

ENGLISH SPEAKING CLASSROOM APPREHENSION: A STUDY OF THE PERCEPTIONS HELD BY HONG KONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Jessie Choi

Hong Kong Education University, Hong Kong
Phone: +852 2948 7312, E-Mail: wchoi@eduhk.hk

Abstract. *The study aims to investigate the perceptions of university learners on English speaking apprehension in a Hong Kong classroom. In Hong Kong, students usually express strong desires for improving their English speaking skills as they realize the importance of the skills for their studies and careers; however, in most of the Hong Kong English classrooms, students tend to take a rather passive role in class and have very limited practice of speaking both inside and outside the classrooms. The lack of exposures and needs in using spoken English often leads to very low confidence or a high level of apprehension on their own. The relationship between feelings of apprehension and the learning of English speaking skills has been under-researched in Hong Kong. The present study is an attempt to fill this gap by investigating the link between feelings of apprehensions and the learning of English speaking skills in a language course of a tertiary institute in Hong Kong. The data for the study were derived from a questionnaire survey of 80 first-year undergraduates from a teacher education institute after the completion of an English speaking course. The quantitative findings indicate that impromptu speaking activities appeared to be more anxiety provoking and having more practices and preparation could help to reduce respondents' negative feeling towards the speaking course. Moreover, pedagogical and individual factors accounted mainly for both positive and negative feelings respondents had. The results of the study also reveal that the behaviour and attitudes of the teacher were important aspects that could help to reduce feelings of apprehension. The article concludes by discussing the implications of the findings for ESL speaking courses for tertiary level learners in Hong Kong.*

Key words: *English speaking skills, classroom anxiety, speaking apprehension, student perception*

1. INTRODUCTION

To obtain a better command of spoken English has always been a concern for Hong Kong students (Gan, 2011). Apprehension or anxiety, however, is regarded as one of the major factors that affects learners' language achievement in the learning of speaking English (Marcos-Llinás & Garau, 2009; Spielman and Radnofsky 2001; Woodrow, 2006). It is normal that people have apprehension or anxiety when they encounter unfamiliarity. Likewise, learners may experience certain levels of apprehension or anxiety when they are learning a new language (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). As Horwitz, Howitz and Cope (1986) mention: "difficulty in speaking in class is probably the most frequently cited

concern of the anxious foreign language students ...” (p. 126). Recently in Hong Kong, it has become increasingly popular that students are required to fulfill exit English language requirements before they graduate from the university. In addition, if they want to have higher chances of getting employed, students must show their proficiency in both written and spoken English. This study, therefore, hopes to find out the perceptions of ESL university students on the possible causes of apprehension or anxiety they experience in an English speaking course and the strategies of dealing with them. Finally, it is expected that the findings can contribute to investigations in this dimension by providing educators with some pedagogical information to deal with anxiety or apprehension among students in English speaking courses.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This review presents some theoretical perspectives on the relationship between apprehension and the learning of English speaking skills. Feelings of apprehension can be defined as communication anxiety and fear in a learning process. Having effective communication skills is crucial for our daily lives as they can help in exchanging our ideas and thoughts. They are especially useful for our study, work and social lives. People who possess good speaking skills are deemed as having more advantages in different aspects. Nevertheless, feelings of apprehension are common among ESL learners in English speaking classrooms, which are believed to have an influence on learning effectiveness (Schmidt, Boraie & Kassabgy, 1996). In relation to the effects of feelings of apprehension on the effectiveness of learning a language, most of the researchers have found that these feelings can be a negative force that may demotivate students to learn, resulting in an unsatisfactory learning performance (Humphries, 2011; Liu & Jackson, 2008; Hewitt & Stephenson, 2012).

The language learning theory proposed by Horwitz's et al. (1986) is probably the most influential among all in the study of the association of language anxiety or apprehension with learning. They identified three highly-related components for their theory: firstly, it is “the fear of anxiety about communicating with people” (p. 127), secondly, it is the “apprehension about others' evaluation, avoidance of evaluative situations, and the expectation that others would evaluate oneself negatively” (p.128), finally, it is “a type of performance anxiety stemming from a fear of failure” (p.128). Simply put, they regard communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety as the major debilitating factors of anxiety on learning and achievement. Since then, their theory has spearheaded a series of investigations to ascertain how anxiety affects learners' performance in speaking classrooms.

Various investigations have attempted to find out the level of anxiety that language learners experienced in the English speaking classrooms with Chinese students and its effects. Such studies have revealed a high level of anxiety among Chinese language learners and a negative relationship between anxiety and language learning. One of these studies was conducted by Cheng (2009). The findings of this study carried out on English major students of a university in Taiwan indicated that language anxiety had a more significant negative influence on the speaking proficiency of freshman students than on sophomores, juniors and seniors.

