



## Understanding Chinese Middle School Students' Anxiety in English Speaking Class

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This study employed a concurrent mixed method to find out whether Chinese young EFL learners (7th- to 9th- graders) were anxious, what caused them to feel/become anxious in English speaking class, how anxiety affected their learning of (spoken) English, and what differences existed in English speaking anxiety among the learners. Both quantitative (199 questionnaires) and qualitative (8 interviews) data were collected. The major findings were: (1) each grade sample was not anxious when speaking English in class. Few students were afraid to speak English, to make mistakes and to be laughed at in class, (2) the majority did not feel anxious when speaking English, a few did so due to such reasons as peer pressure, fear of making mistakes, fear of losing face, low self-confidence, little/no preparation, little practice, fear of being the center of attention, task difficulty, a limited vocabulary, poor English and wrong pronunciation, (3) anxiety seemed to have a negative effect on students' learning of (spoken) English, and (4) differences occurred in English speaking anxiety levels, causes for and effects of anxiety among the learners in different grades.

**Keywords:** middle school students, anxiety, English speaking class

### Introduction

The role of foreign language anxiety (FLA) has been widely researched in second/foreign language (SL/FL) acquisition, with an enormous focus on adult learners of English as a second/foreign language (ESL/EFL) (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). The studies have generally revealed that quite many learners experience anxiety in SL/FL learning and that anxiety consistently negatively affects SL/FL learning (e.g., Alshahrani & Alshahrani, 2015; Gardner, 1985; Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986; Liu, 2016; Liu & Jackson, 2008, 2011; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). As English becomes a universal language and the world becomes increasingly globalized, FL instruction, especially English, tends to start earlier and earlier around the world in recent few decades. This is the same in China, which may explain the trend in Liu's studies that Chinese university students seem to suffer lower levels of anxiety than their older peers in English learning (Liu, 2006, 2007, 2012; Liu & Thondhlana, 2015; Lu & Liu, 2015). Even so, more research is called for to further confirm this trend, especially research on Chinese young learners of English, which has seldom been studied. For this reason, the present study aims to find out whether Chinese young EFL learners were anxious and what caused them to feel/become anxious in English language class. This will be able to identify the unique anxiety profiles for different cultural and demographic groups as recommended in Horwitz (2017) and offer useful suggestions for future research on emotions associated with SL/FL learning.

## Literature Review

As “the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system” (Spielberger, 1983, p. 15), anxiety is often classified into three types: trait anxiety, state anxiety and situation-specific anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991; Scovel, 1978). As a situation-specific anxiety, FLA has been enormously researched (e.g., Dewaele, 2013; Dewaele & Alfawzan, 2018; Gardner, 1985; Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991; Scovel, 1978). According to Krashen’s (1982) filter theory, anxiety could negatively affect FL learners’ full use of language input. This negative effect of anxiety in SL/FL learning has been acknowledged by many researchers (e.g., Gardner, 1985; Horwitz, 2017; Horwitz et al., 1986; Liu, 2007; Liu & Jackson, 2008, 2011; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991; Young, 1991). As defined in MacIntyre (1999), FLA refers to learners’ worry, and negative emotional reactions linked to learning/using a SL/FL. Horwitz et al. (1986) defined FLA as a specific kind of anxiety responsible for language learners’ uncomfortable experiences with SL/FL learning. To measure it, they developed the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), which consists of 33 items and covers three dimensions—communication apprehension, fear of being negatively evaluated and test anxiety.

Quantitative research has revealed that learners experience anxiety to differing degrees in SL/FL class and that there is a consistent negative correlation between FLA and SL/FL learning outcomes measured by different test scores or school grades in different aspects (e.g., reading, speaking, and vocabulary learning) of a SL/FL (e.g., Al-Shboul, Ahmad, Nordin, & Rahman, 2013; Alshahrani & Alshahrani, 2015; Dewaele & Alfawzan, 2018; Liu & Jackson, 2008). For example, in Wu’s (2011) study, 91 university students answered the questionnaires and took a reading comprehension test. The findings showed that students with lower language anxiety and reading anxiety tended to score higher in the reading comprehension test. This line of research also shows that FLA interacts with a multitude of other factors such as language proficiency, motivation, self-confidence, language strategy use, the number of FLs known, age, gender, and willingness to communicate (Boudreau, MacIntyre & Dewaele, 2018; Dewaele, 2013; Dewaele & Alfawzan, 2018; Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Lu & Liu, 2015). For example, the FLA level decreases as learners have more exposure and access to the FL (Liu, 2007; Liu & Jackson, 2011) and increases as learners learn more FLs (Dewaele, 2013); more anxious learners tend to use less frequently more effective strategies in language learning (Lu & Liu, 2015) and be more unwilling to communicate in the FL (Liu, 2017; Liu & Jackson, 2008). In a study of learners’ anxiety and enjoyment in FL class, Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) administered a self-developed 21-item Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) and an 8-item Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) adapted from Horwitz et al. (1986) FLCAS as well as other measures to thousands of FL learners around the world. The results revealed that the FLE levels were significantly higher than those of FLCA, and that FLE and FLCA were related to such variables as students’ self-perceived proficiency in the FL, number of languages known, education level, number of FLs under study, age, gender, cultural background, general proficiency in the FL, classroom environment, and teachers’ professional and emotional skills.

