Chinese EFL Learners' Lived Experience of Communication Apprehension in a Sino-Foreign Context

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A R T I C L E I N F O	A B S T R A C T
	A great deal of emphasis has been placed on the development of communication competencies among students in light of the significance of effective communication in the 21st century. Past studies identified communication apprehension (CA) as one factor that hindered learners' ability to communicate effectively. This study used a qualitative, phenomenological method involving six (6) participants who have lived experience of CA in a unique Chinese context, the Sino-Foreign Joint Venture, a concept that promotes cooperation of foreign educational institutions with China's educational services industry. In-depth interviews, essays of the participants' experiences, stimulated recall, and classroom observation has been employed. The video-recorded interviews were carried out as the primary method of data collection. The results revealed eight themes identified as anxiety-provoking classroom situations, namely, level of difficulty and familiarity with the topic, incomprehensible input, preparation, interpersonal evaluation and criticism, voluntary speaking and being asked to, making mistakes and losing face, classroom oral presentations, and oral language assessment and rate of recurrence. This study throws in user input to sensitize Sino-Foreign higher education institutions, curriculum developers, and teachers to the debilitating influence of communication apprehension on language learners.

INTRODUCTION

China's participation in export-led growth, development of its economy through a more open market, foreign investments, and sophisticated technologies generates a growing demand for its university graduates with exceptional proficiency and communication skills in the English language. The worldwide expansion of the English language has amplified the demand to acquire good communication skills in English. To possess effective communication skills and multiple communication competencies, especially in English, the target language that most Chinese students strive to be proficient at is not only a value-added advantage to stay competitive in the increasingly challenging demand in the global workforce but also an important aspect employers place significant emphasis on in their hiring and promotion decisions as evidenced in several empirical studies (Deppe et al., 1991; Kelly & Gaedeke, 1990; Maes et al.,

1997; Warnock & Curtis, 1997: as cited in Shanahan, 2011).

A great deal of emphasis has been placed on the development of communication competencies among students in light of the significance of effective communication in the world today. However, not all students appear to benefit as desired from communication skills development (Tanveer, 2007). Past studies identified communication apprehension (CA) or the fear of communicating as one of the factors that hindered a learner's ability to develop effective communication skills and his/her willingness to communicate. In China, Liu (2006) emphasized that English Language Teaching (ELT) has long been a difficult task for both students and teachers due to many reasons with little contact with the target language and communication apprehension as some of the factors identified affecting learners' communication skills in the English language. Institutions of higher

learning in China are constantly challenged to improve students' communicative competence (Liu & Huo, 2007) to meet the demand for domestic economic development and international communication (Xu et al., 2006). Cai Jigang issued a report disclosing that only 7% of the graduates are qualified interpreters for international conferences, and only 14% are qualified translators of negotiation with foreigners (as cited in Genzola, 2010).

To this day, the task of producing competent English language speakers among Chinese learners is still a challenge for institutions of higher learning throughout mainland China even though considerable efforts have been made to prioritize the development of communication competence. Given the number of foreign language learners on a global scale, highlighting China as having "the largest number of EFL learners in the world" (Liu, 2006, p. 303), the phenomenon of communication apprehension is explored with various groups of learners in different contexts. One such context is China's Sino-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools, a novel concept in China in recent years that promotes and encourages cooperation and participation of foreign educational institutions with China's educational services industry.

Given the phenomenon's complicated and multifaceted nature, there is also a need to validate and expand upon quantitative results, that is, the utilization of a qualitative inquiry to gain a better and more in-depth understanding of the construct of foreign language communication apprehension. There is a considerable scope to utilize qualitative research in understanding CA, although a great deal of research on this construct has focused on anxiety in classroom activities; however, qualitative approaches in examining CA from the learners' perspective in a Chinese setting are still scarce in the literature and so far none has been done concerning CA of EFL students in a Sino-Foreign higher education institution.

Previous studies indicated that many factors trigger anxiety among foreign language learners, and this anxiety experienced in the foreign language classroom has negative effects on learners' abilities to learn a foreign language. Investigations in a variety of settings with students who have differing backgrounds are needed to better understand this construct. To my knowledge, no study has dealt with Chinese EFL learners in a Sino-Foreign context; thus, the need to explore this phenomenon in wider contexts with different groups of learners.