In a similar study which assessed a group of high school students in the Shangdong Province of China, Cui (2011) revealed that there were negative connections between

anxiety and students' English performance. The language learning anxiety was found to be higher in males than females.

In the same vein, Woodrow (2006) carried out a mixed-approach study that investigated the relationship between anxiety and second language performance and the major causes of second language anxiety. The participants of this study were 275 Chinese students studying Advanced English for Academic purposes (EAP). Woodrow's findings indicated that anxiety was an affective factor that had a negative impact on speaking English for some students.

Similarly, Mak (2011) examined the factors leading to the speaking-in-class anxiety of a group of Chinese ESL first-year university students in Hong Kong. This mixed approach study proved that students' negative self-evaluation was a significant factor that induced anxiety, which ultimately was associated with their poor class performance and achievement.

Unlike the previous two investigations which had adopted a mixed approach, Gan (2013) conducted a questionnaire survey with 290 university students from mainland China and Hong Kong studying at a teacher training university in Hong Kong. Confirming the findings of Woodrow and Mak, Gan's survey revealed that most of the mainland Chinese students and Hong Kong students reported to have experienced anxiety when speaking English and that grammar was considered as a major factor that provoked anxiety.

Given the influential roles of anxiety in language learning, particularly in the second language learning context, from the previous studies, it is considered beneficial to further assess the roles of anxiety in the English language classrooms and its impact on learning in the speaking classroom. Anxiety can be a crucial factor that hinders students' performance and achievement. In the light of this, it therefore, deserves a continuing investigation to contribute further to the existing state of knowledge on language learning anxiety in speaking classrooms.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Participants

The participants of this study were 80 year-one students (61 females, 17 males, 2 unknown) from a teacher-training institute of Hong Kong taking "Academic English: Speaking and Reading", which was first implemented in the institute. All of them had obtained the Diploma for Secondary Education (DSE) after finishing their form six education and had met the language entrance requirement of the institute for English in DSE. All the participants of this study had Cantonese or Putonghua as their native language and took the speaking course for 13 weeks in the second semester of 2014-15.

3.2. Setting

This study was undertaken in the language centre of a Hong Kong tertiary institute. Each year, all the year-one students from various departments enroll into the mandatory English enhancement courses offered by the Centre. Due to resources limitation, there was no screening for students in each course. Students were placed in the courses according to their majors or available timeslots. All Year-one students have to take two English enhancement courses, one for each semester. The course named "Academic English: Speaking and Reading" was newly designed and implemented in the second semester of 2014-2015, which was aimed to improve students' skills on pronunciation, prepared and

impromptu talks. Students had the speaking lesson each week, which lasted for 3 hours. There were 13 lessons in total, with two being the assessment sessions. Speaking activities were conducted in each lesson based on the teaching material developed by the Centre.

3.3. Research objectives

The objectives of the study were:

- To investigate the feelings of apprehension of students towards the in-class activities of the speaking course;
- To examine the reactions of students to the speaking course and the possible causes;
- To find out the possible strategies of alleviating students' fear towards the speaking lesson.

3.4. Research significance

In Hong Kong, similar research has been carried out with different groups of university students. Most of them, however, were conducted to assess students' level of fear in speaking English generally as a second language. Few of them provide an insight into second language learners' level of fear towards an English speaking course. For that reason, the current study attempts to provide information for educators to help them, particularly in course design, which can reduce speaking classroom anxiety. In the light of this goal and the above-mentioned objectives, the present study was guided by the following research questions:

- What are the feelings of apprehension of students towards the in-class activities of the speaking course?
- What are the reactions of students to the speaking course and the possible causes?
- How can students' fear towards the speaking lesson be alleviated?

3.5. Data collection

In this study, both quantitative and qualitative data were gathered as a mixed research approach can help to provide more comprehensive data than a single one for a study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). To assess students' level of anxiety in the speaking course, a questionnaire (Appendix 1) was adapted from the Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) set by Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope (1986) (Appendix 2), which was used to examine the level of anxiety in foreign language learning. The questionnaire of this study consisted of 14 items, of which the first section was to collect the background information of the respondents, the second section for the respondents' feelings towards the in-class speaking activities of the course and the level of communication fear the respondents had in the course. As for the final section, the respondents were asked about the ways to reduce English speaking class anxiety. The questionnaire was administered in the last lesson of the speaking course. With an aim of getting more in-depth data on ESL speaking class anxiety, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 5 volunteer students of the course. Each interviewee was invited to evaluate their learning experience as a participant of the speaking course, with the focus on their fear they had. The questions were presented in Appendix 3. All the interviews were conducted in English, recorded and transcribed (Appendix 4).

