International Online Journal of Education and Teaching (IOJET), Vol. 13 , No. 2, 2026 (pp. 248-262)

RESEARCH ARTICLE WWW:IoJet.org

Factors Contributing to Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety and the Coping Strategies: A Case Study in China

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Keywords:
Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety (FLSA), Chinese EFL Learners, Factors, Coping Strategies.

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Received : 13.12.2025
Revised : 10.03.2026
Accepted : 12.03.2026

Abstract

Speaking is widely recognized as the most essential skill in foreign language acquisition, and it is most directly achieved through spoken interaction. Despite this, Chinese learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) often exhibit comparatively weaker speaking competence than in other language domains. Previous research has identified anxiety as a significant factor affecting oral performance, with studies reporting that between one-third and one-half of Chinese EFL learners experience foreign language anxiety (FLA), and over two-thirds of these cases are specifically linked to foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA). However, the underlying causes of FLSA and the coping strategies employed by learners remain underexplored within Chinese educational contexts. This study addresses this gap by investigating the contributing factors to FLSA and the coping strategies adopted by Chinese university students, using semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method. The findings revealed six key factors influencing FLSA and identified eight coping strategies utilized by learners to mitigate their anxiety. Based on these insights, pedagogical implications were discussed to inform more effective instructional practices for enhancing EFL speaking competence in China.

How to cite this article: Liu Y, Suppasetseree S, Chen J (2026). Factors Contributing to Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety and the Coping Strategies: A Case Study in China. International Online Journal of Education and Teaching, Vol. 13, No. 2, 2026, 248-262

Introduction

According to the three circles of English proposed by Kachru (1985), China belongs to the expanding circle, where English is taught as a foreign language (EFL). In China, English is taught from kindergarten through primary and secondary schools. It was estimated that over 400 million Chinese people were learning English in 2012 (Wei & Su, 2012), currently the number keeps increasing. English teaching has always been highlighted throughout Chinese history since the early 2000s.

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Despite China's strong emphasis on learning English, Chinese EFL learners still face challenges, especially in developing speaking skills (He & Miller, 2011). Speaking, among the four skills of English, has always been perceived as the most practical skill because the primary purpose of learning a foreign language is communication and speaking is the most direct way of communication (He, 2018). Many EFL students struggle with speaking English and often feel anxious when practicing in class (Shi et al., 2024). Previous studies (e.g., Amoah & Yeboah, 2021; He, 2018; Liu & Jackson, 2008) claimed that anxiety is an important factor influencing Chinese EFL learners' English speaking. They revealed that 1) their speaking problems were more closely linked with psychological factors such as anxiety than linguistic factors; 2) over one third or half of the Chinese EFL learners demonstrated foreign language anxiety (FLA) and their FLA caused their unwillingness to communicate in English class; 3) more than two-thirds of the FLA was associated with foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA).

Language anxiety is generally considered as debilitating which has a negative impact on language learning (Ellis, 2012). Students with higher levels of foreign language anxiety tend to anticipate and receive lower grades than those with lower anxiety levels (Horwitz, 2001). Language anxiety negatively influences learners' performance in various ways, both indirectly by leading to worry and self-doubt, and directly by decreasing class participation and leading to avoidance of the language (He, 2018). It adversely affects students' performance in multiple language skills, including vocabulary learning (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989), as well as reading, writing, listening (Kim, 2000), and speaking (Phillips, 1992). Decreasing anxiety appears to enhance language acquisition, retention and learner motivation (e.g., Horwitz et al., 1986; Young, 1990). Horwitz et al. (1986) stated that 1) some students may experience intensive anxiety that they postpone required courses until the last possible moment or change majors to avoid them; 2) those with moderate anxiety possibly procrastinate on assignments, reject speaking in class, or sit in the back row; 3) other students may seldom, if ever, experience anxiety or tension in a foreign language class; 4) The negative impact of anxiety is not limited to the classroom. Foreign language anxiety possibly influences learners' choices of courses, majors, and even career paths. It may also contribute to student resistance towards foreign language requirements. Therefore, reducing learners' anxiety is significant for ultimately enhancing their speaking skills.

To help Chinese EFL learners with high FLSA, identifying the factors contributing to their FLSA and the coping strategies is crucial. However, little research has been done to identify the factors, particularly the coping strategies of FLSA. Therefore, the present study attempted to use a qualitative approach to get a deep and comprehensive understanding of Chinese EFL learners' FLSA. The following two research questions ar formulated.

1. What are the factors contributing to Chinese EFL learners' foreign language speaking anxiety?
2. What are the coping strategies suggested by Chinese EFL learners to reduce their foreign language speaking anxiety?