Moreover, most of the studies included participants who are English majors and whose target language communication exposure mainly depended on English classes, but, the current context involves non-English majors in a Sino-Foreign English-medium institution of higher learning in which the majority of the classes from EFL and Academic English to their respective field of specialization are taught by native speakers and foreign teachers with EFL/ESL teaching as their area of expertise. This study attempts to fill these gaps by examining this phenomenon of interest from a unique Chinese context to provide further insights into the role of different learning situations in learning and communicating in the target language in an EFL classroom context

This study aims to investigate the lived experience of foreign language communication apprehension of Chinese EFL learners in a unique Chinese context, a Sino-Foreign Higher Education context; specifically, it endeavors to look into the classroom situations the participants experienced to be anxiety-provoking when they communicate in English in their EFL classroom.

METHODS

This study followed a transcendental phenomenological research design to qualitative research. Phenomenology, as a type of qualitative research (Merriam, 2009), is a study of people's conscious experience of their life-world (Schram, 2003); it attempts to uncover and describe the structure, the internal structures, of lived experience (Van Manen, 1990). It aims to understand an identified phenomenon of interest as experienced by a group of individuals (Creswell, 2013). Communication apprehension as an internal, personal phenomenon necessitates an approach that is more suitable to the world of natural phenomena, thus, the phenomenological approach was used to obtain deeper insights in consideration of the goal of this research undertaking in understanding the experience and the constructed meaning from the point of view of the participants.

Methods of Data Collection

The interview (video-recorded) was carried out as the primary method of data collection. I used

semi-structured videotaped in-depth interviews. To complement the responses obtained from the interview, a researcher-generated document in the form of an essay (participants were asked to write an essay about their experiences learning and communicating in the target language in EFL classes), stimulated recall (stimulated recall questions were used to encourage the participants to remember that moment they were performing a particular speaking task in their EFL class), and classroom observation (to collect the participants' actions in various speaking situations or activities that provoked anxiety) were also employed.

Participant Selection

The study employed purposive sampling. To start purposive sampling, the investigator must establish selection criteria in choosing the people or sites to be studied (Merriam, 2009). I determined what selection criteria were essential in choosing a sample from which the most can be learned. First, the participants must be Chinese EFL students of a Sino-Foreign institution of higher learning. Second, the participants were those who have had experiences relating to the phenomenon to be investigated (Kruger, 1988). Last, the participants were required to have previously learned English for at least two years and at least two semesters of university-level EFL classes, so they would possess a satisfactory level of proficiency to speak comfortably in English. This criterion was determined based on the participants' academic records.

A preliminary interview was conducted with those who had been invited into the study, and a total of six participants (assigned English names: John, Jerry, Jack, Rebecca, Skili, and Kathy) who have all experienced the phenomenon were selected using the selection criteria.

The Participants

The participants of this study were the EFL students of an English-medium campus in Northeast China, Jilin University-Lambton College (JULC), a private institution of higher learning that is part of Jilin University, the largest university in China. The participants were undergraduate students from years three to four pursuing international programs in Telecommunications Engineering Technology and Business Administration.

Of these participants, three of them were males, and three were females, aged 20-22. They have been learning English for an average of 12.67 years. They had studied English for an average of 9.5 years, with a minimum of six and a maximum of thirteen years, before entering JULC. Except for one male participant who studied English from both Chinese and foreign teachers in middle school and high school, the rest of the participants can be regarded as typical EFL learners since they studied English almost exclusively in a monolingual classroom, by and large from non-native teachers of English, with limited exposure and opportunities to use the English language to communicate outside of language classrooms.

Data Construction

This study used the simplified version of the phenomenological data analyzing procedure of Hycner (1985) which involved five steps, namely, bracketing and phenomenological reduction, delineating units of meaning, clustering of units and meaning to form themes, summarizing each interview, validating it and where necessary modifying it, and extracting general and unique themes from all the interviews and making a composite summary. In summarizing each interview, validating, and where necessary modifying it, I returned to the participants and engaged them in a dialogue about what has been found so far. Returning to the participants and engaging in a dialogue with them vis-à-vis what has been found so far, according to Hycner, is an "…excellent experiential validity check" (1985, p. 291) in determining whether the "…essence of the interview has been correctly captured" (1999, p. 154). The final step involved extracting general and unique themes from all the interviews and making a composite summary. It concluded with a composite summary of all the interviews to accurately capture the essence of the phenomenon studied. It described the "world" in general as experienced by the participants and it reflected the themes that are common to most or all of the in-depth interviews.

