

Effects of Social Context on Foreign Language Anxiety among University English Learners in Hong Kong

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Abstract

This study explored the effects of social context on foreign language anxiety among university English learners in Hong Kong. Given that English competence is widely considered as the key to career opportunities, while speaking English with a Hong Kong accent can invite social stigma, it was assumed that such factors might be potential sources of learners' anxiety. Results from questionnaires and interviews with 12 undergraduates largely confirmed the assumption, providing evidence of how contextual factors might also lead to learners' anxiety in addition to other commonly known causes such as learners' beliefs and psychological traits. To help anxious learners assuage their apprehension, teachers are recommended to adopt a sensitive approach to their speaking pedagogy.

Keywords: foreign language anxiety, speaking, social context, English learners, Hong Kong

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Introduction

Foreign language anxiety (FLA) has long been considered a key affective factor in second language acquisition. It is seen as an impediment to language learning and is defined as “the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language texts, including speaking, listening, and learning” (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). Among the language skills, it is believed that speaking generates the most anxiety (Cheng, Horwitz, & Schallert, 1999). Although there have been suggestions that FLA is closely associated with other types of anxiety (e.g. communication apprehension, test anxiety), researchers generally view it as a largely independent construct that inhibits language learning (Horwitz, Tallon, & Luo 2009).

FLA can be caused by a wide range of personal and contextual factors, such as fear of negative evaluation (Kitano, 2001; Mak, 2011), low self-esteem (Foss & Reitzel, 1988), negative learning experience (Price, 1991), parental influence (Yan & Horwitz, 2008) and teachers’ classroom practices (Choi, 2016). At the heart of the anxiety, however, is the inability to present oneself authentically in the target language (Horwitz, Tallon, & Luo, 2009). It stems from the agonizing realization of the perpetual disparity between one’s authentic self and the compromised version presented through the target language as a result of the learner’s limited command of it. FLA produces numerous undesirable effects, not least for causing learners to avoid communicating in the target language. Such avoidance denies learners the opportunities for practice and further impedes their learning, therefore creating a self-reinforcing vicious cycle for anxiety.

Recent research on FLA has shown that in addition to learners’ psychological traits, the social context of learning can also influence the levels of anxiety experienced by learners. In their study of Chinese university students in a metropolitan city (Shanghai), Yan and Horwitz (2008) found that the regions from which the students came and the dialects they spoke were among the causes of their anxiety when speaking English. Students who came from other parts of China were reported to feel anxious about not being able to speak as well as their Shanghainese peers. Examining the effects of social variables on FLA among adult multilingual speakers, Dewaele, Petrides, and Furnham (2008) also found that higher levels of anxiety could be linked to such social factors as inadequate socialization in the target language and a small network of interlocutors.

This study aimed to further explore the relationship between FLA, with a focus on speaking, and the social context of learning among university English learners in Hong Kong. The social context of the current study is of particular interest as English enjoys high social status in Hong Kong. Competence in the language is widely regarded as the key to higher education and career opportunities (Li, 2013), whereas speaking English with a Hong Kong accent is likely to be socially stigmatized (Luk, 2010). Given this context, it would be of interest to examine whether such social expectations would present themselves as sources of anxiety for English learners in Hong Kong. To this end, two assumptions were tested:

1. Given the high status of English in Hong Kong and its implications on academic and career prospects, learners may experience much anxiety due to the high stakes involved.

2. Learners may hold a negative attitude towards the Hong Kong accent and feel anxious when they can only speak with it.¹

Since a lack of proficiency for self-expression is a major cause of anxiety, the study also explored whether anxious learners would make an effort to ease their anxiety by improving their proficiency.

Participants and methods

The participants were the students of the researcher in a professional English course in the spring semester of 2017. They were second and third-year undergraduates majoring in surveying and civil engineering. Most grew up in Hong Kong and started learning English at the age of 3. They had not lived or studied in an English-speaking country. They completed a simplified version of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) (see Appendix). The simplified questionnaire consisted of 15 statements, focusing primarily on speaking with a few original statements reflecting causes of anxiety as identified in research.² The questionnaire was completed by 55 students. Students with an average score of above 3 were considered anxious. Only those who reached this threshold and were willing to share their anxiety in a follow-up interview were included in the data analysis. This resulted in data from 12 students' questionnaires and interviews.