Literature Review

Foreign Language Anxiety

Language anxiety is defined as the feeling of tension and apprehension, particularly linked with second language contexts (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994, p. 284). It is considered as a situation-specific anxiety (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991, p. 90). Horwitz et al. (1986) defined foreign language anxiety as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (p. 128). According to these researchers, this anxiety arises from the inherent lack of authenticity in early-stage second language communication abilities. They developed a five-point Likert scale named the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) as an instrument to examine learners' FLA, thus making FLA more tangible and operational for testing purposes.

Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety

Speaking is often suggested as the "most anxiety-provoking" (Cheng et al., 1999, p. 420), and it therefore attracted some scholars' special attention when defining FLA. Some scholars have begun to reconceptualize FLA in terms of individual language skills, including speaking. He (2018) starts the pioneering work on the definition of foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA). He reviews it as "an individual's fear or nervousness associated with either real or anticipated oral communication in a foreign language with another person or persons".

Language Anxiety and Achievements

According to Gkonou et al. (2017), language anxiety influences learners cognitively, academically, and socially. Firstly, language anxiety has cognitive effects on learners. Anxious learners often experience heightened self-focused thoughts, such as fear of failure, excessive worry about their performance, and self-criticism. This anxiety disrupts cognitive functioning at all three stages of learning: input, processing, and output. During the input phase, anxiety acts as a barrier, preventing new information from entering the cognitive system. In the processing stage, it slows down learning and reduces accuracy, making it harder for learners to absorb and retain new linguistic knowledge. At the output phase, anxiety interferes with information retrieval, leading to difficulties in recalling vocabulary, grammar rules, and previously learned content, ultimately diminishing the quality of second language communication. Secondly, language anxiety has academic effects on learners. It can damage students' confidence in their language abilities, creating a negative cycle of self-doubt. Consequently, learners may score lower on assessments of actual language proficiency. Thirdly, language anxiety has social effects on learners, influencing their confidence and willingness to communicate. In environments where the second or foreign language is predominantly spoken, learners may feel increased anxiety when using their first language, fearing judgment or a perceived loss of proficiency. This heightened apprehension discourages them from actively participating in conversations, reducing their opportunities for meaningful language practice.

Factors of Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety

In the general language classroom, Horwitz et al, (1986 p. 127-128) identified three key factors of foreign language anxiety (FLA): communication apprehension (a type of shyness characterized by the fear of communicating with people), fear of negative evaluation (apprehension about others' evaluation, avoidance of evaluative situations and expectation that others would evaluate oneself negatively), and test anxiety (a type of performance anxiety stemming from the fear of failure). Young (1991, p. 427) proposed a significant framework for classifying and investigating the factors of FLA, identifying six key factors: 1) personal and interpersonal anxieties, 2) learners' beliefs about language learning, 3) instructors' beliefs about language teaching, 4) interactions between instructors and learners, 5) classroom practices, and 6) language testing. In an EMI context, Wilang (2022) identified several factors of FLA, including communication apprehension, cognitive processing anxiety, the difficulty of the course, fear of making mistakes, lack of autonomy, perceived negative teacher acts, peer negative evaluation and test anxiety.

However, only three studies were conducted to investigate foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA). Woodrow (2006) developed the Second Language Speaking Anxiety Scale (SLSAS) and conducted interviews among advanced English for Academic Purposes (EAP) students enrolled in intensive EAP courses before entering Australian universities. The findings revealed that the most common source of anxiety was interacting with L1 speakers. Mak (2011) investigated the factors contributing to in-class speaking anxiety among Chinese first-year ESL university students in Hong Kong, using Horwitz et al.'s (1986) Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). The study identified five key factors: speech anxiety and fear of negative evaluation, discomfort when speaking with L1 speakers, negative attitudes toward the English classroom, negative self-assessment, and fear of failing the class or facing personal failure. He (2018) conducted a study involving first-year non-English majors and their teachers at two Chinese universities. Data were collected through

questionnaire surveys, interviews, and classroom observation. The findings identified three main factors of FLSA: 1) students' concerns, such as limited vocabulary, unfamiliarity with topics, fear of oral testing, and fear of making mistakes; 2) personality factors, including overly high self-expectations; and 3) environmental factors, such as an unsupportive learning environment.Although many studies have investigated the factors of general FLA (e.g., Horwitz et al., 1986; Wilang, 2022; Young, 1991), some have specifically focused on anxiety related to writing (Rasool et al., 2023)considering gender as a variable. The study's second goal was to uncover the learners' perspectives on writing anxiety and the factors that contribute to it. The convenience sample method was used to choose seventy-six students to participate in the English language teacher training course. Second Lan guage Writing Anxiety Reasons Inventory (SLWARI, reading (Chen et al., 2022; Zheng, 2024) and listening (Bekleyen, 2009), the research on the factors related to speaking skills remains insufficient.

Although many studies have investigated the factors of general FLA (e.g., Horwitz et al., 1986; Wilang, 2022; Young, 1991), some have specifically focused on anxiety related to writing (Rasool et al., 2023), reading (Chen et al., 2022; Zheng, 2024) and listening (Bekleyen, 2009), the research on the factors related to speaking skills remains insufficient.

