

A Study on the Correlations between English Speaking Self-Concept and English Classroom Speaking Anxiety of Non-English Major Freshmen

Yang Tianyun and Liu Fei*

Abstract—English speaking self-concept and English classroom speaking anxiety are two important factors impacting learners' English acquisition. This research investigates the relationship between English speaking self-concept and English classroom speaking anxiety on non-English first-year students. Questionnaires were adopted as the main instruments. The results show that there does exist a negative correlation between English classroom speaking anxiety and English speaking self-concept among non-English first-year students, while such kind of relation is not strong.

Index Terms—English speaking self-concept, English classroom speaking anxiety, non-English major freshmen

I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, some empirical studies have been conducted at home and abroad on the relations between English speaking self-concept and English classroom speaking anxiety. The correlation between them has been proved in previous research [1–3]. However, most of these researches pay attention to junior and senior middle school students or take the whole college students as the research subject without especially concerning first-year students in college. Thus, this study focuses on the relation between oral English self-concept and English classroom speaking anxiety of first-year students. Since English major students have their goals and motivation in learning English, this study mainly concerns non-English major first-year students.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. English Speaking Self-Concept

Self-concept belongs to the research field of personality psychology, which arouses much attention of psychology researchers [4]. It was first put forward by an American psychologist, James in 1890. It includes two parts: internal self-evaluation and self-evaluation based on external opinions. Later, some scholars give their definitions of self-concept. For instance, Shavelson *et al.* [5] indicate that self-concept is one's perception of himself. It is formed through his experience, environment even the evaluations given by some significant others. Marsh [6] points out that "self-concept is organized by self-perceptions of one's

advantages and disadvantages or strengths or weakness."

Although there exist various definitions of self-concept, the consensus is that self-concept is related to one's self-perception or self-cognition [7]. Later, Yeung and Lee *et al.* [8] refines that concept, which provides three aspects of self-concept: self-perception, self-evaluation, and self-efficacy.

The model made by Shavelson and Marsh [9] is widely applied to explain self-concept in detail. It states that general self-concept can be divided into academic self-concept and non-academic self-concept. "Academic self-concept means one's self-judgment on his academic performance. In contrast, non-academic self-concept is their self-judgment or self-perception in others fields besides the academic field like appearance, social contact, or emotions [1]". Lau [8] explains the aspects of speaking, listening, writing, and reading in the global English self-concept of the model by conducting experiments. Based on previous study, Wang [4] comes up with the opinion of categorizing English self-concept into four dimensions: grammar, listening, pronunciation, speaking and reading. Besides, he points out that these four dimensions of English self-concept are independent and interact with each other. Each can reflect individuals' evaluation of themselves and global English self-concept. Based on Wang [4], Ma [10] adds another dimension, which is lexical self-concept.

English speaking self-concept is one of the branches of academic self-concept of self-concept. Researchers intend to link English speaking self-concept to other affective factors to explore their combined effect on students [11]. Zeng explores the overall situation of non-English major undergraduates' English speaking self-concept and English classroom anxiety. She points out that learners' anxiety can be controlled within a reasonable range by helping them improve their English speaking self-concept. Shi [12] investigates senior high school students' communicative intention in class from the perspective of their mental factors and class participants. The result shows a positive correlation between senior high school students' English speaking self-concept and communicative intention in class. Fu conducts a case study on the development of the English speaking self-concept of college students [13]. Fu observes their English learning process in detail and profoundly reveals learners' inner cognition and emotional perception, providing a specific theoretical basis and practical evidence for studying English speaking self-concept. According to these researches, it can be found that although there are certain studies on English speaking self-concept, the division of research object category is not detailed, which leads to the existing comparatively limited research objects.

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B. English Classroom Speaking Anxiety

Anxiety is a kind of common negative emotion among foreign language learners. Yong indicates that anxiety can reflect one's psychological activities when one faces difficulties [14]. Arnold [15] points out that anxiety appears when people lose self-confidence and self-esteem. Anxiety is always accompanied by nervousness and depression.