Research Ethics

Ethical issues relating to the protection of the participants in any qualitative study are of concern (Merriam, 2009). At all stages of the research process, this study was conducted with care for ethical issues to ensure that those who took part in this study were protected from any possible harm. In this study, the goals of the research and the role of the participants in the research were explained to

all student participants who were asked to sign the consent form. Obtaining informed consent indicating the willingness of the participants to participate is of prime importance. They were never coerced to consider participating in the study, and they were told they could withdraw at any time should they decide to. Confidentiality is another important consideration, that is, the names and the data that they reported were kept confidential. In collecting the data, the video camera was positioned in a location that did not cause discomfort to the students and the teacher. I stayed at particular spots to make sure my presence did not interfere with the classroom activities. In conducting the interview, I made sure that the participants were aware that it would be videotaped. In analyzing and writing up the results, confidentiality was strictly adhered to in a way that readers of the report would not be able to identify the student participants. I sought approval from the administration before the study was carried out.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Researchers have attempted to investigate the phenomenon of interest in various contexts because of its potentially debilitating effects on language learning. The findings of the study seem to corroborate the findings offered by previous studies on foreign language communication apprehension, although not agreeing with every detail. The participants' description of the experience of foreign language communication apprehension revealed eight themes (see Figure 1) identified as anxiety-provoking classroom situations when they communicate in English in their EFL classroom.

The results corroborate the previous findings of Wang (2005), which revealed that Chinese college students experienced comparatively high levels of anxiety in the students' foreign language classes, and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students had a tendency to be more anxious than most of the other student groups, and many of them exhibited certain degrees of communication apprehension in English class. The findings also support Liu's (2006) study on the causes and consequences of anxiety in EFL classrooms of Chinese undergraduate non-English majors in oral English language lessons disclosing self-reported feelings of anxiety in oral English lessons at all proficiency levels, which consequently made many of them unwilling to volunteer to speak English in class.
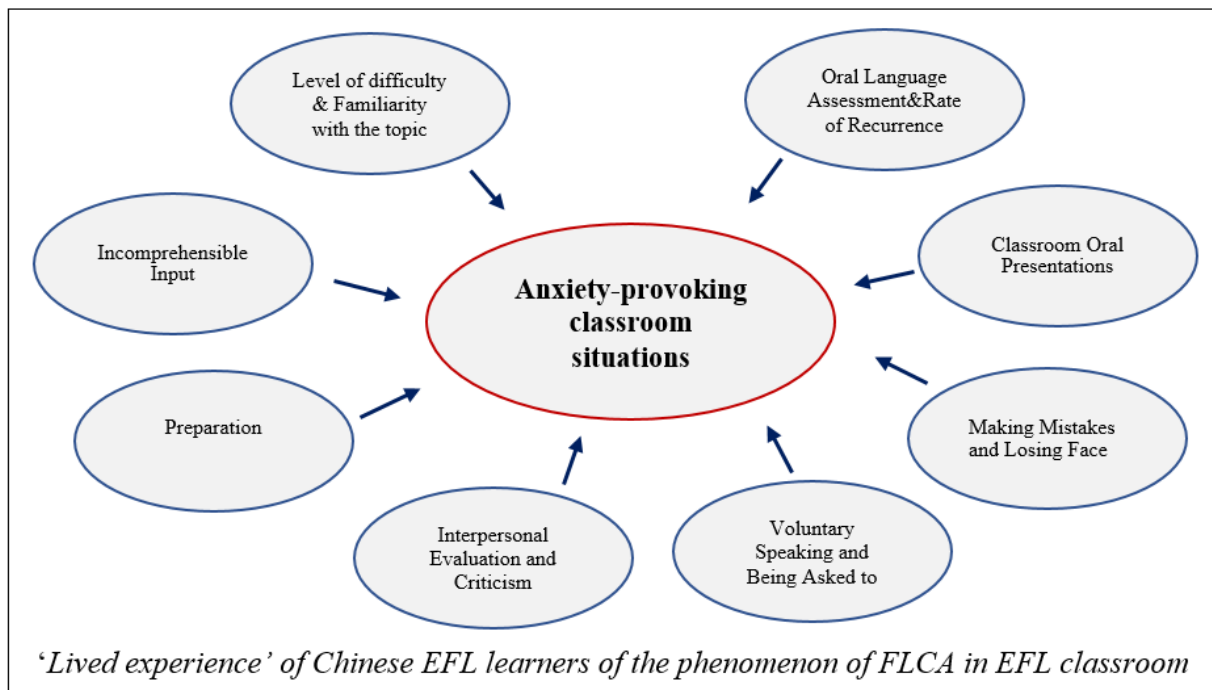

