

# **The Silent Language Learner: The Causes of and Solutions for Communicative Anxiety in English Language Classrooms**

Michael T. R. Madill, Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, Seoul, South Korea

## **ABSTRACT**

*When learning a new language, students inevitably develop varying levels of communicative anxiety in the classroom due to a variety of situational and contextual influences. This speaking anxiety is often seen in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings, and it has a negative impact on the development of effective language skills. Without feeling comfortable speaking the new language, students will have difficulty improving, and will not have the opportunities necessary to practice what they have learned. As an educator, it is essential to understand the root causes of this speaking anxiety and incorporate teaching methodologies that minimize its impact. Therefore, the causes of communicative anxiety will be presented and solutions that minimize its impact will be explored. With this information, educators will be more effective in their pedagogical delivery and learners will have more confidence when attempting to use the new language.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

When a student is learning a second or foreign language, they will encounter many different challenges and obstacles of varying levels of difficulty. These hindrances are very important in the learning process and the more we understand them, the better we are able to adjust our teaching methodologies and strategies to meet or even eradicate them.

One such difficulty is increased student levels of speaking anxiety when attempting to produce the language they are learning. This leads to a reluctance to practice or produce the language because "Communication apprehension is a type of shyness characterized by fear of or anxiety about communicating with people." (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986, p.127). It is very common to encounter students who exhibit varying levels of apprehension when they are attempting to produce in the form of verbal output. Therefore, successful language learners will be able to identify the causes of their speaking apprehension and utilize learning styles that effectively manage them. An effective educator will understand the challenges presented to language learners and adapt their instructional approaches in order to minimize speaking anxiety levels in their classrooms.

Therefore, the following study will present the specific reasons and causes behind speaking anxiety among South Korean university level students.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Communicative anxiety is "an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons" (McCroskey, 1977, p.78). Some symptoms of speaking anxiety include clammy hands, amplified heart rates, hesitated speech, heightened blood pressure, mouth dryness, shortness of breath, muscle tension, and nausea. One major symptom that speaking anxiety has on a learner and what will be investigated in this paper,

is a perceived decrease in willingness to communicate in the classroom given various levels of speaking apprehension or anxiety.

It is common for language learners to not want to speak in the class because they are afraid of a variety of societal, cultural, personal, and educational related variables. This has a negative effect on learning because "There have been a number of studies in a number of instructional contexts with varying target languages which find a negative relationship between specific measures of language anxiety and language achievement" (Horwitz, 2001, p.115). It is a devastating sociological and physiological characteristic that affects students studying languages all over the world.

This speaking anxiety is something that all language learners experience to varying degrees at some point in their development. In the South Korean context, this is advanced because "...English is not a second language but a foreign language for Koreans. That is, there are few chances to speak English because English is not used frequently in daily life" (Seongja, 2008, p.376). To further hinder their language development and add to their level of speaking anxiety, during high school in South Korea, all students are preparing for their university entrance exam called the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT). This very important examination requires only the receptive English skills of reading and listening while ignoring productive aspects of speaking or writing. As a result, "This problem is exasperated as Korean students strive to merely memorize the specific English required to pass this language section in their College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT) during their final year of high school" (Madill, 2013, p.39). These students are not learning or practicing productive speaking abilities and do not have the opportunity to practice this skill outside of their classroom. In essence, they are not effectively acquiring the language during their high school years and are anxious when they must produce in the form of English speaking in university conversation classes.

These issues are problematic in South Korea because "the rise of foreign language requirements is occurring in conjunction with the increased emphasis on spontaneous speaking in the foreign language class"(Horwitz et al., 1986, p.131-132). In addition, "English speaking ability is connected directly to good jobs and good universities" (Mikio, 2008, p.387). Without developing productive English skills in their early years, these students are confronted with high levels of speaking anxiety when forced to use the language in the communicative university classroom context. This Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) is a very serious problem in South Korea and there are very few research reports that illustrate the complexities behind such apprehension. More specifically, there are relatively small numbers of data that present the causes of speaking anxiety among these students.

Before continuing, the work of Horwitz et al. (1986) in regard to their research into the concept of FLCA must be noted because it has revealed some important concepts. They explained how "Since speaking in the target language seems to be the most threatening aspect of foreign language learning, the current emphasis on the development of communicative competence poses particularly great difficulties for the anxious student" (Horwitz et al., 1986, p.132). Their studies proved that "...the more anxious student tends to avoid attempting difficult or personal messages in the target language." (Horwitz et al., p.126). Although their research was very influential, it had

limitations because it was based on an English as a Second Language (ESL) environment where English is used in daily life. It is therefore important to explore how speaking anxiety is exhibited in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context where the language is not commonly used outside the classroom. In addition to this, there are different cultural, sociological, and educational ideologies that are different in an Asian EFL context compared to an ESL environment such as America or Canada.