Coping Strategies for Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety

Three studies proposed some strategies for alleviating FLSA. Young (1990) designed a questionnaire to investigate FLSA among Spanish university students and high school students. The study revealed that certain teacher traits, such as having a sense of humor, being friendly, patient, and maintaining a positive attitude towards error correction, were linked to lower levels of anxiety. Chou (2018) investigated university students' speaking anxiety, the strategies they employed, and the challenges they faced when speaking English in both full and partial English Medium Instruction (EMI) contexts through a questionnaire survey. The study indicated that students who practiced speaking more regularly and used communication strategies, such as rehearsal and paraphrasing, were less likely to experience speech anxiety. He (2018) identified three types of strategies to alleviate FLSA: 1) teacher-initiated strategies, including speaking good English, providing indirect error correction, and employing diverse teaching methods; 2) student-related strategies, such as thorough preparation, engaging in relaxation exercises, and discussing FLSA with others; and 3) environment-related strategies, like fostering a supportive atmosphere and incorporating language games. The research on the coping strategies for FLSA remains very low in number.

Methodology

Participants

Semi-structured interviews were conducted among fifteen Chinese EFL learners at a university in Southwest China. Concerning the selection of the participants for the interview, random sampling was employed because "stratified random sampling,

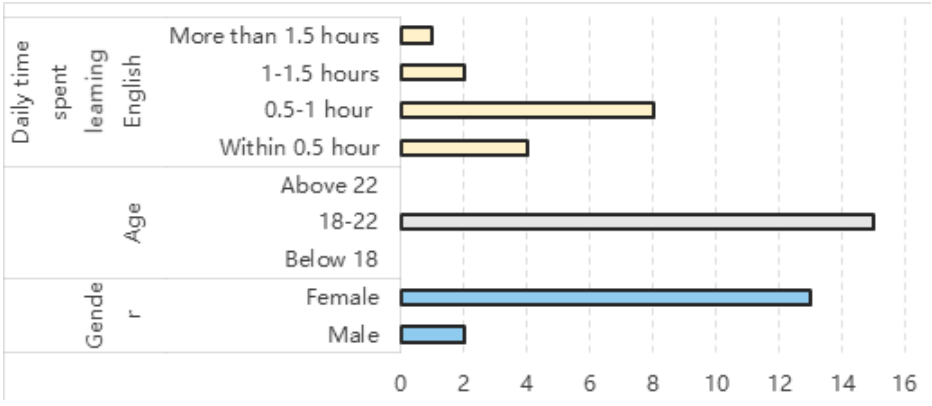

Fig. 1: Participants' Demographic Information

integrating random sampling with rational grouping, is especially effective for research with a specific focus" (Dörnyei, 2007). In this study, 15 participants were selected and divided into three groups based on their speaking test scores (high, medium and low). As for the qualitative sample size, it is suggested to have a minimum of 12 participants (Guest et al., 2006). Therefore, 15 interviewees were enough. For ethical reasons, participants were provided with an overview of the entire research process before the experiment, and their written consent forms were collected.

The participants (2 males, 13 females, aged between 18 and 22) had an intermediate level of English speaking proficiency, as determined by their scores on a placement test. None of them had overseas learning experience. Additionally, as shown in Figure 1, excluding English class time, 54% of them spent 0.5 to 1 hour daily learning English, 27% spent less than half an hour, 13% spent 1 to 1.5 hours, and 6% spent more than 1.5 hours.

Trustworthiness

To avoid any potential misunderstanding and alleviate pressure on the participants, the interview was conducted in Chinese. Moreover, the interview questions were translated into Chinese to prevent any misunderstandings and alleviate pressure on participants. The translation was reviewed by two experts to guarantee its accuracy. Additionally, member checking was used to ascertain the reliability by presenting the major findings (in Chinese) of the interview to the participants to confirm their accuracy. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), member checking is used to "determine the accuracy of the qualitative findings by taking the final report or specific descriptions or themes back to participants and determining whether these participants feel that they are accurate".

Data Collection and Analysis

The interviews were conducted with fifteen students divided into three groups and five students in each group. Each group interview lasted around twenty-five minutes. Before analysis, several preparatory steps were required, including transcription, translation, and an overview of the transcript. The researcher first transcribed the audio-recorded interview data, originally in Chinese, to ensure accuracy and to be familiar with the data. Next, the researcher translated the transcripts into English and conducted an initial reading to deepen the familiarity with the content. The objective of this phase was to prepare the text for the development of a coding system. By the end of this phase, the interview texts were ready for coding system construction.