Figure 1. English Language Learning in a Sino-Foreign Higher Education Context

The study affirms that anxiety is a serious issue in Chinese EFL classrooms and is not yet being addressed by many EFL teachers and learners. The findings of this qualitative, phenomenological exploration clearly indicate the existence of foreign language communication

apprehension among the participants when learning and communicating in English in their foreign language classroom.

Level of Difficulty and Familiarity with the Topic

Five of the respondents expressed that the level of difficulty and familiarity with the topic triggers anxiety in their attempts to speak in English in their language classroom. They believe that any effort to take part in any communicative situation is, to a certain extent, dependent upon their interest, level of ease and complexity, and their familiarity with tackling the topic at hand. John demonstrated this sentiment when he stated "If the topic is not my dish, I would be anxious" (313). "If the question for me is more difficult, I can't answer it. If it's a simple question and I can't answer it, I will lose face because everyone knows a simple topic and everyone can answer it" (315-319). "Because I stand in front of the class, and the students, all the students see me I can't answer the question. I feel embarrassed and my face will turn red" (338-340).

To the participants, the lack of knowledge about a certain topic intensifies anxiety. Jerry related his experience, "Sometimes, I want to speak, um, but I can't do it because I am not sure I can describe it clearly" (531-533). The participants tend to take part if they are comfortable with the topic, as reflected in this statement of Jerry, "When I knew the questions, um, I said something" (592-593). Otherwise, "When I didn't know it, I would feel nervous and embarrassed" (593-594). Jack expressed a similar description, "I feel nervous when I don't know what to say (446). I don't have enough ideas when I have a difficult topic; I will feel nervous "(348-349).

Clearly, the participants stressed that when the topics that arise are unknown and the level of difficulty is unbefitting with respect to language tasks and activities, the more worried and anxious they become, thus, speaking performance and efforts to communicate are stymied. This is consistent with the findings of the study of Riasati (2012) that found the topic of discussion is one of the factors that influence the ease of language use to a great extent.

Incomprehensible Input

This anxiety-provoking classroom situation derived from the data is rather unique and rarely discussed in previous research. In this study, the features of incomprehensible input that aggravate apprehension unanimously believed by the participants are pronunciation, teacher's speech rate, fear of not being understood, and difficulties listening to a foreign language. What the participants expressed affirmed these difficulties; for instance, Skili stated, "I worry about pronunciation (351-352). I am bothered […] the teacher won't understand my meaning" (231).

The participants conveyed fear of inappropriate and inaccurate articulation of words and expressions as indicated in this statement of Jack, "I worry about my pronunciation. My classmates and teachers won't understand and not sure with what I say (797-798). If the teacher doesn't understand me, it makes me nervous" (335-336). The immediate effect of pronunciation on any communicative situation instigates tension among the participants of this study. It appears stressful when they are not understood since it brings pressure to improve pronunciation in an instant.

Across all participants, the fear of not being understood amplifies apprehension, as indicated in this statement by Jerry: "I remember I asked a question to the teacher, and uh", "When do we hand in the homework?" But he didn't understand what I said. I said it again. He also didn't get it. At that time, I feel [sic] so embarrassed, and uh, nervous. I think it's not good (203-207). I feel [sic] not good. Uh, there are [sic] a lot of other students. They knew it. All of them knew. At that time, I felt nervous. I can hear the voice of my heart jumping in, jumping out. So it's […] uh, [right-hand holds chest]. It's a terrible thing" (222-225).

The rest of the participants also expressed feeling anxious about not being able to understand the teacher. Like the other participants, Kathy expressed having difficulties listening to the target language, "I felt scared. Uh, sometimes, I can't follow them (317-318). When I can't understand what the teacher is saying, I can't keep up with them so I will feel anxiety" (674-676). The present study suggests that incomprehensible input aggravates anxiety and hampers the participants' attempts to communicate and convey spoken messages in the target language.