3.6. Data analysis

In this study, the background data of the respondents from the questionnaire were compiled to obtain the frequencies and percentages for each question. Then the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) 17.0 was employed to find out the means and standard deviations for the remaining questions. As for the qualitative data from the interviews, they were analyzed through content analysis, in which the data belonging to the same themes were identified and categorized into the ‘thematic units’ or ‘core categories’ (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

4. RESULTS

Eighty questionnaires were collected after the administration. The data about the demography of the students were as follows (Table 1):

Table 1 Demographics of students

Item	Type	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	17	21.25%
	Female	61	76.25%
	(Unknown)	2	2.5%
Native Language	Chinese	78	97.5%
	English	2	2.5%
Hours of having English language lectures per week	Average	4	--
Living in an English speaking country	Yes	3	3.75%
	No	77	96.25%
Self-rating of English speaking skills	Excellent and Good	20	25%
	Average	44	55%
	Below average and poor	14	17.5%
	(Unknown)	2	2.5%

Based on Table 1, the majority of the participants were females (76.25%), with males constituting 21.25%. A large majority of them were native speakers of Chinese who never lived abroad, with only two being English speakers. The average time they spent on English language lectures were 4 hours per week. Most of them rated their English speaking skills as average. The data obtained on the backgrounds of samples provides the characteristics of the target population of the participating institute.

4.1 Students’ levels of apprehension towards the in-class activities of the speaking course

The first research question of the study examined the feelings of apprehension of students towards the in-class activities of the speaking course entitled “Academic English: Speaking and Reading”. To assess the level of speaking apprehension of the targets, 13 related items were asked in the questionnaire. For the ease of analysis and comparison, the mean scores, which refer to the number of students who selected very relaxed (1), moderately relaxed (2), neither relaxed or nervous (3), moderately nervous (4), very

nervous (5), for each of the items, were calculated. Table 2 presents the ranking of the mean scores of each of the 13 items. The items with a mean score above 3 are regarded as more likely to bring feelings of apprehension than those with a mean below 3.

Table 2 Ranking of the mean scores of students' feelings towards the in-class activities of the speaking course

Statement	Mean (standard deviation)
Present an impromptu speech in front of the class.	3.60(1.00)
Answer questions after the impromptu speech.	3.38(1.10)
Present an impromptu speech in front of the teacher.	3.27(1.08)
Present a prepared speech in front of the class.	3.01(1.09)
Answer questions from the teacher.	2.92(0.98)
Present a prepared speech in front of the teacher.	2.77(0.87)
Read aloud passages as a class in pronunciation sessions.	2.76(1.05)
Read aloud passages individually in pronunciation sessions.	2.72(1.01)
Read out words as a class in pronunciation sessions	2.67(1.04)
Read out words individually in pronunciation sessions.	2.58(0.97)
Discuss in pairs.	2.44(1.07)
Discuss in groups.	2.41(1.06)
Repeat as a class after the teacher.	2.33(1.11)

Note: 1=Very relaxed, 2=moderately relaxed; 3=neither relaxed nor nervous; 4=moderately nervous; 5=very nervous; Mean =1+2+3+4+5=3

As shown in Table 2, the mean scores (with standard deviation) for the in-class activities of the speaking course range from 2.33 (repeat as a class after the teacher) to 3.60 (present an impromptu speech in front of the class.). The mean scores of four activities are above the mean (3.0), ranging from 3.01 to 3.60, implying that these four activities provoke higher levels of speaking anxiety than the other nine in-class activities. The mean scores of these four activities (3.60, 3.38, 3.27, 3.01), which are above the mean, are all related to impromptu speaking activities, while the mean scores of the activities which are lower than the mean are respectively about the prepared speaking activities, reading aloud activities in pronunciation sessions, discussion activities, repeating as a class. This means that impromptu speaking activities are the ones contributing most to the feelings of apprehension in the speaking course, while the activities like repeating as a class and discussion with peers provoked the least levels of anxiety.

4.2. Students' responses to the speaking course and their possible causes

The second research question examines the respondents' reactions to the speaking course. Table 3a and 3b summarize the participants' positive and negative responses to the 30 related items in the questionnaire, which were expressed by (1), strongly disagree (2), disagree (3), neither agree nor disagree (4), agree (5) strongly agree for each of the items. The means and standard deviations of all of the responses are displayed in Table 3a and 3b.

Table 3a Ranking of the mean scores of students' positive reactions to the English speaking course