Qualitative researchers have found that speaking is the most anxiety-provoking activity, especially when speaking the SL/FL in front of others, that SL/FL learners become/feel anxious due to various linguistic, cultural, educational, psychological and personality reasons, such as being afraid of being negatively evaluated, being afraid of being laughed at, peer pressure, low proficiency in the SL/FL, fear of making mistakes, not understanding the input, teachers being (too) strict, unfamiliarity with the surrounding, poor pronunciation, competition, and being shy (e.g., Alshahrani & Alshahrani, 2015; Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014; Liu, 2006, 2016; Liu & Jackson, 2011; Price, 1991; Young, 1991). By contrast, a mutually supportive peer group or class, an empathetic teacher, a confident or experienced learner and so on helps to reduce anxiety. For example, Liu’s (2016) mixed study of Chinese speaking anxiety and willingness to communicate in adult international learners of Chinese showed that the participants felt anxious when speaking Chinese in class because of peer pressure, fear of being laughed at, poor Chinese, fear of public speaking, worry about bad consequences

and fear of being the center of attention. Some researchers (Dewaele, 2012, 2017; Liu, 2007) also found perfectionism to be a cause for FLA in university students. Effiong's (2016) interview study showed that such factors as unfriendliness and the dress code of the teacher as well as laughter and silence could lead to anxiety in class. Moreover, it is worth noting that FLA can be facilitating in certain situations (Bailey, 1983; Horwitz, 2017; Liu & Jackson, 2011) and that FLA and SL/FL learning outcomes can be mutual factors for each other (Liu & Jackson, 2008, 2011).

As reviewed above, studies on FLA in young learners are scarce (Abu-Rabia, 2004; Alshahrani & Alshahrani, 2015; Chan & Wu, 2004; Dewaele & Alfawzan, 2018; Gürsoy & Akin, 2013; Gürsoy & Arman, 2016; Liu & Cheng, 2014). For instance, Gürsoy and Akin (2013) employed an adapted version of FLCAS (Horwitz et al., 1986) and other measures on 84 Turkish children aged 10 to 14 years old. They found that the 10-year-olds were less anxious about English than their older peers, and that the older students were more afraid of tests and held more negative beliefs about English learning. They also found that examinations were the most anxiety-provoking to the children. Chan and Wu (2004) explored FLA in 11-12-year-old Taiwanese students with an adapted FLCAS (Horwitz et al., 1986) and interviews. The study showed that the main sources of anxiety were language tests, peer pressure (feeling less competent in EFL than peers), and having to speak in front of others in the FL. Macaro and Lee's (2013) case study of 12-year-old Korean primary school children revealed that failing to understand every word that the teacher said in English was a major cause for them to feel/become anxious in class. Liu and Cheng (2014) recruited 212 fifth- and sixth-graders in central Taiwan and found that at least a quarter of the participants experienced an above-average level of anxiety though most participants generally experienced a mild level of anxiety in the EFL classroom. The students tended to be most anxious when (a) feeling that other students had better English performance, (b) being called on to speak in class, and (c) feeling afraid of being left behind in class. The researchers concluded that students were most likely to feel anxious due to worry over inadequate language performance and fear of being evaluated negatively by others.

Moreover, young and adult SL/FL may experience different levels of FLA and become/feel anxious in SL/FL class for different reasons, especially in this globalized, information explosion, and technology-prevalent world. Therefore, it is necessary to research FLA in young SL/FL learners. This study used a concurrent mixed method (Creswell, 2009) to find out whether Chinese young EFL learners were anxious and what caused them to feel/become anxious in English speaking class. The major purpose was to identify differences in English speaking anxiety among Chinese young EFL learners (7<sup>th</sup>- to 9<sup>th</sup>- graders). To accomplish this, the following three specific research questions were formulated:

- (1) To what degree are Chinese young learners of English anxious when speaking English in class?
- (2) What causes the students to be anxious when speaking English in class?
- (3) What are the effects of anxiety on students' learning of (spoken) English?

## The Present Study

### Participants

This study was conducted in a middle school in Beijing, where an English-speaking course was offered by native speakers of English to all students. The course lasted a term which had 21 weeks, with one meeting of 50 minutes per week. Even so, speaking English was not so highly valued as other skills of English (e.g., listening and reading) since it was not required in important English examinations in middle and high schools. The participants in the study included survey and interview respondents, as described below.

