

Storytelling Pedagogy to Reduce Speaking Anxiety in EFL Students: A Practical Application

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Abstract

Recently, the demand from industry is for young people who, over and above a functional competency in foreign languages, have the ability to convey in their speaking the personal confidence that reassures clients that they are in good hands, as well as the quick-thinking analytical skills necessary to respond logically to a complex range of evolving foreign client needs. Answering to the needs of these industries, university language departments have started to focus more on the development of students' public speaking skills. Hence, finding effective ways to train students in such skills has assumed greater importance in recent years. However, many Taiwanese EFL college-level students have become increasingly unable to respond effectively to the difficulties of developing self-confidence in English speaking, making it difficult for educators to formulate an effective pedagogy for dealing with the issue, especially among differing levels of students. The purpose of the paper is to present research that focuses on determining how the use of storytelling as a pedagogical strategy can help college students preempt and diminish anxiety caused by their perceived difficulties in English speaking. The methodology of the study is an action research in which the students are given storytelling tasks. The goal is to determine how utilizing the storytelling approach as a pedagogical strategy can help college students preempt and diminish the anxiety that prevents them from developing oral competency. This study also seeks to identify those storytelling tasks that benefit EFL learners the most and seeks to determine whether a storytelling pedagogy incorporating a cooperative learning approach enables intermediate and/or lower-intermediate learners to enhance their public speaking skills while stepping out of their comfort zone. To address these issues, this action research utilizes storytelling tasks of varying complexity in order to gauge the efficacy of differing tasks on improving a student's public speaking skills. Participants shall be a class of students from a Science and Technology University in the north of Taiwan. A total of twelve lessons shall be undertaken in one semester, with content focused on developing the students' linguistic skills, as well as developing in the students positive attitudes towards instruction. Both individual and group work shall be assigned. A pre/post anxiety scale shall be used to measure the students' speaking anxiety. It is hoped that this study will be able to provide a sample curriculum to aid educators to diminish students' speaking anxiety, thereby training confident speakers to meet the requirements of Taiwan's globalizing industries.

Keywords: Speaking Anxiety, Picture Narratives, Four Social Bonds and Eight Virtues, Action Research, Cooperative Learning

1. Introduction

In 2014, with the introduction of the 12-year compulsory education plan, Taiwan's MOE stressed several core policy concepts such as "No Child Left Behind" (有教無類), 'teaching students in accordance with their aptitude' (因材施教), and "nurture by nature" (適性揚才) (Ministry of Education, 2015). Since then, MOE has promoted curricula that encompass current teaching pedagogies such as cooperative learning, differentiated instruction and multimodal assessment. At the same time, industry has increasingly emphasized the need for Taiwan's education system to supply employee candidates who not only possess good foreign speaking and listening skills as assessed by tests, but who also have the personal self-confidence and quick thinking abilities that will enable them to respond spontaneously and creatively to any situations that may arise as part of a client relationship in an international business environment. EFL Learners who are given opportunities in university to give presentations and deal with questions from the audience naturally develop these skills, and universities aiming to respond to the needs of industry have started to focus on the development of students' public speaking skills.

Research has shown that the learning experience has to be linked to personal life, and respecting individual differences during the learning process should be at the core of the curriculum (Short, Harste, and Burke, 1996). Storytelling, especially speaking about one's own experiences, is therefore a great tool to help not only young and adult EFL learners, but also students who lack practice speaking and listening English in a remote socio-cultural environment (Lee and Hsu, 2016), because the story itself provides a wealth of content learning and scope for developing meaning and imagination. It has been shown that storytelling can help EFL learners feel comfortable in public speaking settings (Lin, 2008), so the appeal of combining storytelling and public speaking in an educational setting is doubly attractive for universities. In an educational environment where time is strictly rationed (elementary schools offer around 40-80 minutes language teaching weekly, for junior school about 150-200 minutes weekly, and for general high school about 150-200 minutes) the symbiotic combination of storytelling and public speaking in language classes has the potential to simultaneously provide students with the language, sales and creative skills (as well as the personal confidence) that the Nation's companies are crying out for. Finding creative and effective ways to train students in such skills is essential. Storytelling is taught in schools globally as a key skill for retail, advertising, public relation, and many other sales-related functions. Nowadays, every global business devotes resources to developing storytelling skills in their sales force. Accordingly, in recent years companies in Taiwan have started to recruit candidates or staff based on their storytelling abilities. For example, some major airline companies and related industries look for individuals who possess great storytelling skills to work as flight attendants (Chang, 2012).