Preparation

The insufficient preparation time given to the participants before speaking depicts their feelings about the negative influence it does on their efforts

to participate in any speaking tasks in their foreign language classes. Rebecca's sentiment is echoed by the other five participants, "I do not like being asked to speak with little or no preparation at all. If a teacher does [sic] not give us some time to prepare, I do not know how to say anything" (285-288). She detailed in her essay: "I will feel more nervous if we have no time to prepare. I need time to think about what to speak for my ideas. It makes me very restless because I need to think about what I will say and I don't like [sic] losing face in my foreign language class". [Participant's Essay]

Evidently, during her oral interview that was observed, she displayed a certain level of restlessness as indicated by the scratching of her head quite a few times within that two-and-a-half-minute- impromptu speaking, looking at the ceiling, stuttering, and tripping over her tongue trying to explain her response to the question she picked from among the oral interview questions provided by her teacher. She attributed this discomfort and unsuccessful attempt to demonstrate a grasp of the topic at hand to the amount of time given before speaking. This condition frightens Jack, too, "I don't like it because I will be nervous very much, and uh, cannot answer the questions very well" (204-206).

It appears that the participants value being given a reasonable amount of time to prepare if they are to put themselves out into any communicative situation. Previous studies show that when sufficient time and practice are given, moderate amounts of anxiety can produce positive results (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994b; Tobias, 1986, as cited in Matsuda & Gobel, 2004).

The findings of this study suggest that the amount of time provided to the participants for any speaking tasks is critical. Owing to the immediacy of face-to-face communication, it can give rise to a stressful atmosphere for EFL learners and it also implies that the impact of insufficient preparation time provided before speaking activities aborts attempts to participate in any oral tasks.

Interpersonal Evaluation and Criticism

This overarching theme parallels Horwitz et al.'s (1986) fear of negative evaluation. In this study, interpersonal evaluation and criticism are characterized by the evaluation of peers and English language teachers and the negative evaluation of English language abilities. All six of them have an intense fear of being evaluated while performing communication tasks. Jerry shared the extent of this fear of what other people in his foreign language classroom might think of him: "I find it hard when my teacher evaluates me. I fear others' evaluation; it makes me feel tired and gives me some more pressure, but I can't control not to do that" (581-584). I am afraid of speaking English. When they see my face is shaking, I will feel more nervous because they look at me and my expression was terrible. They will know that I am not good. I have not prepared for this speech. And, uh, maybe they think I have not studied hard" (436-439).

For Jack, this fear of being negatively evaluated puts him in a situation he considers discouraging. Not only is he scared of hostile evaluation, but he is also frightened of being negatively criticized. For instance, he dreads teachers who keep saying, "…you should have learned this before" (665). The participant expressed that the fear increases as their foreign language teachers criticize their answers. They are terrified of being perceived as unsatisfactory, and such inauspicious evaluation causes them to believe that their teacher might criticize them as terrible learners who neither tried nor studied hard enough and might consequently be viewed by their classmates as no different.

The findings of this study are consistent with other studies that indicate that "…this fear can lead to increased anxiety and apprehension" (Richmond & McCroskey, 1998; Byrne, Flood), especially for these participants who have lived experience of the phenomenon of foreign language communication apprehension. In the study of Liu and Zhang (2013), the majority of the participants reported being apprehensive in English class, feared being negatively evaluated, and were anxious about both speaking and tests. The study suggests where an expectation of hostile evaluation of English language abilities from classmates and English language teachers breaks the surface, the intensity of the apprehension is much greater.

Voluntary Speaking and Being Asked to

Speaking voluntarily is inherent in a Sino-Foreign EFL classroom that stresses communicative approaches in target language teaching. All six participants fear being called upon and having to speak up in their foreign language classroom. Skili is scared of volunteering to speak and being asked

to in her foreign language classroom: "When my teacher asks me questions, I'm very nervous and afraid (245). I feel terrified (298). I am uncomfortable giving my answer in class and giving my opinion about something because I don't want to embarrass myself if my answer [clears throat] is wrong" (299-300).

Jerry, who doesn't like volunteering, shares this feeling of Skili and relates it to the correctness of speech and accuracy of response: "To volunteer to answer the questions that the teacher asked, I felt nervous because I didn't know what the teacher would ask me, and uh, maybe the answer I don't know. I will feel nervous about it (414-417). I don't know whether I can describe it clearly" (454).