After that, the three-phase thematic analysis suggested by Ebadi & Ebadijalal (2022) was adopted to analyze the interview data. Firstly, based on the interview questions, the transcripts of the interviews were coded to identify core themes. In this phase, the researcher thoroughly read all the transcripts multiple times, making notes on constructing the coding system to categorize the factors contributing to their FLSA and the coping strategies they suggested. During this process, the researcher read, reread, and analyzed the data to identify key themes. By the end of this phase, a tentative coding system had been established. The second phase, the axial coding phase, aims to group similar themes. In this phase, the researcher first confirmed and described the coding system established in the first phase. Next, the researcher reread and reanalyzed all the data, comparing them with the evolving coding system and noting any new emerging themes. The aim was to group similar themes together and to ensure each code was clearly differentiated from the others. The third phase, the labeling phase, was to assign labels to the grouped themes. Through the labeling, the coding system related to the factors and coping strategies of FLSA was eventually established.

Results and Discussions

Factors Contributing to Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety

As shown in Table 1, six factors of FLSA were elicited in the interview, including fear of making mistakes and negative evaluation (the worries about others' opinions on you), the lack of formulaic sequences, being put on the spot, learner belief (only English L1 norms are correct), difficulty or unfamiliarity of the topics, and trait anxiety (introversion, high

Table 1: Factors Contributing to Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety

Factors	Number of Responses
Fear of making mistakes and negative evaluation (the worries about others' opinions of you)	10
Lack of formulaic sequences	8
Being put on the spot	7
Learner belief (the belief that only English L1 speakers' norms are good)	7
Difficulty or unfamiliarity with the topics	6
Trait anxiety: (introversion, high self-expectations, perfectionism)	4

self-expectations, perfectionism). Among these, the lack of formulaic sequence and the learner belief that only English L1 norms are correct are new factors that have not been identified in previous studies.

Fear of making mistakes and negative evaluation

Ten out of fifteen learners expressed their concerns about making mistakes in front of their peers or the teacher, fearing criticism or mockery. This fear of being evaluated by both teachers and classmates can diminish their confidence and discourage them from fully participating in language practice. As some students expressed:

[1] "My heartrate increased a lot. Sometimes I could not stop my body from trembling when speaking in front of the class … I was afraid that my classmates would laugh at me if I made a mistake."

[2] "I always felt like all eyes were on me when I spoke English…I forgot what I had planned to say … I was afraid that if my answer was wrong, they (her classmates) would think that I was stupid and tell others that I'm a bad learner."

[3] "When I spoke, I worried that the teacher would judge negatively. It made me hesitant to answer or participate."

The finding indicates that students often fail to see mistakes as a natural aspect of foreign language learning and overlook the fact that all learners make mistakes. Instead, they perceive mistakes as a threat to their self-image and a trigger for negative evaluations from teachers or peers. This finding was consistent with Liu (2007) who also found fear of making mistakes and negative evaluation was a cause of FLSA among Chinese EFL learners. Some previous studies (e.g., He, 2013; Horwitz et al., 1986; Wilang, 2022) have tended to separate this cause into two: making mistakes as one cause and negative evaluation as another.

However, in this study, students discussed them together in the interviews, expressing their fear of negative evaluation from teachers or peers due to making mistakes. To help these students, teachers can take some action. First, teachers need to help them recognize that making mistakes is a natural part of foreign language learning and that all learners experience them. Meanwhile, teachers should be tolerant of minor errors that do not hinder communication, which can reduce pressure and boost students' confidence. For common mistakes, teachers can provide some implicit corrective feedback (e.g. recast, clarification request, elicitation, and repetition) instead of explicit ones, as the latter may weaken students' confidence. Such implicit corrective feedback should be provided after students complete their speaking tasks, avoiding interrupting them during performances. Second, teachers can provide students with the learning materials before class, such as video transcripts, allowing them to familiarize themselves with the content and preview the new words and structures. Third, teachers can offer them some encouragement such as a smile or a positive gesture. Fourth, teachers can exclude in-class performances from final course results using summative assessments at the end of the semester. Lastly, teachers can select the VR which does not reveal learners' identities to create a safe and comfortable virtual environment for learners to speak English freely.

Lack of formulaic sequences

Eight out of fifteen students expressed that they would feel less anxious if they had mastered many prefabricated collocations, and sentence structures, etc. Formulaic sequences are sequences of words such as common collocations (e.g., strong coffee, heavy rain), idiomatic expressions (e.g., spill the beans, break the ice), and sentence stems (e.g., The room we'd like to reserve is…) that are stored and retrieved as a unit from memory during use (Richards & Schmidt, 2010). They constitute a significant proportion of any discourse (Schmitt, 2004), accounting for 58.6% of the spoken English discourse (Erman & Warren, 2000). Many students in this study expressed that one factor of their FLSA was the lack of formulaic sequences. This is because formulaic sequences can help reduce cognitive processing pressure. As Perkins (1999, p. 56) noted, "the main reason for the prevalence of formulaicity in the adult language system appears to be the simple processing principle of economy of effort." It indicates that ready-made formulaic sequences allow students to express their ideas without the effort of generating an utterance from scratch each time they speak. To support these learners, teachers can use the following strategies. First, teachers can introduce and assist learners to practice some common collocations, idioms, and sentence stems through in-class exercises or games or by integrating them into virtual reality (VR). Alternatively, due to the limited class time, they can also provide these formulaic sequences examples before class for independent study. Furthermore, they can encourage students to reinforce their learning after class using dubbing applications such as Qupeiyin (a Chinese dubbing application). The following quotes were extracted from some interviewees:

[1] "Sometimes I struggled to begin or continue my sentences. So I just got stuck there and did not know what to do … If I had memorized enough ready-made expressions or sentence structures, I would speak much more smoothly and would not feel so nervous."

