. Guo (2021) and Chen (2022) study second and first-year students, while this study's participants are third-year students. According to Lin (2018), in the third year, students abstract logical thinking begins to shift from empirical to theoretical, and they express their opinions in a more individualistic, original and profound way. Therefore, this paper suggests that third-year students may have a clearer understanding of their speaking anxiety and be able to respond more profoundly to the test taker's questions about it. On the other hand, third-year students are facing entrance examinations and may therefore feel more anxious.

Table 3. Students' Scores on English Speaking Anxiety

Anxiety Level	Number of Students	Percentage
Low (16-29)	5	10%
Average(30-65)	34	68%
High (66-80)	11	22%

In summary, this study argues that the presence of intermediate levels of speaking anxiety among the majority of middle school students in China may be attributed to several factors. Firstly, the Chinese education system's strong emphasis on written tests neglects the assessment of speaking skills, leading to students experiencing anxiety when expressing themselves in spoken English due to limited practice and opportunities to showcase their speaking abilities (Jiang & Dewaele, 2019). So, there maybe a significant pressure within the speaking teaching environment. Secondly, many Chinese middle school students lack self-confidence in speaking English and fear making mistakes or facing ridicule from their peers, which contributes to higher levels of anxiety regarding their speaking proficiency (Liu, 2021). Additionally, classroom factors, such as classroom rules, questioning methods, and teacher feedback, have a significant impact on students' English speaking anxiety (Guo, 2021).

To facilitate the mitigation of speaking anxiety among middle school students and the enhancement of their speaking skills and self-confidence, this study puts forth the following recommendations. Firstly, educators and educational institutions ought to cultivate an enabling learning milieu that fosters active engagement in speaking practices and self-expression. By establishing a secure and encouraging environment, students can feel at ease and confident to freely articulate their thoughts and ideas. Secondly, the adoption of interactive and collaborative pedagogical approaches can significantly contribute to the bolstering of students' speaking self-assurance and fluency. The organization of activities such as group discussions, role-playing, and collaborative projects provides

students with opportunities to engage in authentic oral exchanges. Moreover, English instructors should exhibit a comprehensive understanding of individual students' levels of speaking anxiety and specific needs in order to deliver personalized support and guidance. Through means such as individual tutoring, group mentoring, or one-on-one sessions, teachers can effectively assist students in overcoming their speaking anxiety and advancing their speaking proficiency.

Furthermore, educators can enhance students' self-confidence by providing constructive feedback and offering words of encouragement. Positive assessments serve as motivational drivers, stimulating students' active participation in speaking activities. Additionally, educational institutions and governing bodies can facilitate authentic language practice by organizing practical speaking communication initiatives such as role-plays, speech competitions, and English corners. These opportunities allow students to apply their speaking skills in real-life contexts. These recommendations aim to help adolescent learners overcome their speaking anxiety, while simultaneously improving their oral expressive abilities and self-assurance. Educators and institutions should carefully select and implement appropriate strategies and methodologies, considering the specific circumstances and individual needs of their students. Furthermore, acknowledging individual differences and addressing special requirements is crucial in designing effective support measures.

6. Conclusion

The research findings indicate a moderate level of English speaking anxiety among the middle schoolers in Jinjiang District in China. The majority of students experience a certain degree of anxiety when engaging in English communication, with a subset of students displaying high levels of anxiety. Notably, anxiety is particularly pronounced during unprepared speaking tasks, English class interactions, and interactions with native English speakers. The study elucidates various contributing factors that underlie the prevalence of speaking anxiety among middle schoolers. These factors collectively impede the development of English speaking proficiency and exacerbate communicative anxiety. Teachers should be encouraged to incorporate ample opportunities for spoken English practice and conversation within their instructional practices. However, it is essential to acknowledge the limited scope of this study, which solely focused on a single middle school in Chengdu's Jinjiang district, thereby restricting its generalization to students in other regions of China. Further research is warranted to comprehend English speaking anxiety among students in diverse geographical contexts, explore additional contributing factors to such anxiety, and devise effective strategies for its mitigation. By addressing the underlying causes of oral anxiety and implementing appropriate intervention measures, educators can aid students in cultivating confidence and enhancing their English speaking abilities, ultimately augmenting their overall language proficiency and facilitating more effective communication.

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