Not only is speaking voluntarily frightening for Jack, but he also shrinks from being asked to read in front of the class, "When the teacher asks me to read something with some difficult words I don't know how to read, I feel very nervous and stressed" (399-403). Like the other participants, he only speaks up, "…because the teacher requires" (466), and responds when asked, "If the questions are easy, and I won't if it's difficult" (475-476), but "most of the time, I don't" (483).

Although previous studies such as that of Mak and White (1996) show that this classroom situation aggravates apprehension, this present study somewhat differs from where it arises from. In their study, the participants, Chinese ESL students in New Zealand, who feared voluntary speaking in class linked it to the importance placed upon by the learning context on listening in the learning process; however, in the present study, the participants related their anxiety in voluntary speaking and being asked to speak in English in their foreign language classrooms to not having a good grasp of the topic or question at hand, fear of appearing inept, and the inability to produce accurate responses.

Making Mistakes and Losing Face

This fear of making mistakes in front of other people makes the learner feel afraid and even terrified because it makes one appear foolish, tongue-tied, and silly in the eyes of students' peers and others. Each time Jerry speaks in his foreign language class, he feels there is danger, "Standing in front of the class maybe I will say something wrong, and sometimes I can't say anything (442-444); I will feel nervous and embarrassed about my

terrible expression" (444-4450). He added, "Making mistakes makes me feel terrible, and I am afraid that the students and the teacher will think I am not good" (547-549). Rebecca feels the same way, "If I make mistakes, I think the teacher will think I am not a good student and thinks my English is very terrible" (357-358). This feeling of the participants not being viewed favorably is indicative of their fear of being refused positive affirmation. Not only do these participants dread being considered incompetent or, in their words, not good enough but also fear being poked fun at by others. Being laughed at or others making fun of them puts them in an embarrassing and humiliating situation, consequently, they lose face. The participants are terrified of losing face. Kathy recalled an embarrassing experience of making mistakes and being laughed at in her foreign language class: "In my EFL class, I had a speech about my favorite food. I, uh, my favorite food is steak but I said my favorite food is stick, so all my classmates laughed at me (543-546) even my teacher also laughed (546). After the class, my classmate helped me to know my mistake. And, at that time, I'm [sic] very helpless about it (547-549). I'm afraid of speaking because I'm afraid I will lose face if I make some mistakes" (598-599).

The study supports the findings of the investigation of Awan et al., (2010), which showed that speaking in front of others is rated as the main cause of anxiety, followed by worries about grammatical mistakes, pronunciation, and being unable to talk spontaneously. It further disclosed that the participants enrolled in English reading, listening, and speaking classes felt anxious and experienced fear of negative evaluation when it came to saying something in the target language because they were worried about making mistakes. Similarly, Tanveer's (2007) study reported that the participants agreed that speaking in front of the whole class or in public caused anxiety for most of the learners, and they frequently expressed anxiety and panic because of the fear of committing mistakes or errors in front of others. As a result of the fear of making mistakes, some learners expressed that learning and speaking a foreign language in the classroom is always a problem.

The findings in this context, Sino-Foreign Joint Venture, affirm that making mistakes as well as losing face hinders participants from taking part

in any speaking situation for fear of running a risk of being labeled inept and not good enough and being ridiculed and its accompanying embarrassment and humiliation.

Classroom Oral Presentations

This particular theme also parallels Horwitz et al.'s (1986) conceptualization of CA as one of the components of their original three-part model of language anxiety. Unanimously, the participants dread speaking in front of their teacher and classmates in their foreign language classroom. Of the numerous oral classroom activities required of them to perform, they fear impromptu speaking and memorized speech presentations the most.

Kathy narrates how she detests feeling terrified each time she thinks about standing up in front of the class. During her stimulated-recall interview, where she watched all her video-recorded memorized and impromptu speech presentations, she expressed, "I don't like it, um, because this activity always makes me feel nervous. Um, I don't like that emotion" (807-808).

Kathy's apprehension reflects Skili's. Her anxiety was observed during her video-recorded group business presentation, where she was seen hiding behind a fellow group member each time she was done delivering her turn in the business report presentation of her group. When asked, Skili explained, "I did because I was very, very nervous (474). I hope the speech will be finished soon" (477). "I kept looking at my watch because I wish the speech would be over soon" (480).