[2] "It was often hard for me to quickly find the right expressions when speaking English … I think, memorizing more common collocations would make me feel more confident."

Being put on the spot

Seven out of fifteen students reported that being put on the spot to perform in front of the class triggered their anxiety. This finding substantiates the study conducted by He (2018). Being put on the spot requires students to rely on their ability to think quickly and independently and improvise while processing the language. However, if teachers avoid putting students on the spot entirely throughout the whole course, it may become difficult to identify students' learning problems. To address this, teachers can reduce the frequency of putting students on the spot such as doing so every two topics, giving them enough preparation time, or excluding in-class performances from final course grades. Below are some quotes from the students:

[1] "When I had to perform in front of everyone, I felt really nervous. I felt like all eyes were on me, and my heart beat fast. Sometimes I could not stop myself from shaking."

[2] "I got anxious when I was selected to speak in front of the class. It made me forget what I wanted to say. I could not speak naturally as I normally would."

Learner belief

Learners believe that only English L1 speakers' norms are good was found to be a new factor of FLSA. Many students in this study considered that they needed to speak in British or American English, which made them very anxious when speaking. To deal with this problem, teachers can raise students' awareness about World/Global Englishes by presenting some videos of people from different countries speaking different varieties of English such as Singapore English, China English, etc. Students should acknowledge that English is an international language used as a lingua franca around the world (Zhang & Liu, 2024)English has become an international language that people use for various purposes in multilingual and multicultural communication. In teaching practices, British and American English are traditionally recognized as the target models. However, these models have incurred broad criticism for failing to guarantee effective communication. Thus, many studies have been done to investigate students' perceptions towards

English as an international language (EIL. Moreover, the number of English speakers in the outer and expanding circles far exceeds those in the inner circle where English is spoken as a first language (Kachru, 1985). Teachers can incorporate this awareness into the criteria for assessing their speaking skills by prioritizing comprehensibility, helping learners feel reassured that they do not need to speak like English L1 speakers. Seven out of fifteen students mentioned this factor. As they stated:

[1] "I felt not confident because I believed only American or British English is correct. I think I have a strong accent when speaking English."

[2] "I think that I must sound like American or British speaker. It puts a lot of pressure on me when speaking English. Because of this, sometimes I could not remember what I wanted to say."

Difficulty or unfamiliarity

Concerning topic difficulty or unfamiliarity, this finding substantiates the study conducted by Wilang (2022), which found that students' anxiety increases when they are unfamiliar with the topics. To help with this, teachers can start with familiar topics before gradually introducing more difficult ones, provide students with background information before class for previewing, and offer scaffolding when they have difficulty completing the speaking tasks in class. Six students mentioned this factor. As they mentioned:

[1] "Conversations about food and shopping were easy because we talk about them all the time, but hotel-related conversations, like making a reservation, were more challenging. I had never done that in English before. It made me feel nervous."

[2] "Ordering food, shopping, and talking about travel are daily topics, but interactions with hotel staff, such as housekeeping, or things like that, seemed more formal. I was not familiar with these situations … I felt anxious and uneasy."

[3] "For some topics, I felt that the role-plays in VR were easier … but I think that the topics involved conversations between hotel staff and guests were more difficult and there were only a few key words as prompts to guide the role-play."

Trait anxiety

Four students linked their anxiety to their personality traits, such as introversion, high self-expectations, and perfectionism. According to Horwitz et al. (1986), high self-expectations and perfectionism may lead to overstudying. These students often overly concentrate on their performance, leading to heightened FLSA when they do not perform well. When their intense efforts do not result in better grades, they may try to study even more. This finding aligns with He's (2018) study which also found trait anxieties such as high self-expectation were some of the factors of FLSA among Chinese EFL learners. To help these students, teachers can tell them about their positive personality traits to boost their self-esteem and confidence. Additionally, teachers can refer them, along with introverted students, to specialists or counselors who deal with anxiety management. Furthermore, VR can be used to expose learners to anxiety-provoking scenarios, helping them gradually adapt and reduce their fear of speaking English (Fehlmann et al., 2023). Some quotes from the students were extracted from the interview:

[1] "I think I'm an introvert. I feel uneasy and uncomfortable speaking in front of others, whether it's in English or Chinese."