As an English facilitator and instructor in universities for more than a decade, I have found it hard to motivate underachieving EFL learners and keep all college students interested in a class setting because the textbook was confined to the curriculum or there were time constraints and large class sizes. Under such circumstances, I implemented flipped classes in advanced oral speaking classes in 2015 and drew on the disciplines my students were studying as their major in other departments for the class content. I first introduced Cooperative Task-based (CTBL) learning strategies in 2008. I began to research EFL learners' public speaking anxiety in 2012 and have implemented strategies accordingly. This study seeks to determine whether storytelling combined with a cooperative learning approach enables intermediate and/or lower-intermediate EFL learners to enhance their public speaking skills and help them to step out of their comfort zone. The hypothesis that, by means of the various storytelling activities, public speaking anxiety is diminished, and a confident speaker developed.

The project investigated two specific research questions:

1. Can storytelling tasks enable EFL learners to diminish their public speaking anxiety?
2. How does the difference between the experience of individual and group storytelling task work enable the learners to feel less anxiety in the classroom?

2. Theoretical Foundations

2.1 Research on Storytelling

Storytelling has been found to be an effective teaching aid for language teachers, especially those working with learners of at least intermediate level (Zaro & Salaberri, 1995); it is considered to be a friendly and primary way to guide students willing to speak English in public without forcing them to do so (Lee and Hsu, 2016). Review research on storytelling has described the way many EFL instructors employ English picture books to encourage primary school pupils to speak (Lee and Hsu, 2016), not to mention the widespread use of the storytelling pedagogy with college-level or adult EFL learners. A study (Kormos & Trebits, 2012) that used storytelling techniques with lower-level students outlined several reasons for choosing the strategy. Storytelling, in any language, taps into language itself mediating function in the search for meaning in daily life, and the universal necessity to create narratives to fix and explain experience leads to greater student involvement (Zaro & Salaberri, 1995). Furthermore, storytelling provides teachers working with students at different skill levels great scope to create activities that facilitate inter-student communication, which in turn aids each individual natural language acquisition (Zaro & Salaberri, 1995). Students' voluntarily engaging in oral work in the classroom is believed to positively correlate with students' academic achievement (Ellis, 1988).

In the aforementioned study, Kormos and Trebits (2012) describe how individual difference factors directly and indirectly influence individual task performance.

Individual differences they identify as having a direct influence on students' decisions in carrying out tasks and ability to manage their attentional limitations included working memory capacity, aptitude, linguistic competence and anxiety (Kormos & Trebits, 2012). In any task, such as storytelling in L2, that draws on acquired linguistic abilities, these individual difference factors manifest themselves in task performance (Kormos & Trebits, 2012). In light of this, the storytelling approach is regarded as an effective pedagogical strategy for dealing with individual difference factors.

Over the past decades, many important studies (Fan, 2020; Lee and Hsu, 2016; Miller and Pennycuff, 2008; Tsou, Wang, & Tzeng, 2006) have indicated that storytelling is an effective tool for enhancing foreign language learning. Research demonstrates the significant positive impact of storytelling and reading stories on children's language development and comprehension (Isbell, Sobol, Lindauer and Lowrance, 2004). In a related study regarding four-year-old children, results showed that children are generally capable of telling stories in pictures or photos, while six-year-olds can identify and relate the cause-effect relationship among different events (Zaro & Salaberri, 1995). As children grow, they develop the ability to identify other key factors in more complex narratives, and their ability to understand, compose and enjoy stories increases with age (Zaro & Salaberri, 1995). Because of this ability to develop a child's analytical thinking, storytelling is part of the curriculum in many countries, including countries where English is the native language (Zaro & Salaberri, 1995), and stories are considered an essential daily resource in the foreign language class (Hendrickson, 1992; Tsou et al., 2006; Zaro & Salaberri, 1995). Participants in another study were "highly engaged in the digital storytelling study, which has helped them enhance their ability to express their intended meaning interestingly" (Fan, 2020). In so doing, storytelling strategies enable EFL individual learners to strengthen their public speaking ability, which in turn trickles down to helping them to practice speaking skills for daily life.