**Survey participants.** A total of 199 (103 male and 96 female) students aged 12 to 16 of this school answered the survey: 74 7<sup>th</sup> graders, 70 8<sup>th</sup> graders and 55 9<sup>th</sup> graders.

**Interview participants.** Concurrently, two 7<sup>th</sup>, 4 8<sup>th</sup> and 2 9<sup>th</sup> graders participated in semi-structured interviews (Creswell, 2009). For the sake of convenience and privacy protection, a number was assigned to each interviewee, which was used when reporting their remarks in the paper. Both 7<sup>th</sup> graders liked English and speaking English, in that “it is comfortable to read English out” (No. 1, female), “English is easy” (No. 2, male) and “a good score in an English test can help enhance my overall academic achievements in the grade” (No. 2, male). They self-rated their spoken English as intermediate and intermediate-advanced respectively. One 8<sup>th</sup> grader reported liking English very much because “it is a universal language in this world and is very useful” (No. 3, female), two held a neutral attitude towards English because “it is useful to master English to go abroad” (No. 5, male) yet “there is too much to memorize and learn to master English like words and grammar, then it is not fun” (No. 6, male), and one did not like English because “it is too ... too difficult, and I can’t read it or listen to it. It’s not interesting at all” (No.4, male). Three of them reported liking speaking English very much, which could make them “highly intellectual” (No.3, 8<sup>th</sup> grade, female), “useful” (No. 5, male) and “very cool” (No. 6, 8<sup>th</sup> grade, male). Three 8<sup>th</sup> grade interviewees rated their spoken English as very bad and one rated hers as intermediate. One 9<sup>th</sup> grade interviewee liked English a lot because of interest in the language and the other neither liked nor disliked it; one liked to speak English in class and the other preferred to speak Chinese. Both 9<sup>th</sup> grade interviewees rated their spoken English as good except that their pronunciation was not good enough.

## Instruments

The data in this present was gathered via a 15-item questionnaire and interviews, as detailed below.

**English Speaking Class Anxiety Scale.** The survey used in the present study was adapted from Horwitz et al.’s (1986), with several modifications being made to better suit the present situation. First, only items indicating physical symptoms of anxiety, nervousness and lack of confidence concerned with speaking anxiety were selected, with reference to causes for speaking anxiety in SL/FL language class identified in the current literature (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Liu, 2006, 2016; Price, 1991; Young, 1991). One item (15) was added based on an informal talk with middle school students prior to the study. Thus, the English Speaking Class Anxiety Scale (ESCAS) used in the present study had 15 items, with a reliability score of .906, covering such aspects related to speaking English in class as self-confidence (items 1, 6, 10, & 11), making mistakes (items 2, 7, & 15), teacher input (items 3 & 12), preparation (items 4 & 14), volunteering to speak (item 5), being singled out to speak English (item 8), peer pressure (item 9), and being laughed at (item 13). Then, the words “language” and “foreign language” used in the original FLCAS were consistently replaced with “English”. All the items were placed on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree”, with values of 1-5 assigned to each of the five descriptors respectively. The higher the score, the more anxious a student was when speaking English in class.

**Semi-structured interview.** To gather more views of English speaking anxiety, 8 survey respondents were interviewed. The interview guide covered such questions as feelings when speaking English in class, causes for anxiety, and the effects of anxiety on English speaking performance.

**Speaking English test performance.** Students’ scores in the course’s final-term speaking English test were collected as indicators of their performance in oral English. The test consisted of two parts: 1-minute recitation of a text and a 2-minute teacher-student conversation (e.g., topics like “what book did you read this week?” and “what sports do you like?”).

## Procedure and Data Analyses

During the 20<sup>th</sup> week of the term, a week prior to the final-term examination, the questionnaire, as well as a background information questionnaire and a consent form, was distributed to students in Grades 7-9 of the school, who answered the questionnaires in around five minutes. Meanwhile, 8 survey participants were interviewed by a research assistant, each of which lasted about 4.5 minutes and was tape-recorded. Both the questionnaires and the interviews were conducted in Chinese. After that, final-term examination scores were collected.

SPSS 20 was used to analyze the quantitative data. Means and standard deviations were computed to determine English speaking anxiety levels of the students. Post-hoc (Duncan's) tests of one-way ANOVA were run to explore the difference in English speaking anxiety levels between the graders; and correlation analyses were conducted to examine the associations between English speaking anxiety and English-speaking performance. All the interview recordings were transcribed and double-checked, the results of which were then subjected to open coding to identify feelings, causes for and effects of anxiety on the learning of (spoken) English (Richards, 2009). The results complemented those of quantitative data.