Statement	Mean (standard deviation)
I would feel more confident about speaking in class if I practiced more.	3.71(0.76)
I feel more comfortable in a speaking class when I know I don't have to speak in front of the others.	3.69(0.74)
I am less anxious in class when I am not the only person answering a question.	3.66(0.79)
I am more willing to participate in class when the speaking topics we discuss are interesting.	3.65(0.80)
I would be less nervous about taking a speaking test in the English language if I got more practice in class.	3.62(0.83)
I enjoy class when we work in pairs.	3.55 (0.70)
I would feel better about speaking in class if the class were smaller.	3.54(0.62)
I would feel less nervous about speaking in front of others if I knew the people well.	3.54(0.89)
I feel comfortable in a speaking class when I come to class prepared.	3.53(0.80)
I like going to class when we are going to practice English pronunciation.	3.46(0.83)
I enjoy the speaking class when I can work with other students.	3.45(0.78)
I enjoy class when we work in groups.	3.44(0.80)
I like the teacher to correct my speaking mistakes in class.	3.42(0.75)
I prefer to be allowed to volunteer an answer instead of being called on to give an answer.	3.36(0.79)
I like going to class when we are going to practice prepared speech.	3.33(0.77)
I am more willing to speak in class when we discuss current events.	3.29(0.79)
I like going to class when we are going to practice impromptu speech.	3.19(0.84)
I don't worry about making mistakes in a speaking class.	3.19(0.82)
I feel confident when I speak in an English speaking class.	3.17(0.84)
I would be more willing to speak if I know that I am being graded.	3.14(0.77)
I would enjoy class if we weren't corrected by the teacher at all in class.	3.13(0.78)

Note: 1=Strongly disagree, 2=Disagree; 3=neither agree nor disagree; 4=Agree; 5=Strongly agree
Mean = 1+2+3+4+5=3

Table 3b Ranking of the mean scores of students' negative reactions to the English speaking course

Statement	Mean (standard deviation)
I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in a speaking class.	3.58(0.83)
I always feel my classmates speak better than me.	3.55(0.77)
I feel more nervous when I know I am being graded in an English speaking task.	3.45(0.77)
Even if I am well prepared, I still feel nervous about speaking English.	3.36(0.76)
I feel uneasy when my fellow students are asked to comment on my speaking skills.	3.30(0.82)
I feel nervous if I have to speak to a native speaker.	3.24(0.87)
I am afraid that my classmates will laugh at me when I make mistakes.	3.24(0.88)
I would feel nervous if the teacher corrects my speaking mistakes in class.	3.21(0.87)
I feel more nervous in an English speaking class than in other classes.	3.21(0.76)

Note: 1=Strongly disagree, 2=Disagree; 3=neither agree nor disagree; 4=Agree; 5=Strongly agree
Mean = 1+2+3+4+5=3

The statistical results presented in Table 3a and 3b show that the mean scores of all the 30 items were above 3.00. Of all the positive statements, the one “I would feel more confident about speaking in class if I practiced more”, had the highest index of 3.71. The highest index of the negative statements was “I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in a speaking class”, which was 3.58. As Table 3a shows, there were some major factors (according to the ranking of mean scores) constituting the positive responses to the English speaking lesson, which were “practiced more”, “don’t have to speak in front of the others”, “I am not the only person answering a question”, “the speaking topics we discuss are interesting”, “work in pairs”, “the classes were smaller”, “knew the people well”, “teacher to correct my speaking mistakes in class”, “volunteer to answer questions instead of being called on to give an answer”. Likewise, Table 3b reveals the major stressors that constitute the feelings of apprehension, which were “to speak without preparation in a speaking class”, “I always feel my classmates speak better than me”, “I am being graded in an English speaking task”, “Even if I am well prepared, I still feel nervous about speaking English”, “my fellow students are asked to comment on my speaking skills”, “if I have to speak to a native speaker”, and “I am afraid that my classmates will laugh at me when I make mistakes”.

It is indicated, in Table 3a and 3b, that there were various reactions from the respondents to the English speaking course. To identify the underlining causes, the positive and negative reactions could be grouped into three main categories, which are “personal”, “pedagogical” and activity”, and are presented in Table 4.

Table 4 Factors constituting to the positive and negative reactions to the English speaking course

Factor	Positive Statement	Mean (standard deviation)	Negative Statement	Mean (standard deviation)
Personal				
	I feel more comfortable in a speaking class when I know I don't have to speak in front of the others.	3.69 (0.74)	I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in a speaking class.	3.58 (0.83)
	I am less anxious in class when I am not the only person answering a question.	3.66 (0.79)	I always feel my classmates speak better than me.	3.55 (0.77)
	I would feel less nervous about speaking in front of others if I knew the people well.	3.54 (0.89)	Even if I am well prepared, I still feel nervous about speaking English.	3.36 (0.76)
	I feel comfortable in a speaking class when I come to class prepared.	3.53 (0.80)	I feel nervous if I have to speak to a native speaker.	3.24 (0.87)
	I don't worry about making mistakes in a speaking class.	3.19 (0.82)	I am afraid that my classmates will laugh at me when I make mistakes.	3.24 (0.88)
	I feel confident when I speak in an English speaking class.	3.17 (0.84)	I feel more nervous in an English speaking class than in other classes.	3.21 (0.76)