When an educator understands and acknowledges the causes of speaking anxiety in the EFL classroom, then they can effectively tailor their teaching methodologies to minimize student speaking anxiety. For example, "...Teachers need to include a program that enables learners to start in a relatively comfortable and stress-free environment, and gives them the opportunity to learn in their preferred style" (Tasnimi, 2009, p.121). Furthermore, Horwitz, et al. (1986) summarize it perfectly when they state that "In general, educators have two options when dealing with anxious students: 1) they can help them learn to cope with the existing anxiety- provoking situation; or 2) they can make the learning context less stressful. But before either option is viable, the teacher must first acknowledge the existence of foreign language anxiety" (p.131).

The field of EFL speaking anxiety related to the language learning environment is an area that has not been extensively explored in the South Korean context. Therefore, this research will explain what is causing anxiety among these students using Horwitz et al. (1986) study as a basis for further development. It will hence add to the field of EFL speaking anxiety research by providing the common causes of speaking anxiety among this unique set of learners.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Questions**

This study measured the underlying contextual elements that increase speaking anxiety levels in South Korean university conversational English classrooms. Therefore, the main research question is why South Korean EFL students are exhibiting speaking anxiety.

### **Context and Participants**

The subjects in this study were 82 tertiary level students studying at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies (HUFS) in Seoul, South Korea during the 2013 school year (N=82, 40 male, 42 female). Their age range was from 20 to 24 years old with the average being 21.6. Their academic specializations varied widely from many different language majors, business and economic concentrations, in addition to English literature majors. Of the total sample size, 39% were in their first year, 20% were in their second, 14% were in their third, and 26% were in their final year of study. Their declared English levels were high intermediate to high advanced levels with their average TOEIC and TOEFL scores being 883 and 104 respectively. Most participants stated that they have been studying English for 7 to 10 years with 77% of respondents replying to this timeframe. The majority of the participants previously studied English in high school in addition to private language institutes or academies.

### **Measurements and Testing Instruments**

The current study employed two devices: a contextual survey modeled after the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz et al. (1986) and individual, open ended

interactive interviews with selected students. The 33 question survey was directed and administered to explore the specific reasons for speaking anxiety thus discovering what made them nervous in the EFL classroom. The answers were evaluated using a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree (Appendix 1).

The individual interviews were conducted one-on-one with 15 students from various proficiencies and fluency levels in an unoccupied classroom. Each student was questioned independently and the inquiries were intended to advance the understanding of the results gathered from the surveys (Appendix 2). These discussions lasted roughly 15 minutes each and all communication was recorded for further examination.

### **Research Design and Procedure**

To test the main questions in this study, the process involved administering the survey followed by analyzing the data to identify the main themes contributing to the participants varying levels of speaking anxiety. Once identified, the individual interviews were conducted in order to gain further insight into the main questions and themes uncovered from the surveys.

## **RESULTS AND ANALYSIS**

After studying the collected data, interesting characteristics or themes began to appear. Some of the findings were predicted while others created interesting interpretations. The presentation of the results will be divided into two main classifications that were commonly found in this research. The first is a student derived source of speaking anxiety and the other, an instructor induced source of apprehension.

### **Underlying Social and Cultural Ideologies**

Overall, the participants were not confident with their English speaking skills in the language classroom. This was confirmed in question seven regarding the perception that other students were better at the language. It was found that 52% strongly agreed or agreed that they thought their classmates were more proficient in the language than they were (Appendix 4). Furthermore, this concept was presented in the data for question 23 regarding the feeling that other students in the class were better language speakers. The results for that question revealed that 45% strongly agreed or agreed to that statement (Appendix 5).

These social and cultural characteristics in regard to speaking anxiety not only surfaced in the survey but also during the structured interview process. An astounding 87% of participants agreed that their social and cultural experiences have sometimes negatively affected their ability to speak English with confidence in South Korea classrooms. The students admitted to having developed anxiety because of their intrinsic realization of the classroom atmosphere. Being such a competitive educational environment, their self-confidence in speaking English was very low relative to the perception of their peer's abilities. They were frequently worried that other students would be more advanced. Many agreed during the interviews that they felt their English skills were inadequate compared to their classmates and thus they were unwilling to open up in the classroom and practice their English speaking. Wong (2009) explains how speaking anxiety affects output where "if students are too scared to speak up in class, they can't have any opportunities to

practice and improve their oral skills" (p. 4). This proved to be a major source of speaking anxiety in this study and one that is hindering their speaking development overall.