## Results

### English Speaking Anxiety Levels of the Graders

#### Analysis of the ESCAS items

A total of 199 complete questionnaires was collected for statistical analyses. The English Speaking Class Anxiety Scale (ESCAS) items were computed in terms of mean (M) and standard deviation (SD) first for each sample graders and then compared by ANOVA to explore differences. The results are presented in Tables 1 and 2.

TABLE 1  
*Means and Standard Deviations of ESCAS Items*

<i>ESCAS Items</i>	<i>Grade 7 (N = 74)</i>		<i>Grade 8 (N = 70)</i>		<i>Grade 9 (N = 55)</i>	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking English in my class.	2.14	1.09	2.31	1.22	2.35	1.14
2. I don't worry about making mistakes in the English class.	2.31	1.06	2.64	1.36	2.78	1.26
3. It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in English.	2.15	1.14	2.31	1.43	2.38	1.22
4. I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in the English class.	2.05	1.13	2.10	1.31	2.58	1.33
5. It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my English class.	1.72	.94	1.84	1.19	2.15	1.22
6. I feel confident when I speak English in class.	2.31	1.19	2.43	1.22	2.51	1.17
7. I am afraid that my English teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make.	2.11	1.12	2.10	1.28	1.84	1.12
8. I can feel my heart pounding when I'm going to be called on in the English class.	2.30	1.21	2.50	1.41	2.29	1.28
9. I always feel that the other students speak English better than I do.	2.82	1.23	2.71	1.34	3.16	1.21
10. I feel very self-conscious about speaking English in front of other students.	2.01	1.22	2.10	1.26	1.96	1.07
11. I get nervous and confused when I am speaking English in class.	1.72	.97	1.94	1.23	1.87	1.17
12. I get nervous when I don't understand every word the English teacher says.	2.15	1.26	2.20	1.34	2.25	1.29
13. I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak English.	1.96	1.19	2.00	1.31	1.87	1.14
14. I get nervous when the English teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance.	2.14	1.25	2.44	1.35	2.24	1.15
15. I'm afraid to give wrong answers in my English class.	2.24	1.20	2.43	1.43	2.20	1.19

As shown in Table 1, the 7<sup>th</sup> graders scored 1.72 (items 5 and 11) to 2.82 (item 9), far below the item midpoint 3, even below 2.5 except item 9, on all the ESCAS items, indicating that they were not anxious when speaking English in class. These results were further supported by the interview results. When asked about feelings upon speaking English in class, one 7<sup>th</sup> grade interviewee did not feel anxious, saying that “if I am anxious my performance will be affected” (No.1, female), the other was rather anxious because “I may become a laughing stock if I don’t speak well” (No. 2, male) and “there isn’t much chance to speak English in class” (No. 2, male). As reported in Table 1, what made the 7<sup>th</sup> graders the most anxious was that other students might speak better English (item 9,  $m = 2.82$ ), that they might make mistakes (item 2,  $m = 2.31$ ), that they might not feel confident when speaking English (item 6,  $m = 2.31$ ), and that they would be asked by the teacher to speak English (item 8,  $m = 2.30$ ). Meanwhile, they felt natural to volunteer answers (item 5,  $m = 1.72$ ) and to speak English (item 11,  $m = 1.72$ ) in class. They were not afraid of being laughed at either (item 13,  $m = 1.96$ ). These results were consistent with the interview results, which revealed that both 7<sup>th</sup> grade interviewees were not afraid to speak English in class, because “... Even if I make a mistake, the teacher will correct it. Then I won’t make the same mistake again” (No. 1, female), and “I generally speak good English” (No. 2, male). Both commented that making mistakes was natural in the process of learning English and that it sufficed to correct the mistake when it occurred. As No.1 (female) narrated, “... If I make a mistake, the teacher will correct it and explain it, then I will not make the mistake again. This is good”. Understandably, they considered it natural for the teacher to correct their mistakes so that “I can improve my spoken English” (No. 2, male). For similar reasons, they did not think other students would be worried about it either, though some were afraid to do so because of the fear of being laughed at and wrong pronunciation. One 7<sup>th</sup> interviewee would volunteer to speak English in class because “there are lots of chances to practice speaking English in class” (No. 1, female), the other would not.