The follow-up interviews were conducted individually by the researcher on a semi-structured basis, each lasting for about 30 minutes. The participants were asked questions as prompts for further sharing, such as their perceived causes of anxiety, and their attitude towards English and the Hong Kong accent. To maximize the potential for obtaining insightful data and to free them from speaking anxiety, their native language Cantonese was used throughout the interview and they were guaranteed anonymity.³ The details of the participants are given in Table 1.

¹ One participant speaks Mandarin as her native language so for her it is the Chinese accent.

² For simplicity, the reverse-scored statements in the original version were rewritten in line with the rest of the statements. The modified scale had been piloted with two non-participating students to ensure its comprehensibility.

³ One interview was conducted in English as the student was from mainland China and could not speak Cantonese.

Table 1: Background of participants

Participant	Sex	Year of study	Major	Age started learning English	Mean score on the FLCAS
1	F	3	Civil Engineering	3	3.33
2	M	3	Civil Engineering	3	4.00
3	M	3	Civil Engineering	3	4.60
4	M	3	Civil Engineering	3	3.60
5	M	3	Civil Engineering	3	4.07
6	M	3	Civil Engineering	3	4.00
7	M	3	Civil Engineering	3	3.67
8	M	2	Civil Engineering	3	3.80
9	M	2	Civil Engineering	6	3.80
10	M	2	Civil Engineering	6	3.80
11	F	2	Civil Engineering	9	3.33
12	M	3	Surveying	3	4.33
				Overall	3.86

Findings

As seen in Table 1, the overall average of all participants was 3.86, suggesting a fairly high level of anxiety among the group. A similar trend is seen in Table 2, which presents the average score of each statement in the questionnaire. Among the highest-scored statements were the two related to interaction with native speakers (i.e. S13 with 4.17 and S14 with 4.25). Some attributed their discomfort to the fact that they were not proficient enough to communicate with native speakers. They also considered speech by native speakers difficult to follow due to its high speed and use of slang. Regarding the variation among the participants, most statements had a low standard deviation (SD) of under 1. In contrast, statements 6 and 12 showed more variation with a higher SD of 1.00 and 1.17 respectively. A possible explanation is that responses to these statements largely depend on personal learning experiences, which could vary greatly from person to person.

Table 2: Average scores of the statements

Statement	Mean	Standard deviation
1 I worry about making mistakes when speaking in English class.	4.00	0.43
2 When I speak English, I often feel that others are judging my pronunciation and grammar.	4.00	0.43
3 I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in English class.	4.08	0.51
4 I don't feel confident when I speak in English class.	3.92	0.51
5 It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my English class.	3.75	0.75
6 I am afraid that my English teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make in my speech.	3.08	1.00
7 I can feel my heart pounding when I'm going to be called on in English class.	3.33	0.89
8 I feel frustrated about not being able to express myself fully when speaking English.	4.17	0.58
9 I always feel that other students speak English better than I do.	3.92	0.90
10 I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my English class.	3.83	0.58
11 I think accuracy in speaking is very important and I feel very bad about the mistakes I make.	3.92	0.67
12 I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak English.	3.50	1.17
13 I would feel nervous speaking English with native speakers.	4.17	0.72
14 I don't feel comfortable around native speakers of English.	4.25	0.62
15 I get nervous when the English teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance.	4.00	0.74
Overall	3.86	0.70

Findings from both the questionnaire and the interview indicated that fear of negative evaluation and a lack of proficiency to express oneself authentically were the most common causes of speaking anxiety. The average scores for statements related to the fear of being judged negatively were on the high end of the scale (e.g. S2 with 4.00 and S12 with 3.50). Interview comments which reflected their fear include “I fear being laughed at” and “I fear losing face”. In terms of the inability to truly express oneself, almost all participants either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “I feel frustrated about not being able to express myself fully when speaking English” (S8), with a high average score of 4.17. This frustration was typified by interview comments such as “I can't express my meaning”, “I can't speak my mind freely” and “I need to translate from Cantonese”.