Factor	Positive Statement	Mean (standard deviation)	Negative Statement	Mean (standard deviation)
Pedagogical				
	I would feel more confident about speaking in class if I practiced more.	3.71 (0.76)	I feel more nervous when I know I am being graded in an English speaking task.	3.45 (0.77)
	I am more willing to participate in class when the speaking topics we discuss are interesting.	3.65 (0.80)	I feel uneasy when my fellow students are asked to comment on my speaking skills.	3.30 (0.82)
	I would be less nervous about taking a speaking test in the English language if I got more practice in class.	3.62 (0.83)	I would feel nervous if the teacher corrects my speaking mistakes in class.	3.21 (0.87)
	I enjoy class when we work in pairs.	3.55 (0.70)		
	I would feel better about speaking in class if the class were smaller.	3.54 (0.62)		
	I enjoy the speaking class when I can work with other students.	3.45 (0.78)		
	I enjoy class when we work in groups.	3.44 (0.80)		
	I like the teacher to correct my speaking mistakes in class.	3.42 (0.75)		
	I prefer to be allowed to volunteer an answer instead of being called on to give an answer.	3.36 (0.79)		
	I would be more willing to speak if I know that I am being graded.	3.14 (0.77)		
	I would enjoy class if we weren't corrected by the teacher at all in class.	3.13 (0.78)		
Factor	Positive Statement	Mean (standard deviation)	Negative Statement	Mean (standard deviation)
Activity				
	I like going to class when we are going to practice English pronunciation.	3.46 (0.83)		
	I like going to class when we are going to practice prepared speech.	3.33 (0.77)		
	I am more willing to speak in class when we discuss current events.	3.29 (0.79)		
	I like going to class when we are going to practice impromptu speech.	3.19 (0.84)		

Note: 1=Strongly disagree, 2=Disagree; 3=neither agree nor disagree; 4=Agree; 5=Strongly agree
Mean = 1+2+3+4+5=3

According to the respondents' answers, it can be seen that there are several major factors for the positive and negative reactions to the English speaking course. The factors can be classified under three categories as personal, pedagogical and activity. Emerging from the collected data, it is found that the factors for the positive reactions to the English speaking course mainly result from pedagogical and individual aspects. Among the pedagogical factors, the statement "I would feel more confident about speaking in class if I practiced more" has the highest mean scores. Furthermore, the statement "I feel more comfortable in a speaking class when I know I don't have to speak in front of the others" is seen as a remarkable 'individual' factor for positive reasons to the speaking course.

On the other hand, the factors for the negative reactions to the English speaking course mainly come from the personal aspect. The worry of speaking "without preparation in a speaking class" and feeling "classmates speak better" are the major reasons causing negative reactions to the English speaking course.

Finally, the results also reveal that various activity types also constitute different levels of positive reactions to the English speaking course. It is seen that respondents were more receptive to pronunciation skills, prepared speech training and discussion. Comparatively, the reactions to impromptu speech training appear to be less positive. This result is consistent with the data presented in 4.1.

4.3. Possible strategies of alleviating students' fear towards the English speaking lesson

Responses regarding possible strategies of alleviating students' fear towards the English speaking lesson reveal that the behavior and attitudes of the teacher have been pointed out as important elements to lower the feelings of anxiety brought by an English speaking lesson. Table 5 illustrates the responses.

Table 5 Ranking of the mean scores of the possible strategies of alleviating students' fear towards the English speaking lesson

Statement	Mean (standard deviation)
Teacher is helpful.	4.00(0.84)
Teacher's manner of correction is pleasant.	3.96(0.73)
Teacher can make students feel comfortable.	3.92(0.86)
Teacher does not make you feel stupid when you make a mistake.	3.86(0.77)
Teacher does not over-react to mistakes.	3.78(0.83)
Students can work in groups or pairs.	3.73(0.75)
All students are called on equally.	3.72(0.82)
Students get sufficient time for practice before speaking.	3.69(0.79)
Students can volunteer answers and are not called on to provide responses.	3.51(0.85)

According to the respondents, a substantial number of respondents believed that the positive attitude and behavior of teachers and their ways of teaching could make the English speaking lesson less intimidating. The ones receiving the highest mean scores among all the strategies were "Teacher is helpful" (m=4.00), "Teacher's manner of correction is pleasant" (m=3.96) and "Teacher can make students feel comfortable". In addition to the teacher's attitude and behavior, teacher's ways of teaching also matter as all the statements relating to the teaching strategies received mean scores over 3.5.

Respondents pointed out that “teacher does not make you feel stupid when you make a mistake” (m=3.86) and “Teacher does not over-react to mistakes” (m=3.78) were important for lowering anxiety. Moreover, strategies such as “students can work in groups or pairs” (m=3.73), “all students are called on equally” (m=3.72), “students get sufficient time for practice before speaking” (m=3.69), “students can volunteer answers and are not called on to provide responses” (3.51), were regarded as the possible ways that could be of some help to alleviate classroom anxiety.

