

Speaking anxiety in South Korean classrooms

Michael T. R. Madill explores causes and solutions.



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The road to learning a new language is littered with hurdles a learner must overcome. One such difficulty is increased speaking anxiety when attempting to produce a new language. This apprehension can be exhibited as minor hesitations when attempting to speak, to an extreme when students completely shut off as they are too scared to speak. All language learners experience a level of speaking anxiety when in the classroom.

This Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) is something that needs attention in the South Korean English classroom and teachers need to know the causes in order to increase the effectiveness of their teaching. Three common causes of speaking anxiety among South Korean tertiary English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners will be revealed in this article. In addition, the cultural and historical factors underlying these causes will be explored. Finally, three effective teaching methodologies will be presented that will make students feel more confident speaking English in the classroom.

Causes

To identify the underlying origins of English speaking apprehension, a survey was administered to 158 tertiary students at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies in Seoul, South Korea. This survey was a modified version of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) created by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986). It was provided in English with Korean translations in order to increase comprehension rates as the native language of most participants was Korean and not English.

After examining the results, several trends appeared which identified three common causes of speaking anxiety in this context. They were:

- the perception that classmates had higher speaking abilities (87%),
- inadequate preparation time prior to speaking in class (89%), and
- a fear of failure because of lower speaking abilities (91%).

These results were similar to Tasnimi's findings, where 'some sources of anxiety are negative self-assessment, high personal expectations, and certain classroom practices like speaking in front of the class' (2009: 122). Acknowledg-

ing these will allow an educator to better understand their classroom and introduce teaching methodologies that will help minimise speaking anxiety.

Underlying cultural and historical factors

Education plays a very important role in South Korean culture, but has a negative influence on student perceptions of classmates' English abilities. There is an extremely high level of educational competitiveness and it shapes the way students see each other. For example, '... Korea may generally be considered as an exam culture. English is a high stakes subject in Korea; English scores have a large impact on one's success in college entrance examinations' (Butler and Lee 2010: 11). These students are constantly competing for the best grades, universities, and jobs. In this competitive environment, achieving high grades is their ticket to success.

As a result, many Korean students think that other students are better at speaking English because they constantly want to rank their abilities in order to see where they stand in class. The survey revealed that the majority of students thought their English speaking abilities were inferior to those of their classmates. This negative perception is a serious hurdle that students have to overcome in South Korea.

The English education system in South Korea has one important standardised exam that greatly contributes to the fear of failure among students. During high school, all students study for the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT) in order to get into university. This exam has an English component, but it only focuses on reading and listening aspects. Specifically, students focus on English grammar during their high school years. There are no productive English requirements and students do not need to improve their speaking skills as they will not be tested at the end of high school. Jeon explains how '... grammar translation and emphasis on grammatical knowledge had been the dominant method in English teaching in Korea, remaining so throughout the Japanese colonial period and up until the sixth National Curriculum' (2009: 235). A deficiency exists where students do not develop effective speaking skills during their pre-university studies.

Upon entering university, this unbalanced language learning results in high levels of speaking anxiety among students. They fear failure because they have not been tested on their English speaking abilities in the past. In addition, as their oral English skills have never been developed, students do not always know if they are good enough.

Finally, the fact that South Korean is a non-English speaking country plays a major role in developing speaking anxiety

among these students. In their day-to-day life, Korean is the language that is used and it is rare that they need to use English outside the language classroom. For example, '... 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: 376). This creates a problem because students do not have the chance to practise their English skills in other settings and thus become anxious when speaking English in the classroom. This is not a situation that can be changed, but it is an issue that must be recognised as hindering the development of effective English speaking skills and adding to the speaking anxiety issues in South Korean English classrooms.

Solutions

An effective teacher will recognise that speaking anxiety exists, find ways to manage it, and create a classroom that makes students feel comfortable. Having students work in smaller, levelled groups during speaking activities is an effective first step. This makes interaction and speaking more manageable as perceptions of others' abilities will diminish because all the students within a group will be at the same ability level. Speaking anxiety decreases when the learners feel more confident as they get to know the group better. Also, cooperative learning allows students to help each other if they make any speaking mistakes. It is much easier for students to ask another group member than to ask the teacher. Many students admitted that they feared asking questions in class, thus small groups helping each other learn will help solve this problem.

Allowing for adequate preparation time is another tool that will dramatically reduce speaking anxiety in the language classroom. Being singled out in front of the entire class and making a mistake was a major fear among these students. Thus, providing some time for students to prepare and practise their responses beforehand will allow students to feel more comfortable speaking English in class. This can be done in small groups or individually. Either way, increased preparation time will prove to be very beneficial in reducing speaking anxiety levels.

Positive experiences and reinforcement lead to greater achievements in the classroom. Thus, the teacher should create a classroom that fosters positive experiences and makes students feel more comfortable speaking in class. Effective error management is important because students

who have a negative experience when they make mistakes will feel less inclined to try in the future. In addition, positive reinforcement that targets even the smallest progress will make students feel more comfortable taking chances. The more positive experiences learners have, the more they will want to speak in the language classroom.

Conclusion

Acquiring the skills necessary to become a fluent speaker is a long and difficult process. Developing speaking anxiety along the way is common and sometimes debilitating. Thus, an educator must know the reasons why this is happening and teach in a way that reduces apprehension among students. It is hoped that this article identifies some common causes of speaking anxiety and presents methods that will help reduce it in the classroom. It starts with educators as they are responsible for the efficacy of their approaches and, in the end, combating speaking anxiety and creating a comfortable classroom are important goals which will lead to enhanced speaking abilities among all their students.

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