Individual reasons for anxiety were also noted. One participant cited a negative learning experience where he was laughed at when he accidentally switched to

Cantonese during a class presentation. Ever since, he felt particularly anxious when speaking English in front of the class. Another attributed his anxiety to his shy personality; he felt anxious even when communicating in his first language and more so in English. A few reported that they felt anxious because of the pressure from the test and interview situations, which suggested that there were few opportunities for them to use English outside these high-stakes situations.

Regarding the assumption that the high status of English and the high stakes in mastering it may cause anxiety, results from the interview suggested this is quite plausible. Almost all participants (92%) agreed that the high status and the implications of English on their future career had an effect on their anxiety levels. They worried that with less than fluent English, they might not be competitive enough in job interviews and might leave a poor professional image before clients. Some comments reflecting such worries were:

I need good English to pass the interview in the HKIE⁴ exam. (Participant 3)

All candidates have similar qualifications and skills but being able to express oneself in good English leaves a better impression. (Participant 6)

It's an open secret that big companies and the government won't interview candidates with a DSE⁵ score less than 4. (Participant 7)

With such high stakes on their career, it is understandable that they feel anxious about not being able to express themselves effectively in English, both in testing and professional contexts.

The second assumption that learners may hold a negative attitude towards the Hong Kong accent and therefore feel anxious about speaking with the accent was only partially supported and the data presented a nuanced picture. Most participants (92%) considered it acceptable to speak with the Hong Kong accent as long as they were intelligible. However, about half of them (42%) considered society as less tolerant of the Hong Kong accent and therefore they would feel anxious if being judged so. They formed such impression from social media and newspapers, for instance, Youtube videos showing Hong Kong legislators speaking English with a heavy accent and the ridiculing comments underneath the videos.

When asked whether they made a regular effort to improve their English proficiency as a way to ease their anxiety, most of the participants (83%) admitted not. Reasons that emerged repeatedly in the interviews were being too busy with course work from their major, little motivation due to difficulty to see improvements, a lack of practicing opportunities, and feeling embarrassed to speak English with classmates. The last two reasons seem to be interrelated: it is not surprising that they do not have

⁴ The Hong Kong Institution of Engineers (HKIE) is a professional organization for various fields of engineers in Hong Kong. Graduates who wish to become chartered engineers are required to pass the assessments where English is the official language for all the papers including the interview.

⁵ The Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (DSE) is an academic qualification that secondary school students in Form 6 (Grade 12) obtain by sitting the public examination. A score of 4 is roughly equivalent to 6 on the IELTS scale, indicating a competent user.

many opportunities for practice as they do not use English even with their classmates whom they see regularly.

Discussion

The causes of foreign language anxiety reported in the current study largely chime with those found in previous research, with fear of negative evaluation and inability for authentic self-expression being among the most common ones (e.g. Horwitz, Tallon, & Luo, 2009; Mak, 2011). The finding that the two assumptions were largely confirmed provides further evidence for the significant role of social contexts in determining learners' anxiety. Contrary to the assumption that the participants may hold a negative attitude towards the Hong Kong accent which they may feel anxious having, most of them consider it acceptable despite the potential unfavourable view by others. This again echoes previous research that although the native accent is strongly preferred as the learning target by most English learners in Hong Kong, they do not mind being identified by their accent as a Hongkonger (Chan, 2016).

Results from the interviews provide clear evidence that the high status of English and its stakes on learner's career prospects is likely to make them more susceptible to, and suffer a higher level of, foreign language anxiety. Given that anxiety undermines learners' performance and inhibits their will to speak, the results carry important implications for language teachers. While the social context of learning can hardly be changed, an understanding of the ways it may provoke anxiety enables teachers in Hong Kong and other language educators working in a similar context, to recognize the importance of adopting a sensitive approach to teaching.