Like Skili, John admitted he is no stranger to anxiety fears speech presentation since it takes place in a formal context. Calling himself back to that moment when he watched himself deliver his speeches from those clips of his video-recorded speech presentations in front of the class, John stated: "In the presentation, I feel nervous. My hands were in the same position, and I felt so nervous because I stand[sic] not straight. Sometimes I speak so fast, and I used some wrong words. (819-823). I feel anxious and nervous. Uh, I wore a suit and it was a formal presentation so everyone are [sic] listening to me, and I felt so scared" (825-827).

In this study, oral classroom presentation in the classroom is highly anxiety-inducing. Speaking in front of the teacher and the students made all the participants even more nervous owing to their apprehension of not being able to generate ideas within a limited time and failure to remember what had been prepared or rehearsed earlier. They find idea generation and sentence production laborious and frustrating, thus, any communication tasks before their teacher and classmates become limiting and, worse, debilitating.

Oral Language Assessment and Rate of Recurrence

The data revealed that oral language assessment and its rate of recurrence provoked anxiety in all participants in their foreign language classrooms. The participants expressed apprehension days prior and on the day itself of any scheduled speaking tests in view of how they regard this particular classroom situation in the negative.

John dislikes and frets speaking test owing to the manner it is administered and their very nature of being a graded oral production in target language learning: "I don't like speaking test because the test is formal. The test makes me nervous because after that I have a mark" (478-480). Like John, Jack worries too that it is a graded oral performance: "I am more nervous because it has a mark" (502-503). "When I have an upcoming test, I feel worried because it will make me feel stressed and nervous" (518-520). "Because it is marked, I will think it's bad and maybe after the interview I will feel stressed" (554-555). "I'm afraid I cannot get a good mark" (559).

Not only is Jack scared of receiving poor evaluations in his speaking tests, but he's also anxious about the teacher's speech rate during English oral examinations, which he believes hinders his grasp of subject matter, as evidenced by this experience he shared, "I remember the teacher spoke English so fast. I could not understand what the teacher talked about […], so I answered the question wrong. I felt so embarrassed (536-539). It gave my teacher the wrong impression (547). I feel [sic] stressed (555).

Participants consistently mentioned their opposition to frequent testing, another feature of this classroom situation in the foreign language classes they wished to reduce or regulated. This is a source of irrational panic for the participants. Skili's statement reflects their sentiments: "When I have a speaking test, I'm worried about this very much (331). I worry about speaking in front a lot; a lot of tests in speaking give me fear" (350-351).

The last aspect of this classroom situation the students view as anxiety-provoking is the ambiguity in test tasks and formats, as reflected in this statement of John, "I will be very worried if I don't know what the interviewer will say and what we will do" (532-533).

The findings of the study suggest that the participants experienced increased anxiety in a highly evaluative situation and suffered stress from oral language assessment and frequent testing and have somewhat developed a negative typecast about speaking tests and had an irrational perception of oral assessment in the English language classrooms.

CONCLUSION

The study revealed eight classroom conditions that fuel participants' communication apprehension. These situations that create possibilities or the likelihood of disclosing and uncovering their language deficiencies and limitations in front of their foreign language teacher and classmates are anticipated to exacerbate apprehension. The findings of this study also showed that the impact of this fear on the participants, when confronted with communication activities in their foreign language classroom, is severe.

Given the detrimental impact of foreign language communication apprehension on English language learning, English language teachers should recognize that communication apprehension hinders language learners' success in foreign language communication. The teachers should also recognize that EFL classrooms or language classrooms could be an anxiety-provoking environment for learners as it is rather experienced as an evaluative than a communicative learning context. A situation that generates the likelihood of being laughed at and ridiculed and a situation that creates the possibility of exposing deficiencies in front of other people are anxiety-provoking for EFL learners in this learning environment. Language teachers could reduce the apprehension of the learners by encouraging them to speak English in the classroom even if mistakes are made because a classroom is a place for learning and communication and not where mistakes and language deficiencies are noticed. A non-threatening and supportive classroom environment through a language teacher's helpful, cooperative, encouraging, and sympathetic behavior can lessen the influence of social and status differences between the teachers and learners to a considerable extent, especially in a setting based on collectivism and hierarchical social relationships like China that place teachers in a position of authority.

It is hoped that the findings from this context will broaden the understanding of teachers and researchers into the discomfort and apprehension experienced by Chinese EFL students and contribute to helping the students communicate better, alleviate anxiety, and effectively direct and reposition learning strategies through the learning objectives and language targets.

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