Table 1 shows that the 8<sup>th</sup> graders scored 1.84 (item 5) to 2.71 (item 9), far below the item midpoint 3, even below 2.5 except items 2, 8 and 9, on all the ESCAS items, suggesting that they were not anxious when speaking English in class. By contrast, only one 8<sup>th</sup> grade interviewee (No. 3, female) did not feel much anxious when speaking English in class because almost all the others did the same thing as well; two reported feeling quite anxious because they “don’t know anything” (No. 4, male) and “worry very much about making mistakes” (No. 5, male); one (No. 6, male) did not feel anxious if the task was not difficult but became somehow anxious if it was difficult. Table 1 reveals that the 8<sup>th</sup> graders felt the most anxious when other students spoke better English (item 9,  $m = 2.71$ ), when making mistakes (item 2,  $m = 2.64$ ), when called on by the teacher to speak English (item 8,  $m = 2.50$ ), and when the teacher asked questions they hadn’t prepared (item 14,  $m = 2.44$ ). They felt the least anxious when volunteering answers (item 5,  $m = 1.84$ ) and speaking English (item 11,  $m = 1.94$ ) in class. They did not worry much about being laughed at either (item 13,  $m = 2.00$ ). These results were generally consistent with the interview results. One 8<sup>th</sup> grade interviewee (No. 5, male) confided that he was rather afraid to speak English in class because he was not good at English, had limited vocabularies and feared making mistakes; two reported being slightly afraid to do so because they did not know how to speak English and felt (very) embarrassed, especially when they did not know certain words. All the four 8<sup>th</sup> grade interviewees remarked that it was natural to make mistakes in class, in that “... It is unavoidable” (No. 4, male) and “learning is to learn what we don’t know” (No. 6, male). To them, students who were good at English were not afraid to make mistakes in class, as No. 5 (male) reported, “... Those who are good at English may also make some mistakes sometimes, but those mistakes are small. But for those who don’t learn English well often make big mistakes like grammar mistakes, which is embarrassing”. All the 8<sup>th</sup> grade interviewees did not worry about the teacher correcting their mistakes, because it was good, unavoidable, and useful to improve their English. As No. 6 (male) said, “... Mistakes are bound to occur in the process of learning English. Correcting mistakes helps us not make them again. So it is good and helpful to improve my English”. Likewise, three of the 8<sup>th</sup> grade interviewees believed that students normally did not worry about the teacher correcting their mistakes, but one 8<sup>th</sup> grade interviewee commented that introverted or shy students might be slightly worried about it. One 8<sup>th</sup> grade interviewee (No. 3, female)

sometimes volunteered to speak English in class when she was ready, the other three seldom volunteered to do so, because they were not good at English, did not like to speak English in class, feared making mistakes and feeling embarrassed. They believed that students who were blunt and those who were good at English tended to actively volunteer to speak English in class to demonstrate their good English or because they liked English or quick at organizing ideas.

According to Table 1, the 9<sup>th</sup> graders scored 1.84 (item 7) to 3.16 (item 9), far below the item midpoint 3, even below 2.5 except items 2, 4, 6 and 9, on all the ESCAS items, reflecting that they were not anxious when speaking English in class. They became the most anxious when other students speaking better English (item 9,  $m = 3.16$ ), when making mistakes (item 2,  $m = 2.78$ ), when having to speak without preparation (item 4,  $m = 2.58$ ), and when not feeling confident in speaking English (item 6,  $m = 2.51$ ). Speaking English in class (item 11,  $m = 1.97$ ), being laughed at (item 13,  $m = 1.87$ ) and speaking English in front of others (item 10,  $m = 1.96$ ) provoked the least anxiety in them. These results largely conformed to the interview results. The two 9<sup>th</sup> grade interviewees were not afraid to speak English in class because “English speaking class is meant for students to speak English” (No. 8, female) and “I am cheeky” (No. 7, male). Both thought it natural to make mistakes in class, in that “one is bound to make mistakes sooner or later. This is natural. It doesn’t matter. When it occurs, just correct it” (No. 7, male), and “one can correct a mistake when she/he makes it” (No. 8, female). To them, students who had high self-esteem might be afraid to make mistakes, but others were probably not afraid to do so. Neither of them worried about the teacher correcting their mistakes, claiming that “if the teacher didn’t correct the mistakes, I would not be able to avoid making them” (No. 8, female). For the same reason, they reported that other students did not worry about the teacher correcting their mistakes either. Neither liked to volunteer to speak English in class unless called by the teacher.

### **Differences in the ESCAS items among the graders**

A further look at the ESCAS item scores indicates that the participants in all grades tended not to be anxious or worried when speaking English in class. A comparison of the scores across grades shows that the students tended to score higher on the ESCAS items as they moved higher in grades, meaning that students in higher grades tended to feel more anxious when speaking English in class. Nevertheless, as shown in Table 2, the post-hoc (Duncan’s) ANOVA test results indicate that statistically significant difference occurred only in items 2, 4 and 5 between students in different grades. Alternatively, the 9<sup>th</sup> graders worried about making mistakes in class significantly more than their 8<sup>th</sup> grade peers, they also felt significantly more panicked when having to speak English unprepared and embarrassed to volunteer answers in class than their 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> gradepeers.