One suggestion on teaching with sensitivity can be offered on teachers' attitude towards accent. This study revealed that some students worried about being judged negatively with their accent. To allay their fear, teachers should handle issues with pronunciation sensitively. For example, some students speak with a relatively flat intonation, which is a typical feature of the Hong Kong accent (Chan & Li, 2000). When teaching these students, teachers should avoid negative comments on their intonation such as "strange" or "boring". By eschewing a punitive stance towards the accent, teachers will be spared from unwittingly reinforcing society's unforgiving view in the classroom, thereby creating a safer environment for the anxious students to use the language.

Error correction can also be approached with sensitivity. For learners who have a strong fear of negative evaluation, they will be more willing to participate in speaking activities if their errors are dealt with judiciously. Teachers are encouraged to be more tolerant of errors and intervene only when there is serious miscommunication. To encourage the more reticent students to speak, a short class period can be set aside for speaking activities in small groups, with the explicit goal of keeping the conversation going without worrying about errors. This could enable students to appreciate the importance of expressing themselves over the production of error-free speeches (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002), thereby easing their fear of making mistakes. As teachers' classroom practices have a significant impact on students' anxiety levels (Choi, 2016; Mak, 2011), teachers with a heightened sensitivity in their pedagogy could greatly facilitate the learning of anxious learners.

On the learners' side, an awareness of the fact that speaking anxiety is a common phenomenon is a good start to tackle the issue. For learners with perfectionistic tendencies, they should be guided to set realistic expectations on their speaking ability and to realize that making mistakes is an indispensable part of the learning process (Horwitz, Tallon, & Luo, 2009). Since Cantonese is the default common language among Chinese Hongkongers and speaking English among fellow Cantonese speakers is viewed as highly awkward (Li, 2009), it is only natural that the participants in the study lamented a lack of opportunities for practice. This highlights the need on the part of the anxious learners to seize and create opportunities to use English with a wider network of conversation partners, which could be an effective way to reduce anxiety (Dewaele, Petrides, & Furnham, 2008). Common informal speaking opportunities on campus such as conversation and interest groups with international students should be seen as valuable allies for the learners to build their confidence in English.

Conclusion

Research on foreign language anxiety has identified various causes ranging from psychological factors, learners' beliefs, and teachers' practices, to the broader contextual factors such as parental influence and peer competition. This study shows that the high status of English and its stakes on learners' career is a possible source of anxiety for English learners in Hong Kong. This extends the current understanding of anxiety research by providing further evidence of how contextual factors might also lead to learners' anxiety. To support anxious learners' language development, teachers could profitably adopt a sensitive approach to their speaking pedagogy, which helps learners liberate themselves from their crippling anxiety.

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Appendix

Name: _____

A test on your English speaking anxiety

(adapted from Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M. B., & Cope, J. (1986). English classroom anxiety. *The Modern Language Journal*, 70, 125-132.)

For each statement, indicate whether you:

- 1 strongly disagree
- 2 disagree
- 3 neither agree nor disagree
- 4 agree
- 5 strongly agree

Statement	Answer
1. I worry about making mistakes when speaking in English class.	
2. When I speak English, I often feel that others are judging my pronunciation and grammar.	
3. I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in English class.	
4. I don't feel confident when I speak in English class.	
5. It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my English class.	
6. I am afraid that my English teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make in my speech.	
7. I can feel my heart pounding when I'm going to be called on in English class.	
8. I feel frustrated about not being able to express myself fully when speaking English.	
9. I always feel that other students speak English better than I do.	
10. I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my English class.	
11. I think accuracy in speaking is very important and I feel very bad about the mistakes I make.	
12. I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak English.	
13. I would feel nervous speaking English with native speakers.	
14. I don't feel comfortable around native speakers of English.	
15. I get nervous when the English teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance.	
Add up your answers to get the total score. Then divide it by 15 to get your average.	Average =