5. DISCUSSION

In this section, the findings of the questionnaire survey will be further discussed with the data from the semi-structured interviews, which were used to explore more of the students’ perceptions of anxiety in an English speaking course. Interview data can provide information to supplement the data from the quantitative survey (Tanveer, 2007, p.35). In the present study, the responses from the interviews were mostly in accordance with the results of the quantitative data.

5.1. Feelings of apprehension towards the in-class activities of the speaking course

The first research question refers to the feelings of apprehension towards the in-class activities of the speaking course. The results indicate that impromptu speaking activities were regarded as the most stressful for most of the students. The results are in line with the findings of Young’s study (1990), which found that students would have more anxiety if they were asked to have speaking practices on the spot. The reason behind may be due to a lack of skills and experience in impromptu speech as English is not their native language and speaking a topic on the spot requires a lot of skills and experience. This thus might result in pressure, according to one of the interviewees (original wordings):

“It is the origin of my pressure because English is not my mother tongue and I can’t speak naturally just like Cantonese.”

A study carried out by Öztürk & Gürbüz (2014) also reveals that “speaking spontaneously is the most common situation in which students get anxious” (p. 12). Speaking instantly, especially without much preparation or being asked to answer an instant question, was found to cause much anxiety with students. This is reflected by one of the interviewees when asked about a time that he felt uncomfortable speaking in English in the course (original wordings):

“I remember when I was having an impromptu speech, I felt a bit uncomfortable as it is my first time to do that, which I cannot expect how many sentences I need to use and how long to use.”

Apart from this skills deficit type of anxiety, another reason may be because students are afraid of speaking alone in front of the others, as activities like repeating as a class and discussion with peers were the ones regarded as provoking less anxiety. This shows that students feel more nervous if they speak or work alone. When speaking or working alone, students constantly compare themselves with others and the feeling of inferiority is likely to trigger feelings of anxiety. As Koch and Torrell (1991) point out, speaking in front of classmates may be a source of language anxiety. Most importantly, they may be afraid of

being evaluated individually by the teacher. This performance worry may result in anxiety. The following interviewees' answers (original wordings) to the question on the elements leading to the uncomfortableness of the speaking course reinforce the analysis:

"When I need to have a speech in front of my teacher, I felt a bit anxious."

"I think teachers may organize some group activities to let student interact with one another and thus make students more comfortable."

"Individual practice because I am afraid of being wrong and teacher could have noticed my mistake, which is unlikely classmates...."

5.2. Reactions to the speaking course and the possible causes

The second research question examines the reactions of students to the speaking course and the possible causes. The study reveals that the three major types of factors constituting to the positive and negative reactions of students to the speaking course are pedagogical, personal and activity.

Factors leading to positive reactions. Findings of the study revealed that "having more practices" received the highest mean, followed by "not speaking in front of others" and "not being the only one to speak". These findings are consistent with the study of Von Wörde (2003), who discovered that pedagogical and instructional practices and instructor's attitudes toward error correction are anxiety-provoking. As Price (1991) points out, speaking skill is usually regarded as the most threatening aspect when learning a foreign language, it is thus essential that the instructor can find ways to reduce students' anxiety based on their skill-specific knowledge and competence (Cheng, 2005). This is echoed by one of the interviewees (original wordings):

"avoid individual time in speaking English. I think we should have more group activities first, then we have individual time in speaking English. Also, I think a relaxing learning environment for example...."

Factors leading to negative reactions. In the light of the respondents' responses, it is possible to state that the negative reactions were associated closely with individuals' perceptions and beliefs towards communicating with others using the target language (Daly, 1991). The results of the present study show that the mean scores of "I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in a speaking class" was the highest among all, followed by "I always feel my classmates speak better than me" and "I feel more nervous when I know I am being graded in an English speaking task". These results further assert that negative feelings arise mainly from lack of confidence in English speaking, a fear of being evaluated and failing the class. In the answers of the students being interviewed, it is confirmed that students had feelings of apprehension due to the above mentioned reasons (original wordings):

"Before my presentation, I was always nervous because of the lack of preparation. (Preparation is always not enough for people...)"

"I don't feel confident speaking in English during the speaking course."

"I felt uncomfortable speaking in English during the speaking course as I realized that my English pronunciation is not good and different from the standard pronunciation...."

The study results indicate that the confidence level of the respondents deserves attention. Having a feeling of unpreparedness, a fear of being evaluated, failing the class or talking to native speakers show that most of the respondents are lacking in confidence. As Chan, Abdullah, & Yusof (2012) mention, “if a speaker feels that the other speaker is better, then there could be a reverse psychology where he may feel inadequate in having to speak and perform to the best of his ability” (p. 162). In Hong Kong, students generally are not confident in speaking English. This may be mainly due to inadequate opportunities of being exposed to the target language and applying the language into real life. In addition, the culture of focusing on scores may also aggravate the situation. After much effort of teachers and schools, confidence remains as an impediment to mastering the English language.