TABLE 2  
ANOVA Results of the ESCAS Items Across Grades

ESCAS items	Sum of squares	df	F	P	F*	Location of Sig. difference (p = .05)
1. I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking English in my class.	1.759	2	.663	.517	2.77	/
2. I don't worry about making mistakes in the English class.	7.781	2	2.58 2	.078	2.77	8 <sup>th</sup> & 9 <sup>th</sup> graders
3. It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in English.	1.914	2	.591	.555	2.77	/
4. I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in the English class.	18.873	2	4.94 5	.008	2.77	7 <sup>th</sup> & 9 <sup>th</sup> graders; 8 <sup>th</sup> & 9 <sup>th</sup> graders
5. It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my English class.	5.957	2	2.40 1	.093	2.77	7 <sup>th</sup> & 9 <sup>th</sup> graders; 8 <sup>th</sup> & 9 <sup>th</sup> graders
6. I feel confident when I speak English in class.	1.290	2	.450	.638	2.77	/
7. I am afraid that my English teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make.	2.857	2	1.03 3	.358	2.77	/
8. I can feel my heart pounding when I'm going to be called on in the English class.	1.916	2	.562	.571	2.77	/
9. I always feel that the other students speak English better than I do.	6.576	2	2.04 9	.132	2.77	/
10. I feel very self-conscious about speaking English in front of other students.	.605	2	.211	.810	2.77	/
11. I get nervous and confused when I am speaking English in class.	1.933	2	.767	.466	2.77	/
12. I get nervous when I don't understand every word the English teacher says.	.356	2	.106	.900	2.77	/
13. I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak English.	.510	2	.172	.842	2.77	/
14. I get nervous when the English teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance.	3.499	2	1.10 0	.335	2.77	/
15. I'm afraid to give wrong answers in my English class.	1.943	2	.589	.556	2.77	/

Note. \* = Significant differences are reached. F\* → Critical F value for Duncan's test at .05 level (Black, 1999).

## Causes for and Effects of English Speaking Anxiety

### Self-reported causes for and effects of anxiety

Though the results presented above shows that the 7<sup>th</sup> graders were normally not afraid to speak English or make mistakes in class, Table 1 shows that what made the 7<sup>th</sup> graders anxious was that other students might speak better English, that they might make mistakes, that they might not feel confident when speaking English, and that they would be asked by the teacher to speak English. When asked causes for anxiety, the two 7<sup>th</sup> grade interviewees reported that some students became anxious when speaking English in class because they did not practice much, worried about making mistakes such as pronunciation and grammar mistakes, worried about being laughed at and feeling embarrassed. As No.1 (female) explained, "... Because they seldom practice speaking English, it is kind of stiff when they suddenly have to speak it in class. Then they worry about making mistakes, worry about their pronunciation and grammar. If they do make mistakes, other students may laugh, interrupt them and correct their mistakes. Then they may feel uncomfortable." Another important cause not identified but implied by the 7<sup>th</sup> grade interviewees was poor (spoken) English, as they commented that students who were good at English were not afraid to speak English in class and tended to be active to volunteer to do so while those who were not good at it were afraid to do so.

Meanwhile, as presented previously, what drove the 8<sup>th</sup> graders' anxiety anxious was other students speaking better English, fear of being unable to speak (good) English, fear of making mistakes, fear of being laughed at and feeling embarrassed, being called on by the teacher to speak English, being asked to answer questions without preparation, poor English, and the task being difficult. Of the four 8<sup>th</sup> grade

interviewees, two reported feeling quite anxious because they “don’t know anything” (No. 4, male) and “worry very much about making mistakes” (No. 5, male); one (No. 6, male) became somehow anxious if the task was difficult. In their eyes, students felt anxious when speaking English in class because they were afraid that they could not speak English as proficiently as their peers. They also worried that other students might laugh at them and worried about making mistakes, but those who were good at English did not feel so.

Likewise, the 9<sup>th</sup> graders became anxious due to such reasons as other students speaking better English, fear of making mistakes, having to speak without preparation, low confidence in speaking English, not knowing how to express themselves in English, and poor English. Both 9<sup>th</sup> grade interviewees reported that they became anxious when they did not know how to express themselves in English. They explained that those who were (very) fluent in spoken English were definitely not anxious, but those who couldn’t speak very good English were anxious, in that they were afraid of making mistakes and being laughed at. They also commented that students who were good at English were surely not afraid to speak it and were very active to volunteer to speak English in class, while the others spoke English only when asked to.

In regard to the effects of anxiety, all the interviewees remarked that it negatively affected their English speaking performance. As a 7<sup>th</sup> grade (No. 1, female) interviewee commented, “... Those who don’t feel anxious when speaking English are active to speak English in class. Then they tend to speak better and better, while those who are anxious when speaking English choose to be quiet and then tend to speak worse and worse. Then a vicious circle forms.” “If I am anxious my performance will be affected. For example, if I become anxious, I may make mistakes which I often don’t make, like I mispronounce words I know how to pronounce. This is bad and I can’t get the practice I want” (No. 1, 7<sup>th</sup> grade, female). An 8<sup>th</sup> grade (No. 5, male) interviewee reported that he sweated when feeling anxious.