[2] "I'm a bit of a perfectionist. Everything I do, I want to do my best. This kind of personality puts a lot of pressure on me. It sometimes makes me nervous when speaking English."

[3] "I hope to achieve more. But if I didn't meet my expectations when speaking English, I felt anxious and disappointed."

These findings provided a deeper understanding of the underlying factors contributing to FLSA. The lack of formulaic sequences and the learners' belief that only native norms are correct are new findings.

Coping Strategies for Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety

As shown in Table 2, students in the interview suggested eight coping strategies to alleviate their foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA), including VR therapy, input enhancement (e.g., formulaic sequences, communication strategies), pair or

group work, relaxation exercises, self-talk, positive thinking, enough preparation time, and avoidance of eye contact with the audience. Among these strategies, input enhancement and avoidance of eye contact with the audience were newly identified strategies that had not been identified in previous studies.

Table 2. Coping Strategies for Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety

Coping Strategies	Number of Responses
VR therapy (immersion, interaction, practice)	12
Input enhancement of formulaic sequences and communication strategies)	10
Pair or group work	8
Relaxation exercises	5
Self-talk	5
Positive thinking	3
Enough preparation time	3
Avoidance of eye contact with the audience	2

VR exposure therapy

Virtual Reality (VR) technology is strongly recommended by the students as a therapy to reduce their FLSA. Students believed that VR offers a safe, immersive, and interactive environment where they can have a lot of opportunities to practice speaking English without the fear of making mistakes or being laughed at by their peers. This is primarily due to VR's nature of immersion. VR can immerse students in a safe environment where they do not have the pressure of real-life interactions and the fear of making mistakes or being laughed at by their peers. This finding echoes with previous studies (e.g., Kaplan-Rakowski & Gruber, 2022, 2023; Thrasher, 2022; York et al., 2021). It indicates that teachers can incorporate VR into their speaking instruction. However, they should carefully select the VR which does not reveal students' identities and is highly immersive and interactive because using VR which requires interaction with their familiar peers may increase FLSA rather than reduce it. Twelve out of fifteen students mentioned this therapy. The following quotes were extracted from the interviews:

[1] "I often felt anxious when speaking English in class, but in VR, I felt relaxed because I wasn't worried about making mistakes and being laughed at… VR offered many opportunities to practice spoken English. Without practice, what we learned is just 'mute English'."

[2] "In daily life, I rarely had the chance to practice speaking English. But in VR, I practiced a lot ... Interacting with the virtual English speakers in VR made me feel comfortable. VR provided a private space to gain my confidence."

[3] "In VR, I could focus on speaking, I mean, the content itself, rather than worrying about my classmates' opinions about me."

Input enhancement of formulaic sequences and communication strategies

Input enhancement of formulaic sequences and communication strategies is largely viewed by the students as a strategy to mitigate their FLSA. Some students expressed that the activities in the first teaching phase enhanced their input by helping them learn new words, common phrases, and expressions. However, due to limited class time, these students suggested incorporating some out-of-class activities, such as listening to and repeating after authentic English videos or learning some common formulaic sequences from recommended materials. In doing so, they may strengthen their familiarity with natural speech patterns. Focusing on formulaic sequences (e.g. common phrases and expressions) may boost confidence by providing ready-made language chunks for communication. Additionally, students considered that learning communication strategies helps reduce their FLSA as well. They reported that they can use strategies like *description*, *generalization*, and *restructuring* to help them speak more fluently, boosting their confidence in speaking. Ten out of the fifteen students suggested this strategy. Below are some examples:

[1] "In class, before practicing in VR or doing role-play tasks in front of the class, we first learned relevant vocabulary and expressions for later use. I think this is important. If we don't receive enough input, how can we expect to speak well?"

[2] "Class time is limited, so if we want to speak more fluently and confidently, we need to learn more outside of class as well, such as some common collocations and sentence structures. However, many of us do not know which materials are good and suitable. Maybe teachers can recommend some to us."

[3] "I think, the reason why I can speak a bit more smoothly than some other classmates, is that I memorized many sentence structures from a book series … I created some scenarios for myself and made my own sentences using those sentence structures. Then I can retrieve them very quickly when speaking. So, I don't feel nervous."

[4] " … Another time, I couldn't remember 'airport shuttle,' so I just restructured it and asked, 'Can you drive me to the airport for free?' "It made me realize I don't have to stress about finding the perfect word and I can just explain it in a different way when I don't have much time to think."

Brainstorming activities and consciousness-raising activities are considered helpful. However, given the limited class time, they suggested additional input before and after class. For example, providing some extra videos, learning materials, or mobile applications to enhance practice and strengthen their familiarity with natural speech patterns. Mastering ready-made formulaic sequences and mastery of communication strategies can save time for thinking, leading to more fluent speech, increased confidence and decreased FLSA.