For Horwitz [16], English learning anxiety can be subdivided into listening anxiety, speaking anxiety, reading anxiety, and writing anxiety. Students of different language levels feel anxiety differently. Beginners of foreign language learning may feel anxious about their pronunciation, while learners with a higher level of learning ability are more worried about whether they can produce idiomatic expressions. MacIntyre and Gardner [17] considers that learners who have English speaking anxiety are not confident in their oral English level. They are afraid of making mistakes and receiving others' negative comments when speaking English.

Besides research on English speaking anxiety, English classroom speaking anxiety arouses the attention of researchers. Since the classroom is the primary place for English learners to learn English, most studies focus on the foreign language speaking anxiety in the specific context classroom [1]. However, there is no exact definition of English classroom speaking anxiety. Apple (page 6) considers English classroom speaking anxiety "a comprehensive anxiety occurred in a formal foreign language speaking classroom [18]." For Zhou [2], English classroom anxiety refers to "students' anxiety, and fear in various speaking situations appeared in the foreign language classroom." Young divides English classroom speaking anxiety into six groups: the anxiety of teacher-student interaction, personal and interpersonal relationships, teacher's beliefs about language learning, student beliefs about language learning, classroom techniques, and testing. From the definitions by different studies, it can be concluded that English classroom speaking anxiety is a kind of anxiety phenomenon of speaking English in the classroom [14].

C. Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis

In the 1980s, the American linguist Krashen put forward the affective filter hypothesis to illustrate the relationship between affective factors with language input process and effect. Krashen [19] indicates that the affective filter prevents language learners from obtaining comprehensible language input, which means humans' emotions can hinder the input information from the outside world. Krashen illustrates the affective filter hypothesis from three aspects: anxiety, motivation, and confidence. In the book *The Input Hypothesis: Issues and Implications* (1985), Krashen points out that comprehensible input is necessary for the successful retrieval of information on the condition that information receivers positively receive the information.

In this process, if a learner has high motivation and low level of anxiety, he will have a low level of affective filter. It can help him acquire more comprehensible input information. On the contrary, if a learner has a low motivation and a high level of anxiety, he has a high level of affective filter. In this way, the input of comprehensible

information would be impeded. As Fig. 1 shows, according to Krashen's affective filter hypothesis, it can be seen that affective factors are like a pass gate, which plays a critical role for learners to acquire information as well as affects second language acquisition.

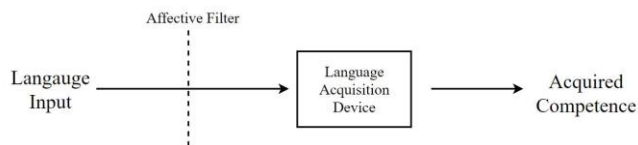


Fig. 1. Magnetization as a function of the applied field [19].

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Questions

The present study aims to investigate the overall level of English speaking self-concept and English classroom speaking anxiety among non-English major first-year students. In addition, it also explores the correlations between both of them. Three research questions are addressed:

- (1) What is the current state of the English-speaking self-concept of first-year students?
- (2) What is the current state of English classroom speaking anxiety of first-year students?
- (3) To what extent does English speaking self-concept correlate with English speaking classroom anxiety of first-year students?

B. Research Subjects

131 non-English major freshmen from Northwestern Polytechnical University have participated in this research on a voluntary basis, they have taken the same oral English class for one semester in their first year at the university. The reasons for choosing non-English major first-year students as subjects are twofold. First, they have just entered the university and it is the only language class they have taken. Their professional English-speaking training is generally at a similar level, so the research results are more effective and can truly reflect the relationship between English-speaking self-concept and English-speaking anxiety. The second reason is that compared to English major students' complex English learning motivation, which can influence their affective factors on learning, non-English major students relatively have more common affective factors. Thus, they are more suitable to be the subjects of quantitative research. Based on these two reasons, non-English major first-year students are chosen as subjects for this research.