### **Relationship between ESCAS items and English speaking test scores**

Analyses of the English speaking test scores showed that the 7<sup>th</sup>-, 8<sup>th</sup>-, and 9<sup>th</sup>-graders scored 85.7 (SD=12.38), 81.21 (SD = 12.32), and 83.8 (SD = 19.16) in the final term English speaking test respectively. In order to explore the effects of anxiety on English speaking performance, correlational analyses were run to explore the relationships between ESCAS items and students’ speaking English test scores (see Table 3). Table 3 shows that most ESCAS items were negatively correlated with English speaking test scores for students in all grades. As reported in Table 3, one ESCAS item (5) was significantly inversely related to 7<sup>th</sup> graders’ English speaking test scores ( $r = -.296$ ,  $p = .011$ ); 9 ESCAS items (1, 2, 5, 6, 9, 10, 11, 13 and 15) were significantly inversely related to 8<sup>th</sup> graders’ English speaking test scores, with a coefficient range of  $-.248$  to  $-.517$ ; all ESCAS items except 3 (items 3, 4, and 7) were significantly negatively correlated with 9<sup>th</sup> graders’ English speaking test scores, with a coefficient range of  $-.283$  to  $-.627$ . This means that the less embarrassed a 7<sup>th</sup> grader was to volunteer answers in class, the better he or she performed in the English speaking test, that the more confident (items 1 & 6), the less worried about making mistakes (item 2), the less embarrassed to volunteer answers (item 5), less worried about other students speaking better English (item 9), the more ease at speaking English (items 10 & 11), and the less worried about being laughed at (item 13) an 8<sup>th</sup> grader was, the better he/she did in the English speaking test, and that generally the more worried/less confident (except not understanding teacher’s input, speaking without preparation, and teacher correcting mistakes) a 9<sup>th</sup> grader was, the worse he/she performed in the English speaking test.

Table 3 also shows that more ESCAS items were significantly negatively related to students’ English speaking test scores as they moved to a higher grade and that the coefficients tended to be higher as well.

TABLE 3  
Correlations between ESCAS Items and Test Scores

ESCAS Items	English speaking test scores					
	Grade 7 (N = 74)		Grade 8 (N = 70)		Grade 9 (N = 55)	
	r	p	r	p	r	p
1. I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking English in my class.	.011	.925	-.329**	.005	-.428**	.001
2. I don't worry about making mistakes in the English class.	-.019	.872	-.272*	.023	-.415**	.002
3. It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in English.	-.157	.183	-.154	.204	-.076	.583
4. I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in the English class.	-.005	.968	-.205	.088	-.208	.128
5. It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my English class.	-.296*	.011	-.517**	.000	-.558**	.000
6. I feel confident when I speak English in class.	-.072	.544	-.357**	.002	-.550**	.000
7. I am afraid that my English teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make.	-.091	.442	-.086	.478	-.136	.324
8. I can feel my heart pounding when I'm going to be called on in the English class.	-.016	.893	-.131	.279	-.627**	.000
9. I always feel that the other students speak English better than I do.	.067	.573	-.255*	.033	-.350**	.009
10. I feel very self-conscious about speaking English in front of other students.	-.079	.506	-.320**	.007	-.402**	.002
11. I get nervous and confused when I am speaking English in class.	-.029	.808	-.369**	.002	-.431**	.001
12. I get nervous when I don't understand every word the English teacher says.	-.050	.673	-.200	.097	-.430**	.001
13. I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak English.	.060	.613	-.292*	.014	-.344**	.010
14. I get nervous when the English teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance.	.015	.899	-.229	.056	-.283*	.037
15. I'm afraid to give wrong answers in my English class.	-.024	.842	-.248*	.039	-.365**	.006

Notes. \*\* =  $p \leq .01$ ; \* =  $p \leq .05$ Coefficient of determination: small =  $r \leq 0.1$ ; medium =  $r = 0.3$ ; large =  $r \geq 0.5$  (Cohen, 1988)

## Discussion and Conclusion

### Levels, Causes and Effects of English Speaking Anxiety

Analyses of the data showed that, for each grade sample, the students were largely not anxious when speaking English in class, with mean scores much lower than the midpoint 3 and those in other similar studies with adult and/or young SL/FL learners (Al-Shboul et al., 2013; Alshahrani & Alshahrani, 2015; Dewaele & Alfawzan, 2018; Liu, 2007; Liu & Cheng, 2014; Liu & Jackson, 2008, 2011; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). This might be because English had been highly valued and widely learned and used in China in recent years so that the participants had significant exposure to the language. Because of this, Chinese learners, including the participants, tended to be more proficient in English than their peers of an older generation as in Liu's (2006, 2007; Liu & Jackson, 2008, 2011; Lu & Liu, 2015) studies. This might also be because, thanks to China's rapid development, the Chinese of the younger generation became more confident in themselves. Another possible explanation for this was that spoken English was not formally tested and not a required part of any official or important English examinations for the participants, while tests and examinations were major causes for anxiety in Gürsoy and Akin (2013) and Chan and Wu (2004). Moreover, though the survey results were generally supported by the interview results, their responses sometimes indicated inconsistency like in volunteering to speak English in class, which needs to be further researched.