The study results also indicate that activity type may induce various levels of negative reactions of the respondents to the course. Similar to the findings in Table 2, it seems that the respondents had more negative reactions to impromptu speech than to prepared speech, group speaking tasks or pronunciation training. This is understandable because impromptu speech is comparatively more demanding and challenging, and most importantly, a solo performance. Pronunciation training and group speaking tasks involved fewer comparisons with their fellow classmates and thus the respondents could be more relaxed and confident.

5.3. Strategies to alleviate feelings of apprehension

Based on the analyses above, the issue of language anxiety could be related to a number of factors, such as pedagogical, personal and activity type. Irrespective of the possible factors, teachers play a key role on the feelings of anxiety students experience in the English speaking course. The respondents of the study pointed out that teacher’s attitude, behavior, ways of teaching are the issues that could make offset the above-mentioned factors and make learners less anxious in the English speaking lesson.

According to the findings, the most rated useful strategy in the questionnaire survey was found to be having a helpful teacher, followed by a pleasant teacher’s correction attitude and behavior. This is understandable as the respondents seem generally not very confident of themselves in English speaking. It is believed that teacher’s helpful, friendly and pleasant attitude could be of some help to reduce learner’s language fear.

Teacher’s ways of teaching might also matter since the respondents reflected that they valued highly on teacher’s ability of making them comfortable, less embarrassed and creating a co-operative learning environment. This is echoed by Wang (2003), who claims that classroom anxiety may be brought by teacher anxiety. For example, it will be anxiety-provoking if the teacher always focuses on grammar rules in error corrections. Suggestions were provided by some of the interviewees in the interview regarding this issue (original wordings):

“I think teachers may organize some group activities to let students interact with one another and thus make students feel more comfortable.”

“I think teachers may not only focus on the lesson’s materials and teach students the pronunciation; teachers may raise some current issues and chat with students. In this activity, students may not feel stressful or fear as they are just sharing their opinion....”

“I think we should have more group activities first, then we have individual time in speaking English. Also, I think a relaxing learning environment for example, learning English through video, song or film and maintaining a good relationship between teachers and students are needed to reduce the stress of students.”

"I think there should be more interaction between teachers and classmates. For example some group discussions and activities."

In the light of the respondents and interviewees' accounts, it is important that the teacher should help to create a relaxing and co-operative learning environment and atmosphere by showing positive attitudes, behaviors and teaching methods. Learners could then feel more supportive and fear less in such a harmonious setting.

6. CONCLUSION

The current study examined the perceptions of university learners on English speaking apprehension in a Hong Kong classroom. The results of the study revealed that impromptu speaking activities were regarded as the most intimidating. In addition, the study confirmed that it was likely that pedagogical, personal and activity factors attribute to the positive and negative reactions of learners to the English speaking course. Among the three factors, pedagogical and personal factors seem to attribute to positive reactions more, while personal factors attribute to negative ones. Finally, it was found that teachers played a significant role in reducing language fear. Teachers' attitude, behavior and ways of teaching are the aspects to be considered seriously.

6.1. Implications

The results of the present study indicated that the design of activities has an important impact on language anxiety. Teachers therefore need to be more aware of their students' level of knowledge and choose the activities that are appropriate for their language competence. In addition, sufficient support and guidance should be provided if the activity is considered to be challenging to students. For example, group or pair tasks, instead of individual tasks, should be given.

Other than activity design, teachers can help learners to develop their confidence in speaking English. It is important for students to know that it is natural to make mistakes while speaking a foreign language and it is unrealistic to think that they can speak perfectly after attending the course. The most important strategy is to practice more. As Cheng (2009) states, "with the realistic expectations and the improvement in proficiency, students will increase their confidence in learning English" (p. 61).

Creating a relaxed learning environment is also believed to be effective in reducing language anxiety. The study findings showed that students mostly preferred a less intimidating learning environment. "A low-stress (sic) language learning environment is often associated with the quality of teachers and instructional methods" (Cheng, 2009, p.62). Generally, teachers can create a less threatening classroom by being more helpful, supportive and friendly since students are usually afraid of being penalized if they do not perform well in a traditional classroom. If teacher-student relation is good, students are more willing to learn as they have less fear about the language and lesson.

6.2 Limitations and suggestions

The current study was experimental in nature and its inferences are rather limited, so the findings may not be generalized to other contexts. Future research could be conducted to investigate other students in the other levels, local or overseas universities. In addition, teachers' perceptions and responses could be collected for a more thorough understanding of language anxiety of their learners as the present study only showed students' responses. It is hoped that the present study could provide a basis for more comprehensive investigations and discussions on the topic and teachers could know how to help students be less anxious while speaking English, and in turn more willing to participate in the classes.