C. Research Instrument

The current mainly adopted a quantitative method. Questionnaires were used as instruments to collect data. They were adapted from Zhou [2] and Apple's [18] questionnaires. There are altogether 29 items in the questionnaire. It consists of two sub-questionnaires. The first one is *Questionnaire on English Classroom Speaking Anxiety of Non-English Majors Freshmen*. Four dimensions are involved: anxiety in speaking to the teacher, anxiety in group discussion, anxiety in speaking to the partner, and anxiety in speaking before the whole class. The second one is *Questionnaire on English Speaking Self-concept of*

Non-English Majors Freshmen, which involves two dimensions, namely English pronunciation self-concept, and English speaking self-concept. All items were rated on a five-point Likert scale indicating the degree of acceptance of each item ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

In the actual testing process, items measuring each dimension are mixed. The questionnaire was conducted in Chinese, so the subjects can better understand each item, Microsoft Excel and statistical package SPSS21.0 were used to analyze the data.

Cronbach's alpha was employed to test the reliability, and KMO was adopted to test the validity of the questionnaires. Cronbach's Alpha of the questionnaires on *English Classroom Speaking Anxiety of Non-English Majors First-year Students and English Speaking Self-concept of Non-English Majors First-year Students* are 0.883 and 0.698 respectively. The KMO values are 0.817 and 0.929. Thus, the questionnaires are of good reliability and validity.

D. Data Collection

Questionnaires were handed out at the last class of subjects' last English speaking class, and they were finished in class. Students have given around 15 minutes to finish the questionnaire so that they had plenty of time to fill it out carefully. The questionnaire was administrated online since it is convenient to collect and analyze data. Finally, altogether 131 questionnaires were collected. However, three of them are invalid for involving wrong information. The data collected was then analyzed using SPSS 21.0. The descriptive statistics were calculated. Afterward, Pearson Bivariate Correlation Analysis was used to explore the correlation between English speaking self-concept and English classroom speaking anxiety.

IV. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

A. General Situation of English Classroom Speaking Anxiety

1) Statistical analysis on English classroom speaking anxiety

For *Questionnaire on English Classroom Speaking Anxiety of Non-English Majors Freshmen*, 1 point indicates that this option is completely inconsistent with the subject's own situation. While, for 5 points, it means that this opinion is completely consistent with the subject's own situation. From point one to point five, the degree of agreement on the items is increasing 3 points is the midpoint.

According to the Table I, the total score is 2.54, which is lower than 3 points. It means that the subjects are not in a high level of anxiety on a whole. The score of items from highest to lowest are anxiety in speaking before the whole class, anxiety in speaking to the teacher, anxiety in group discussion and anxiety in speaking to the partner. It means that when students are asked to speaking before the whole class, they are more likely to be in a state of anxiety. Comparatively, when they are assigned peer assignment and talk to their partner, they seem less anxious.

TABLE I: DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS ON OVERALL LEVEL OF ENGLISH CLASSROOM SPEAKING ANXIETY

	Items	Mean	Mean/Items	Std. Deviation
Anxiety in speaking to the teacher	4	11.76	2.94	0.71
Anxiety in group discussion	3	7.38	2.46	0.72
Anxiety in speaking to the partner	3	6.69	2.23	0.70
Anxiety in speaking before the whole class	3	9.27	3.09	0.79
Total	13	33.02	2.54	0.61

As it is shown in Table II, For the dimension of Anxiety in speaking to the teacher, items 11, 28, 4, 27 are involved. The value of item 28 "I am afraid of making mistakes when I communicate with teachers in English." is the highest while the value of item 27 "I'm worried that the teacher will think my spoken English is not good." is the lowest one. It demonstrates that students feel more pressure to communicate directly with teachers.