Although the results revealed that few participants in each grade were afraid to speak English, to make mistakes and to be laughed at in class, some students felt/became anxious when speaking English, mainly due to such reasons as peer pressure (e.g., other students speaking better English), fear of making mistakes, fear of losing face (e.g., fear of being laughed at and feeling embarrassed), low self-confidence, little/no preparation, lack of/little practice, fear of being the center of attention (e.g., fear of speaking English in class or being called by the teacher), task difficulty, a limited vocabulary, poor English, and wrong pronunciation. These causes were generally similar to those identified in previous studies (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Liu, 2007; Liu & Cheng, 2014; Liu & Jackson, 2011; Tsui, 1996), primarily triggered by personal and interpersonal anxieties, instructor-learner interactions and classroom procedure as categorized in Young (1991). Nevertheless, when reporting the causes, the interviewees did not stress competitiveness among their peers as happened in Bailey (1983) and Liu (2007), or fear of making mistakes, losing face and being the center of attention, none reported tests as a cause either, as discussed in the current literature (Horwitz et al., 1986; Liu, 2007). They tended more to consider it natural to make mistakes, to learn from the mistakes corrected by their teachers, and to speak English in English speaking class. As teachers had been better educated and prepared in China, instructor-related variables began to become less threatening to learners of English, unlike what was reported in previous research (Dewaele & Alfawzan, 2018; Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Liu, 2007; Liu & Jackson, 2011; Tsui, 1996; Young, 1991).

Meanwhile, as expected, English speaking anxiety proved to negatively affect students' spoken English, as reported in the current literature (Al-Shbou et al., 2013; Alshahrani & Alshahrani, 2015; Dewaele & Alfawzan, 2018; Liu & Cheng, 2014; Liu & Jackson, 2008). Surprisingly, no interviewees reported positive effects of anxiety on their learning of spoken English, despite that some ESCAS items were not significantly inversely related to English speaking test performance, especially for the 7<sup>th</sup> graders. This might be probably because the participants suffered a rather low level of anxiety when speaking English in class. This might also be due to the small number of interviewees.

### **Differences in English Speaking Anxiety among the Graders**

The results showed that the students in higher grades tended to feel more anxious when speaking English in class, and that the 9<sup>th</sup> graders worried about making mistakes in class significantly more than their 8<sup>th</sup> grade peers and felt significantly more panicked when having to speak English unprepared and embarrassed to volunteer answers in class than their 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade peers, as revealed in Gürsoy and Akin (2013). The ninth graders were less active to volunteer to speak English in class as well. Slight differences were also observed in their reported causes for and effects of English speaking anxiety. More ESCAS items were significantly negatively related to English speaking test scores, and the coefficients tended to be higher for students in higher grades. The 9<sup>th</sup> grade interviewees also reported a different cause for anxiety when speaking English—self-esteem, although they identified other similar reasons for anxiety as did their peers in grades 7 and 8. All these differences might be largely connected to the social milieu of the present study. The 7<sup>th</sup> graders, fresh from primary school, were the farthest away from the nationwide High School Entrance Examination (HSEE), which would place them into different high schools but did not include any speaking English test. Thus, they could fully enjoy the pleasure of speaking English for practice and felt the least pressured when doing so. By contrast, 9<sup>th</sup> graders, the last-year students of middle school, were right facing the coming HSEE. In order to prepare for the test, they naturally made less effort to study spoken English and felt more anxious when speaking English in class.

As little research has been done on anxiety in Chinese young learners of a SL/FL, more research is needed though the present study revealed some interesting findings. Moreover, many studies have revealed that FLA is dynamic in both young and adult SL/FL language learners (Gürsoy & Akin, 2013; Liu, 2006; Liu & Jackson, 2011). For instance, Liu (2006) and Liu and Jackson (2011) found that undergraduate Chinese EFL students became less anxious as their exposure to spoken English in the classroom increased during a term. It is therefore important to conduct case studies to identify and help

young individual anxious SL/FL learners (Horwitz, 2017). Finally, as implied by the present study, it might be true that the present generation of young Chinese learners experiences a low level of anxiety when speaking or learning a SL/FL, it is then necessary to turn to other types of emotions such as enjoyment, as done in Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) and Dewaele and Alfawzan (2018).

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