Pair or group work

The third strategy recommended by some students is pair or group work. Eight out of fifteen students expressed anxiety when answering questions individually, as they do not want to be the focus of attention and feel more comfortable and secure when working in pairs. Therefore, teachers can arrange for students to work in pairs or small groups because they may feel more comfortable and secure. This may encourage greater engagement in speaking tasks. After discussing in pairs or groups, learners can reconvene to share their ideas and debate outcomes. However, it is important that teachers should try to form mixed-ability groups, assign tasks of equal difficulty, and apply the same questioning strategies. This may ensure that learners would not feel unequal treatment due to their English language proficiency. This strategy was also identified in previous studies (e.g., He, 2017; Wilang, 2022; Young, 1992). Below are some quotes from the students:

[1] "I love working in a pair or group. It helps me feel more at ease. I am not the center of attention … I can learn from my classmates."

[2] "I felt less nervous when working with others. It helped me focus on the speaking tasks instead of worrying about speaking in front of everyone."

[3] "I felt anxious when answering questions alone. When working in a pair, I felt more at ease."

Relaxation exercises

The next strategy students mentioned for reducing their FLSA is relaxation exercises such as deep breathing, arm and leg stretches, or mouth movements to relax the muscles. Krashen's (1982) affective filter hypothesis proposed that anxiety raises an "affective filter," hindering learners to process and produce language. Relaxation exercises help lower the affective filter because they activate the relaxation response which counteracts the stress response. They can calm the nervous system, reduce tension, and clear mental distractions to a more positive emotional state, allowing learners to focus, feel confident, and then participate in speaking tasks. When the affective filter is lowered, learners can retrieve the knowledge they have learned more effectively. Hence, teachers can encourage students to try these relaxation exercises if they feel anxious before they speak. This substantiates Huashan (2019), Oxford (1990), and Wilang's (2022) claim that relaxation exercises can help to alleviate anxiety.

[1] "I think doing some exercises before speaking helps reduce my anxiety. I usually take deep breaths and do mouth movements to relax my muscles."

[2]"For me, doing arm and leg stretches to relax my muscles really helps. In doing so, my body

doesn't tremble when I speak. It's very useful for me. If I don't do that, then I cannot stop my legs from trembling."

Self-talk

Self-talk is another strategy suggested by five students to mitigate FLSA. In this context, self-talk refers to the encouraging words students say to themselves mentally before speaking. Teachers can encourage students to say something to themselves to reduce their FLSA before speaking, for example, "The less I worry, the better I will perform.", "If others can do it, then I can do it too." This finding confirmed the claim of Shi et al. (2015) who examined the relationship between self-talk and speaking anxiety among undergraduate students in an American university and reported that reinforcing self-talk helps reduce anxiety and improve speech performance. Below are some examples.

[1] "Before I speak, I always encourage myself mentally to help me relax, telling myself: 'The less I worry, the better I will perform.'"
[2] "I usually tell myself: 'If others can do it, then I can do it too.'"

Positive thinking

The next strategy is positive thinking. Some students were positive thinkers. They viewed making mistakes as part of the learning process and believed that everyone makes mistakes. They considered teachers' corrective feedback as a way to improve themselves rather than as criticism. Seligman (2006) considered positive thinking as a mindset that fosters optimism and resilience, helping individuals tackle difficulties. For example, some students in this study were positive thinkers, believing that making mistakes is part of the learning process and considering teachers' corrective feedback as a way to improve themselves rather than as criticism. Positive thinking influences individuals' emotional state and what people can achieve in difficult times. Therefore, teachers should tell students to regard mistakes as part of the learning process and encourage them to focus on the content they want to express. This finding is consistent with that of Wilang (2022), who discovered that positive thinking was also a coping strategy employed by engineering students in full English Medium Instruction (EMI) to decrease their anxiety.

[1] "I think that making mistakes is just part of learning. Everyone makes mistakes. … What's more important is what I'm trying to say, not how perfectly I say it."
[2] "When the teacher corrects me, I think she is trying to help me improve rather than criticizing me ."

Enough preparation time

Another strategy recommended by three students is enough preparation time. This strategy needs the instructor's support. Students may feel anxious if they have to respond immediately. With enough preparation time, they can organize their thoughts and build up confidence. Students may experience FLSA if they are required to respond immediately. Teachers should give them sufficient time before speaking to structure their thoughts and gain confidence. Having some written notes may also support their speaking performance. To encourage preparation before class, teachers can provide rewards for well-prepared students. A small quiz before class could motivate learners to review the reading materials beforehand. This finding echoes with previous studies (e.g., He, 2017; Young, 1992). As some students expressed:

[1] "… I had time for preparation before speaking so that I could organize my thoughts. We had rehearsed before we acted out the role-play."
[2] "When I prepared well, I felt more confident."