### **Preparation Time and Fear of Making Mistakes**

Another reoccurring theme revolved around the idea that without time to prepare, students commonly panicked and got nervous in the language classroom. This was confirmed in question nine where 45% strongly agreed or agreed that they exhibit some form of anxiety when they have to speak before having time to prepare their response. Furthermore, this was exhibited in the data from question 33 in reference to getting nervous when the teacher questions them before having adequate preparation time. This question resulted in 57% who strongly agreed or agreed that they got nervous without being provided preparation time in the language classroom.

During the interviews, this notion was expressed as 84% of the respondents explained how they became very anxious during class time when instructor would single them out or asked them a question before giving him or her time to think of the answer.

Furthermore, the fear of making mistakes was something that the majority of interviewees described as one of their main causes of speaking anxiety in the classroom. This is in line with Horwitz et al. (1986) as they found that "Anxious students are afraid to make mistakes in the foreign language" (p.130). The participants continued to explain how, when they made a mistake in the classroom, they felt that this was an indication of their overall English ability. They expressed how they feared making a mistake in front of their classmates and teachers which results in decreased self-confidence in classroom speaking activities.

### **Discussion and Limitations**

Given such a small sample size, caution must be applied as the findings might not be transferable to all EFL classrooms. To explain further, some universities in South Korea require higher levels of English proficiency compared to competing postsecondary institutions. For example, places such as Yonsei or Seoul National University, which are the top two universities in the country, require much higher English proficiency levels in order to be admitted compared to lower tier institutions. Thus, depending on the class of university, the reasons for speaking anxiety may differ depending on how well the students can speak English overall. Universities that require more strict entrance requirements in regard to English proficiency may yield different results when it comes to speaking anxiety in the EFL classroom.

In reference to this study, the participants attended a university that is not at the top level of institutions, but is definitely not at the lower end. They would be considered somewhere in the middle when it comes to English language proficiency requirements for entering university in South Korea.

In addition to this, there are varying levels of English proficiencies among students in South Korea. Some students have endured intensive English study in their elementary and high school years. Thus, they are much more confident in their speaking abilities than students that did not receive this focused instruction. Some of the participants in this study indicated that they did not feel any anxiety in the classroom because they felt that their English levels were much higher than other

students in the class. In essence, they felt confident in the conversational English classroom compared to their other classmates with lower levels of speaking proficiency. On the other hand, some students had extreme levels of anxiety because they felt that their English was inferior to others in the class. This is a common feeling as "Anxious students also fear being less competent than other students or being negatively evaluated by them." (Horwitz et al., 1986, p.130). As a result, they did not participate in classroom discussions and were essentially, scared to speak.

Due to this variance in English abilities, these results need to be interpreted with caution and used as a generalization of the causes related to speaking anxiety in the South Korean EFL classroom.

## **CONCLUSION**

As McCroskey states, speaking anxiety is "An individual level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons" (1977, p.438). Given this definition, in today's EFL classrooms, we can say that all students will have some level of speaking anxiety and a fear of making mistakes is a major part of that. Thus, it is up to the teacher to recognize this fear and incorporate methodologies that will make students more comfortable. Mistakes in the language classroom should not be seen as negative things, they should be seen as positives. It is imperative that students understand this. Furthermore, cooperative learning, adequate preparation time, and positive classrooms are three ways to effectively lower the fear of making mistakes. When this fear is low, students will have lower speaking anxiety, and will have the self-confidence needed to speak more. When students are speaking more, they are developing more and thus, they will progress at a faster rate. In the end, they will be confident English speakers who don't mind making a mistake or two. They will see them as positives and will essentially be more confident English speakers.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

This study was supported by the Hankuk University of Foreign Studies Research Fund of 2018.