TABLE II: DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS ON ITEMS OF DIFFERENT DIMENSIONS IN ENGLISH CLASSROOM SPEAKING ANXIETY

Dimensions of English classroom speaking anxiety	Item	Mean	Std. Deviation
Anxiety in speaking to the teacher	11	2.88	0.98
	28	3.08	0.98
	4	2.97	0.97
	27	2.84	0.99
Anxiety in group discussion	14	2.31	0.86
	25	2.89	0.97
	30	2.16	0.90
Anxiety in speaking to the partner	6	2.05	0.84
	24	2.60	0.90
	16	2.05	0.93
Anxiety in speaking before the whole class	1	3.35	1.05
	10	3.07	0.99
	23	2.84	0.90

For the dimension Anxiety in group discussion, item 14, 15, 30 are designed. The value of item 25 "I feel nervous when I speak in English in group activities in class." is the highest one while the value of item 30 "I was afraid of being laughed at by my classmates when I spoke in English in a group discussion." is the lowest one. The result shows that the reason why students feel anxious is self-related instead of being influenced by other students. Also, it shows that subjects have a friendly learning environment.

Dimension Anxiety in speaking to the partner includes item 6, 24, 26. Among them, items 24 have a relatively high score and the score of items 6 "I feel worried that my partner speaks English better than me." and item 16 "In class, when I talk with my partner in English, I will be afraid of being laughed at." are equal, which are the lowest one of all items in three dimensions of English classroom speaking anxiety. It indicates that the students are not anxious when they communicate with their peers. Instead, they are in a state of relative relief.

For the dimension Anxiety in speaking before the whole class, item 1, 10, 23 are involved in. Among these three items, the value of items 1 "I feel nervous when I speak English in front of all my classmates." is the highest. Also,

the value of item 1 is the highest one of all items in three dimensions of English classroom speaking anxiety. It means that speaking English in front of the whole class is an important factor in making students feel anxious. In addition, according to the item 10, being worried about making mistakes can also make students feel nervous.

2) Discussion on English classroom speaking anxiety

According to Table I, the average value for items in the of English speaking classroom anxiety is 2.54, which is slightly lower than the medium point 3. It indicates that the students' English classroom speaking anxiety is at a comparatively low level. It is supposed that there are three reasons behind it. Firstly, since Northwestern Polytechnical is in the list of "Double First-Class" university projects, students in it have comparatively strong learning abilities in general. Thus, their English speaking ability would not be too weak. Secondly, the subjects are freshmen, which just relived from National College Entrance Examination, they have a relatively solid foundation knowledge of English, therefore they may be not too worried about speaking them out. Thirdly, the last but the most important point is that all students have taken the same oral English course for one semester in their first year at the university. This oral English class contains various teaching forms like taking group discussions in English, doing topical oral presentations before the whole class, writing and presenting English dialogue, and so on. Each student has been provided at least one chance to speak in each lesson. Their oral English communicative competence has been fully exercised in this class. As the result shows that subjects are in a comparatively low level of English classroom speaking anxiety, it indicates that the oral English course has a good effect, really improving the students' oral English ability.

For four dimensions of English classroom speaking anxiety, the average value from highest to lowest is Anxiety in speaking before the whole class, Anxiety in speaking to the teacher, Anxiety in group discussion, Anxiety in speaking to the partner. Thereinto, the average value of dimension Anxiety in speaking before the whole class exceeds the medium point 3. It shows that when students speak English before the whole class, they are easily feeling anxious. However, since the value of dimension Anxiety in speaking to the partner is the lowest one, it shows that students feel at ease when they speak English with their partner. According to the Table II, the value of item 1 "I feel nervous when I speak English in front of all my classmates." is the highest while the values of item item 6 "I feel worried that my partner speaks English better than me." and item 16 "In class, when I talk with my partner in English, I will be afraid of being laughed at." are the lowest one. It demonstrates that students are under more pressure when they speak English before the whole class. However, they don't feel much peer pressure in group discussions.

According to Krashen's [19] affective filter hypothesis, learners' emotion takes an important role in language acquisition, which can promote or hinder learners' learning a language. Thus, teachers are supposed to design language courses reasonably which means they should find ways to reduce students' anxiety levels. However, certain moderate levels of anxiety are also helpful in improving students' concentration when they take courses. Thus, when teachers

design courses, they could combine the form of giving chance for students to speak before the whole class and speak with their partners in the group. Either of these two forms should not take the main role in an English oral lesson.