REFERENCES

- Creswell, J. W., and Clark, P. *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 2011.
- Chan, S. H., Abdullah, A. N., and Yusof, N. B., 'Investigating the Construct of Anxiety in Relation to Speaking Skills among ESL Tertiary Learners. 3L, Language. Linguistics and Literature'. In *The Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies*, 18(2012): 155-166.
- Cheng, Chia-Hui, *Language Anxiety and English Speaking Proficiency*. (PhD diss., Ming Chuan University. 2009.
- Cheng, Yuh-show, 'EFL Learners' Listening Comprehension Anxiety'. In *English Teaching and Learning*, 29(2005): 25-44.
- Cui, Jingjing, 'Research on High School Students' English Learning Anxiety'. In *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 2(2011): 875-880.
- Daly, John A., 'Understanding Communication Apprehension: An Introduction for Language Educators'. In *Language Anxiety: From Theory and Research to Classroom Implications*, edited by Elaine K. Horwitz and Diane L. Schallert, 3-13. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1991.
- Gan, Zhengdong, 'L2 Learner Individual Differences: An Integrative and Contextualist Perspective'. In *Reflections on English Language Teaching* 10 (2011), accessed June 7, 2015, <http://www.nus.edu.sg/celc/research/books/reit/vol10/67to88-gan.pdf>
- Hewitt, E., Stephenson, J. 'Foreign Language Anxiety and Oral Exam Performance: A Replication of Phillips's MLJ Study'. In *The Modern Language Journal*, 96(2012): 170-189.
- Horwitz, Elaine K., Michael B. Horwitz and Joann Cope, 'Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety'. *The Modern language journal*, 70(1986): 125-132.
- Humphries, Rebecca, 'Language Anxiety in International Students'. In *Griffith Working Papers in Pragmatics and Intercultural Communication*, 4(2011): 65-77.
- Koch, April, and Terrell, Tracy Dale, 'Affective Reaction of Foreign Language Students to Natural Approach activities and Teaching Techniques'. In *Language Anxiety: From Theory and Research to Classroom Implications*, edited by Elaine K. Horwitz and Dolly J. Young, 109-126. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1991.
- Liu, Meihua, and Jane Jackson, 'An Exploration of Chinese EFL Learners' Unwillingness to Communicate and Foreign Language Anxiety'. *Modern Language Journal*, 92(2008): 71-86.

- Mak, Barley, 'An Exploration of Speaking-in-class Anxiety with Chinese ESL Learners'. In *System*, 39(2011): 202-214.
- Marcos-Lliñas, Mónica, and Maria Juan Garau, 'Effects of Language Anxiety on Three Proficiency-level Courses of Spanish as a Foreign Language'. In *Foreign Language Annals*, 42(2009): 94-111, accessed July 4, 2015, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1944-9720.2009.01010.x>
- Ozturk, G. & Gurbuz, N. 'The Impact of Gender on Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety and Motivation'. In *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*. 70 (2013): 654-665.
- Price, Martin. 'The Subjective Experience of Foreign Language Anxiety: Interviews with Highly Anxious Students'. In *Language anxiety: From theory and research to classroom implications*, edited by Elaine Horwitz and Jean Stephenson, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1991.
- Schmidt, Richard, Deena Boraie, and Omneya Kassabgy, 'Foreign Language Motivation: Internal Structure and External Connections'. In *Language learning motivation: Pathways to the new century (Technical Report No. 11, pp. 9-70)*, edited by Rebecca. Oxford. Honolulu: University of Hawaii, Second Language Teaching and Curriculum Center, 1996.
- Spielmann, Guy and Mary Radnofsky, 'Learning Language under Tension: New Directions from a Qualitative Study'. In *Modern Language Journal*, 85(2001):259-278.
- Strauss, Anselm, and Juliet Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research; Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998.
- Tanveer, Muhammad, 'Investigation of the Factors that Cause Language Anxiety for ESL/EFL Learners in Learning Speaking Skills and the Influence it Casts on Communication in the Target Language'. (Master's thesis, University of Glasgow, England, 2007). Accessed July 6, 2015, http://www.asian-efl-journal.com/thesis_M_Tanveer.pdf
- Von Würde, Renee, 'Students' Perspectives on Foreign Language Anxiety'. In *Inquiry*, 8(2003), accessed August 6, 2015. <http://www.vccaedu.org/inquiry/inquiry-spring2003/i-81-worde.html>
- Wang, Qi, 'A Relative Study of Foreign Language Learning Anxiety and Classroom Atmosphere and its Teaching Significance'. In *Northwest Normal University Journal (social science edition)*, 6(2003): 27-31.
- Woodrow, Lindy, 'College English Writing Affect: Self-efficacy and Anxiety'. In *System*, 39(2006): 510-522, accessed July 15, 2015. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2011.10.017>
- Woodrow, Lindy, 'Anxiety and Speaking English as a Second Language'. In *RELC Journal*, 37(2006): 308-328.
- Young, Dolly Jesusita, 'An Investigation of Students' Perspectives on Anxiety and Speaking'. In *Foreign Language Annals*, 23(1990): 539-553.