## **REFERENCES**

- Akinwamide, T., K. (2012). The influence of process approach on English as second language students' performances in essay writing. *English Language Teaching*, 5(3), 16-29.
- Card, J. (2005, November 30). Life and death exams in South Korea. *Asia Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Korea/GK30Dg01.html>
- De Villiers, P. (2004). Assessing pragmatic skills in elicited production. *Seminars in Speech and Language*, 25(1), 57-71.
- Dean, M. (2008). Man or machine? A survey of test takers' views on foreign language oral proficiency testing in Korea. *HUFS International Journal of Foreign Studies*, 1(2), 149-173.
- Frain, T. (2009). A comparative study of Korean university students before and after a criterion referenced test (Masters thesis, University of Southern Queensland). Retrieved from <http://www.asian-efl-journal.com/Thesis/Thesis-Frain.pdf>

- Fredericks, J. (2012). Collaborative student learning using writing rubrics. *HUFS International Journal of Foreign Studies*, 5(2), 23-38.
- Freiermuth, M., R. (2005). Purposeful writing in the ESP classroom: Assessing the 'Beg, borrow or steal simulation'. *Electronic Journal of Foreign Language Teaching*, 2(1), 16-24.
- Guo, Y., & Beckett, G. (2007). The hegemony of English as a global language: Reclaiming local knowledge and culture in China. *Convergence*, 40(1-2), 117-127.
- Hwang, A. (2012). Maximizing the positive effects of the new Korean National English Ability Test (NEAT) on English language education in Korea through task-based instruction (Masters thesis, University of Wisconsin, River Falls). Retrieved from <http://minds.wisconsin.edu/handle/1793/61422>
- Ismail, S. A. A. (2011). Exploring students' perceptions of ESL writing. *English Language Teaching*, 4(2), 73-83.
- Kachru, B. B., & Nelson, C. L. (2001). World Englishes. In A. Burns & C. Coffin (Eds), *Analyzing English in a Global Context* (pp.9-25). London: Routledge.
- Kang, S. (2009, April 1). Koreans ranked bottom in English proficiency test. *The Korea Times*. Retrieved from [http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2009/04/117\\_42399.html](http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2009/04/117_42399.html)
- Kim, E. (2008, February 2). History of English education in Korea. *The Korea Times*. Retrieved from [http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/special/2008/04/181\\_21843.html](http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/special/2008/04/181_21843.html)
- Kim, Y., & Kim, J. (2005). Teaching Korean university writing class: Balancing the process and the genre approach. *The Asia EFL Journal*, 7(2), 1-15.
- Kwon, O. (2000). Korea's English education policy changes in the 1990s: Innovations to gear the nation for the 21st century. *English Teaching*, 55(1), 47-91.
- Kwon, O. (2003, November). English teaching and testing in Korean universities: Trends and changes. Paper presented at the meeting of the 38<sup>th</sup> SEAMEO RELC International Seminar on Teaching and Assessing Language Proficiency, Singapore, Singapore.
- Lee, M. (2012). Teaching genre-based writing to Korean high school students at a basic level (Masters thesis, University of Wisconsin, River Falls). Retrieved from <http://minds.wisconsin.edu/handle/1793/61484>
- Liu, X. (2010). Investigation report on the teaching of practical English writing of English majors. *English Language Teaching*, 3(1), 81-86.
- Mikio, S. (2008). Development of primary English education and teacher training in Korea. *Journal of Education for Teaching: International Research and Pedagogy*, 34(4), 383-396.

- Nation, P. (2013). How do you teach writing? In S. Lee (Ed.), *What should every EFL teacher know* (pp.68-81). Seoul, South Korea: Compass Publishing.
- Ninio, A., & Snow, C. (1999). The development of pragmatics: Learning to use language appropriately. In T.K. Bhatia & W.C. Ritchie (Eds.), *Handbook of Language Acquisition* (pp. 347-383). New York: Academic Press.
- Ramirez, E. (2013, May 2) Native English teacher head count continues decline. *The Korean Herald*. Retrieved from <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20130501000556>
- Seongja, J. (2008). English education and teacher education in South Korea. *Journal of Education for Teaching: International Research and Pedagogy*, 34(4), 371-381.
- Shin, Y. (2008). The effects of planning on L2 writing: a study of Korean learners of English as a foreign language (Doctoral dissertation, University of Iowa). Retrieved from <http://ir.uiowa.edu/etd/44>
- Stevens, R. (2009, May 04). Why few Koreans master English. *The Korea Times*. Retrieved from [http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/opinon/2009/05/160\\_44299.html](http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/opinon/2009/05/160_44299.html)
- Toh, G. (2000). Teaching writing in rural Thailand: Considering new perspectives. *TESL Canada Journal*, 17(2), 101-109.
- Tyson, R. E. (1999, August). Using process writing effectively in Korean university EFL classes. Paper presented at the 12th World Congress of Applied Linguistics (AILA '99), Waseda University, Tokyo, Japan.
- Tyson, R. E. (2000). Increasing the effectiveness of composition instruction in Korean university English classes. *English Language Education*, 21, 205-214.