B. General Situation of English Speaking Self-Concept

1) Statistical analysis on English speaking self-concept

There are 16 items involved in the *Questionnaire on English Speaking Self-concept of Non-English Majors Freshmen*. Since items 18, 19, 26, 32, 33, 3, 7, 9, 12, 13, 21 are set in reverse, they have been reversed and unified when the data is collated. After this step, the higher the value of item is, the weaker the learners' self-concept is as well as they are less confident in their ability to learn English. From Table III, the total value of each item is 3.075, which is higher than medium point 3. It indicates that their English speaking self-concept is at a comparatively low level and overall students are not so optimistic about their own English abilities. The value of English pronunciation self-concept is a little bit higher than English talking self-concept, which suggests that compared to the very act of talking with others in English, students are less confident in their pronunciation.

TABLE III: DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS ON THE SITUATION OF ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION SELF-CONCEPT

	Items	Mean	Mean/Items	Std. Deviation
English pronunciation self-concept	8	21.52	2.69	0.38
English talking self-concept	8	19.76	2.47	0.51
Total	16	41.28	2.58	0.41

For the dimension of English pronunciation self-concept, there are 8 items involved. The top three highest value of item is item 32, 26, 2. Item 32 is "My study of English pronunciation is no worse than that of other students". Item 26 is "I think my spoken English is no worse than others". Item 2 is "I think my English pronunciation is poor." Among them, item 32 and 26 are reverse. This result shows that students think their pronunciation is bad. It is worth noting that they are easy to compare themselves with their classmates when evaluating their ability of learning English pronunciation.

For the dimension of English speaking self-concept, there are also 8 items involved in. The top three highest value of item is item are 13, 21, 7, 12. Item 13 is "I find it easy to learn spoken English." Item 21 is "I am good at spoken English." Item 7 is "I think I read English very well". Item 12 is "I pride myself on my spoken English." The result shows that students are not confident in speaking English as well as the ability to talk with others in English.

2) Discussion on English speaking self-concept

According to Shavelson *et al.* [5], self-concept is one's perception of himself, which can be influenced by one's own experience as well as others' evaluations. For Table III, the average value of English pronunciation self-concept is 3.46, which is higher than the average value of English talking self-concept. According to Table IV, the highest value of item 13 "I find it easy to learn spoken English." is

3.95, which is exceeds the medium score 3. It means that students themselves don't think learning English is an easy thing. Also, they are also less optimistic about their oral English. However, the lowest value of item 15 "My English is not good because I'm not good at learning English" is also in the dimension English pronunciation self-concept. It hints that students do not fundamentally deny their ability to learn English, they just find it difficult for them to learn oral English. There are two possible reasons for this phenomenon: the first reason is as it mentioned before, the learning ability of students in Northwestern Polytechnical University has been proved by National College Entrance Examination, students themselves can be aware that they have been equipped with at least some learning ability, thus they don't have too much doubt about their learning ability. The second reason is that after having taken oral English courses, their English speaking ability has indeed been trained to a certain extent, which helps them to be aware of their potential ability to speak English well. The problem is that they can not speak English well now even if they know they have the potential ability to do well. Thus, under the circumstances, teachers should strengthen students' oral practice in courses and provide students with more effective ways or tips to acquire the ability to speak English. At the same time, teachers are supposed to encourage students and give them more positive feedback to enhance students' enthusiasm in speaking English.

TABLE IV: DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS ON ITEMS OF TWO DIMENSIONS IN ENGLISH SPEAKING SELF-CONCEPT

Dimensions of English speaking self-concept	Item	Mean	Std. Deviation
English pronunciation self-concept	2	2.81	1.12
	8	2.70	1.05
	18	2.59	0.97
	19	2.49	0.87
	26	2.96	0.99
	29	2.32	0.93
	32	2.98	0.92
English talking self-concept	3	3.87	0.56
	7	3.88	0.61
	9	3.68	0.61
	12	3.88	0.60
	13	3.95	0.60
	15	2.06	0.93
	20	2.47	1.01
	21	3.91	0.55

For the overall average value of dimension English pronunciation, self-concept is higher than English speaking self-concept and the average value of dimension English pronunciation is higher than medium score 3, which indicates that students generally have no confidence in their English pronunciation. Thus, teachers should systematically teach and train students' pronunciation, as well as provide them more chances to practice their pronunciation, assist them in improving their oral English and their confidence.

