

Chapter 3

Speaking Anxiety Lower– Level Learners Experienced in Transitional Higher Education in China: The Case Study of Xi’an Jiaotong– Liverpool University

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ABSTRACT

Many students experience foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA). This chapter adopts quantitative and qualitative methods to research the possible causing factors of FLSA and the corresponding solutions. Quantitative data was collected from 41 year one students at XJTLU using questionnaires to test 14 factors’ impacts on students’ speaking anxiety from three categories: self, peer, and teacher. Qualitative data was collected from the interviews with 11 students which probed into what elements from those three categories could help reduce students’ speaking anxiety effectively from their perspectives. The quantitative data analysis showed that most students had a high level FLSA, and the 14 factors influenced their speaking anxiety to different levels. The qualitative data revealed that students generally believed that teacher-related elements could help reduce their speaking anxiety most effectively. With the findings, it is hoped that teachers in transnational higher education can be acquire some inspirations regarding how to effectively reduce their students’ FLSA.

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1. INTRODUCTION

There are four skills in learning a language: listening, reading, writing, and speaking. Among the four skills, speaking is a crucial skill in the learning process of the language. According to Nunan (1991), speaking is the most important skill for most students to master, and whether a student can be deemed as a successful language learner depends on their capabilities to conduct oral communication with others. Similarly, Bahrani and Soltani (2012) argue that the principal outcome of teaching speaking to students is to help them achieve the capability to communicate with others using that target language. These arguments are reasonable because when students learn a language, they may have the needs to express their ideas in that target language and get them understood by others. If they only know how to use grammar and the vocabulary to read and write but cannot have even basic communication, which is a common situation for many EFL learners nowadays, they cannot be regarded as having mastered the language genuinely.

Speaking is even more important when today's globalisation context is taken into consideration. In recent years, communication across the world has been made possible due to the development of new technology, and the continuous growth in the integration of people and countries across the world comes along with it (Huang, 2014). Due to this reason, communication with people from different countries are becoming more important, so it will not meet students' needs if they only master the vocabulary and grammar in the target language. Also, because of globalisation, education, especially higher education, has become borderless and transnational. It is easy for students to attend the educational programmes in another country or the transnational educational (TNE) programmes in their motherland, which may need them to use the target language more often. This relates to the term transitional education, a new word that emerged in 1980s, and its definition is the movement of educational programmes from developed English-speaking countries to emerging non-English-speaking countries (Huang, 2014).

Globalisation and the TNE contexts have put English learning and speaking at a more critical status, and therefore have made it more challenging for students under this context to speak English. Globalisation and TNE contexts have promoted English as a medium of instruction (EMI) in higher education in non-native English-speaking countries in recent years (Chou, 2018). In this circumstance, it is more necessary for students to be accustomed to the mode of using English in class to teach academic content and to use English as a tool to communicate with their classmates or teachers. However, Chou (2018) contends that communication using English in the EMI context is a fundamental demand, but it is very challenging for students to achieve, and one reason is that they experience foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA). Similarly, Suzuki (2017) argues that though EMI in TNE context provides many benefits for students, it also brings forth a problem which is boosting students' anxiety in speaking English. These are not difficult to understand because when students just transit from high school, where English lessons were generally taught in their first language, to an EMI university under TNE context, and suddenly start to attend the English lectures and seminars in their disciplines, discuss with classmates and teachers in English, and use complete English teaching materials and workbook, quite many of them may not be accustomed to this rapid transformation which can lead to the increase of their FLSA dramatically. This is in line with Arunasalam and Burton's (2018) research that some of their participants were discouraged to continue their learning with the EMI teaching mode under TNE context, not because of the different western and eastern educational cultures but due to the deficiencies of their English language skills and levels. Therefore, teachers in the TNE context are suggested to examine what factors may cause the

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