Avoidance of eye contact

Lastly, some students suggested avoiding eye contact with the audience as a way to ease their FLSA. Two students mentioned that they feel less anxious when they choose not to look directly at the audience, instead of looking at the floor, desk, or wall, or even removing their nearsighted glasses. If learners make eye contact, they may be overly aware of the audience's reactions, making them feel judged and increasing their anxiety. By avoiding eye contact, students can concentrate more on their speech and less on perceived judgment, making them feel more comfortable and less anxious. Teachers can encourage

students to try not to look directly at the audience when they speak and they can look at other objects such as the floor, desk, or wall, or even remove their nearsighted glasses. The following quotes were extracted from the interview:

[1] "I chose not to look at the audience. If I looked at them, some of their facial expressions would have made me forget what I want to say."

[2] "When I was asked to role-play in front of the class, I chose to take off my (nearsighted) glasses or look at the floor or desk so I wouldn't be distracted by others."

The eight strategies suggested by Chinese EFL learners relate to technological and environmental support, psychological and emotional support, and language proficiency improvement. They require learners' own efforts, peer support, and teacher assistance. These findings were consistent with previous studies highlighting that effective language learning requires not merely cognitive and linguistic factors but also affective and contextual factors (Dörnyei, 2005; Oxford, 2017).

First, emphasizing technology and environment reflects digital learning tools are increasingly important in language teaching and learning. Learners' awareness of using technology such as VR to reduce their foreign language speaking anxiety and enhance their speaking skills aligns with the recent shift towards blended and autonomous learning environments. As Warschauer (2013) mentioned, technology enables authentic language input and interactive opportunities that were unavailable in traditional classrooms. Supportive physical and virtual learning environments can both enhance learners' motivation and reduce anxiety.

Second, psychological and emotional support emphasizes the affective factors in EFL learning. Emotional well-being has been considered as an important factor that affects learners' engagement and persistence (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012). Chinese learners' awareness of this factor reflects their awareness of the role of encouragement from peers and teachers in mitigating language anxiety and foster confidence. This result aligns with the sociocultural perspective that learning is a socially mediated process, in which emotional scaffolding and positive interpersonal relationships are crucial (Vygotsky, 1978).

Finally, strategies related to language proficiency improvement imply students' proactive efforts to improve their linguistic competence through self-directed learning and persistent practice. These strategies require not only students' own efforts but also peer collaboration and teacher guidance. This threefold support model echoes with previous studies suggesting that learner autonomy flourishes when teachers act as facilitators and peers participate as co-constructors of knowledge (Gao, 2010). As Gao (2010) suggested, Chinese EFL learners often combine individual effort with social and institutional support to optimize their learning outcomes.

Overall, the strategies suggested by the participants reflect a broad understanding of language learning as an ecological process in which technological support, emotional well-being, and linguistic development are mutually reinforcing. This perspective underscores that enhancing English learning outcomes among Chinese students requires coordinated efforts at multiple dimensions—individual, interpersonal, and institutional (Benson, 2011).

Conclusions and implications

The interview conducted among 15 students revealed six factors and eight coping strategies in total. Learner belief (the belief that only English L1 speakers' norms are good) and the lack of formulaic sequences were newly identified factors of FLSA compared to previous research. Concerning the coping strategies for alleviating FLSA, input enhancement of formulaic sequences and communication strategies, and avoiding eye contact with the audience were newly identified strategies compared to previous research. VR technology is found to be the most strongly recommended strategy for mitigating their FLSA.

Some pedagogical implications can be provided. First, teachers can give enough preparation time to students by providing them with the learning materials before class. Second, teachers can offer students some encouragement such as a smile or a positive gesture when they achieve some small progress.

Third, in-class performances can be excluded from final course results, enabling learners to speak freely with no worries about the course grade. Fourth, the enhancement of formulaic sequences to assist learners in speaking more fluently may mitigate their FLSA as well. Fifth, learners should be aware that English is used as an international language or a lingua franca worldwide and different varieties of English are acceptable not only to English L1 speakers' norms. Additionally, in addition to VR-assisted instruction, students' own coping strategies (e.g. relaxation exercises, self-talk, positive thinking, avoidance of eye contact with the audience) may also play a role in reducing FLSA. Teachers can scrutinize their own students' factors of FLSA and adopt corresponding strategies recommended in this study to help them. However, those highly anxious students may possibly be referred to outside specialists or counselors.

The limitation of this study is that the sample size was small, consisting of only 30 participants. It was limited to university students in China and these students were from one major in this research. It would be better to broaden the scope of the research objects and the sample size in their study. For future study, more participants should be recruited, particularly those from different majors or international students who have overseas learning experiences from the EMI (English as a Medium Instruction) programs can be included. Additionally, the effectiveness of the coping strategies identified in the present study for speaking, listening, reading, and writing has not been examined. Future studies could examine their effectiveness.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s). This article is extracted from a PhD thesis.

Funding

This research received no funding.

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