C. Correlation between English Classroom Speaking Anxiety and English Speaking Self-Concept

To figure out whether there is a correlation between English classroom speaking anxiety and English speaking self-concept, Table V is made. Since the value in each block is below 5 points, it shows that although there is a

correlation between the two, the correlation is weak. Since there are some reverse items involved in *Questionnaire on English Speaking Self-concept of Non-English Majors Freshmen*, all the items are unified. The higher value of English speaking self-concept, the lower their actual level of English speaking self-concept. The correlation of overall questionnaires is 0.433 ($p<0.05$), which is positive and below 5 points. It means the higher learners' anxiety in the English classroom speaking anxiety, the lower English speaking self-concept they have. There is a weak negative correlation between English speaking self-concept and English classroom speaking anxiety.

TABLE V: CORRELATION TEST BETWEEN ENGLISH CLASSROOM SPEAKING ANXIETY AND ENGLISH SPEAKING SELF-CONCEPT

	Total	Anxiety in speaking to the teacher	Anxiety in group discussion	Anxiety in speaking to the partner	Anxiety in speaking before the whole class
Total	0.433**	0.453**	0.340**	0.326**	0.393**
English pronunciation self-concept	0.315**	0.271**	0.277**	0.263**	0.117**
English speaking self-concept	0.433**	0.453**	0.340**	0.326**	0.393**

In the second row of Table V, the value of anxiety in speaking to the teacher is the highest one ($r=0.453$, $p<0.05$) compared to the other two items. It indicates that

speaking to teachers can make students feel anxious and decrease their English speaking self-concept. Besides, it indicates that teachers can have a significant influence on students' oral performance. On this occasion, teachers can take one-to-one communication with students in English. It should be noted that the frequency of communication not too high in case students feel anxious.

The value of correlation between anxiety in speaking before the whole class and English pronunciation self-concept is 0.117 ($p<0.05$). It means the correlation between the two of them is so weak that it's almost zero. Speaking English before the whole class does not help to improve students' English pronunciation. Thus, teachers should be aware of choosing right ways for students to improve their English pronunciation. Among those various ways of improving English pronunciation, letting students speak before the whole class is not an effective and good choice.

V. FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

A. Major Findings of the Research

There are generally three findings of this research. The first one is that the level non-English major freshmen's English speaking anxiety is at a medium-low level. Reasons behind them are associated with their relatively solid English foundation knowledge and the help from their English oral courses. Second, subjects' English speaking self-concept is at a comparatively low level. They do not have enough confidence in their oral English performance, especially for their pronunciation. It demonstrates that more

oral English practice is still needed. Thirdly, a negative correlation between English classroom speaking anxiety and English speaking self-concept but such kind of correlation is not strong. Talking to teachers can make them feel anxious, which shows teachers have a great influence on their oral English learning. In addition, speaking before the whole class does little to improve their English pronunciation.

B. Pedagogical Implications

In view of the findings of the research, four pieces of pedagogical implications are given. Firstly, since students have less anxiety when they speak English with their peers or in a group, teachers should organize more group activities in class to help students practice their oral English. Various forms of learning English are needed. Simply speaking in front of the class or speaking with peers in English is not recommended. Secondly, as the research result shows, teachers have the greatest influence on the formation of students' self-concept. Thus, teachers should be proactive to encourage students to speak English in class. Besides, teachers can take one-on-one conversations with students in English. The frequency of such a kind of conversation should not be too high to avoid increasing the psychological burden on students. Thirdly, since speaking before the whole class has a weak impact on improving students' pronunciation, teachers should avoid this way if they want to help them. Fourthly, compared to the act of speaking English, students are not confident in their English pronunciation. Thus, systematic pronunciation knowledge and more oral pronunciation practice are needed.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The first author Yang Tianyun conducted the research and wrote the paper. The second author Liu Fei revised and embellished the paper.

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