Korean Students’ English Speaking Anxiety and Their Coping Strategies

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This study aims to explore Korean ESL students’ degree of English speaking anxiety and how their perceptions and experiences of this anxiety vary with respect to their speaking proficiency. In addition, the study seeks to identify the language learning circumstances which may provoke the most and the least anxiety and to describe the strategies that students use to mitigate their own anxiety. Thirty-one students completed two questionnaires, a background questionnaire and an anxiety questionnaire, and six of them voluntarily participated in the follow-up interview. Descriptive analysis indicates that the degree of anxiety decreased with respect to language proficiency level in the following order: intermediate, advanced, and low. Moreover, the interview results reveal that students who felt high anxiety tended to be highly self-conscious about speaking English, whereas students with low anxiety had an inclination to be less affected by nervous feelings. All six interviewees reported that they felt the most anxious when having an oral presentation due to the fear of negative evaluation. Speaking with less competent learners and participating in group discussions turns out to be less anxiety-provoking to some students, which implies that careful classroom management can play a positive role in reducing students’ speaking anxiety.

Key words: foreign or second language anxiety, English speaking, speaking strategies

I. Introduction

High English language competency provides more and better job opportunities in many parts of the world; many international students come
to English speaking countries to study while immersed in a target language culture, which is particularly seen as a highly effective method of improving oral communication skills.

However, most second language learners who study abroad often report that they do not achieve the satisfactory language ability that they had expected. Although they are exposed to the second language every day, they feel hindered from gaining the skills that they need. One possible explanation for their lack of progress may be due to the variables associated with language learning, such as motivation, interest, affect, and environment. Over the past few decades, one particular individual difference, foreign language anxiety, has been studied as one of the primary concerns to many foreign or second language researchers. Due to the difficulty of measuring the effects of anxiety, somewhat inconsistent and confusing findings were reported in early research studies. However, more recently, there have been a number of studies that have shown relatively consistent results, in the time since the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) was constructed by Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986). A good deal of research using this scale has proposed that anxiety negatively influences language learning and leads to poor course grades (Kim, 1998; MacIntyre and Gardner, 1994; Rodrigues & Abreu, 2003; Saito and Samimy, 1996). In particular, Horwitz et al. (1986) pointed out that “anxiety is a major obstacle to be overcome in learning to speak another language (p.125).” Researchers also have identified relationships between anxiety and other language skills: reading (e.g., Seller, 2000); writing (e.g., Cheng, 2002); and listening (e.g., ElKhafaifi, 2005; Kim, 2000). The effect of anxiety on willingness to communicate has also been studied (e.g., Liu and Jackson, 2008; Yashima, 2002).

Despite these series of studies, there are still open issues that need to be further investigated. Research about the degree of anxiety increase or decrease according to students’ levels of English proficiency is called for, which would lead second or foreign language educators to examine effective