2.2 The pedagogy of cooperative learning

Cooperative learning (CL) is defined as a teaching method in which members work together towards their learning goals. In so doing, students learn how to work cooperatively and support one another to achieve their team objectives. The idea is to help individuals to construct group goals rather than individual targets. More importantly for EFL classes, through group work students develop their ability to articulate and negotiate for their ideas to achieve positive outcomes, leading to increasing use of the target language in a meaningful situation (Chafe, 2007).

Including students with differing individual academic proficiencies in heterogeneous groups seems to affect the outcomes of CL groups (Allan, 1991; Slavin, 1991); many studies conclude that lower achievers can receive needed attention and help through group work (Johnson & Johnson, 1991). Low achievers in heterogeneous groups can benefit from their classmates as well as from their teacher (Jacobs, 2006). Johnson and Johnson (1987) indicate that "low-achieving students tend to reach higher levels when they are members of heterogeneous CL groups" (p.32). However, there are concerns among practitioners about low achievers who feel threatened in a group environment and monitoring is important (Jacobs, 2006). For this study, the researcher utilized heterogeneous CL groups to completely change the dynamics of a traditional Taiwan English-language class.

A number of studies (Li & Lam 2013; Gillies, 2007; Johnson & Johnson, 2009, 1999, 1998, 1993) have identified five essential characteristics of CL with a view to forming genuine methodological cooperation (i.e. group investigation) of the type presented in this study. They are: positive interdependence, face-to-face promotive interaction, individual accountability, interpersonal skills and group processing. Making the students conscious of these five characteristics as early as possible is important. This type of pedagogy can lead to difficulties for teachers if they just ask the students to work in a group without detailed orientation instruction. In addition, this approach might engender negative influences on individual learners who are left to work in their own group without any appropriate direction. However, many reviewers (Johnson & Johnson, 1981; Slavin, 1983, 1989) are convinced of the effectiveness on learners' achievements of cooperative learning methods involving individual accountability and group goals within the team's cooperative environment. Reviews of the literature talk of a wide agreement that the CL method has a positive effect on student achievement in a range of subjects including mathematics and languages (Slavin, 1990).

2.3 Public speaking anxiety

Spielberger (1983) defines general anxiety as “the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with the arousal of the autonomic nervous system” (p.125). Chorpita and Barlow (1998) describe anxiety as “a state of the conceptual or central nervous systems characterized by activity of the Behavioral Inhibition System (BIS)” (p.4). Everyone suffers anxiety at times, especially when speaking in front of an audience. Public speaking makes even the most prepared speaker anxious (Paalhar, 2001). Beatty (1988) describes the visible symptoms of anxiety when speaking publicly: trembling knees, shaky voice, speaking too quickly or too slowly, and a flat, inexpressive voice. Anxiety can also affect anyone, even those with years of public speaking experience. Public speaking anxiety is a very common feeling (Paalhar, 2001).

Recent findings describing the major aspects of psychological and physiological reactivity to public speaking among individuals who experience fear speaking in public in their native language proved that in a high number of cases with this disorder, using artificial intelligence exposure and Internet-based self-help with support were effective (Pull, 2012). Moreover, a review study on public speaking anxiety groups suggested that specific speech phobia and generalized social phobia are two different subtypes. Evidence supported the premise that public speaking anxiety is an apparent secondary type, qualitatively and quantitatively different from other subtypes of social phobia (Blöte, Kint, & Miers, 2009). If public speaking can give rise to such symptoms in a native speaker, how much more of a problem can it be for L2 students whose linguistic competence is on display for all to see! Horwitz and Young (1991) described how anxiety is a significant obstacle when students are asked to improve their language skills by speaking up in language class. Research has shown that speaking in front of their teachers and classmates during a foreign language class is the moment that students are most hampered by anxiety from expressing themselves (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986).

Bygate (1987) indicates that public speaking can help students in many ways, such as improved retention and enhanced learning motivation. Presentations and group discussions are common activities in academic settings, and therefore appropriate public speaking training helps learners improve their communication skills and succeed academically (Sun, 2008). However, despite the advantages that are derived from the development of effective public speaking skills, many students still perceived it as anxiety-provoking during classroom activities (Payne & Carlin, 1994). It is worth noting that these studies were conducted in the West, where students could be expected to be more comfortable with the spotlight than those in East Asian culture.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

This study is designed as an action research, which Kolb (1984) describes as a learning process. Within this process, practitioners learn and create knowledge by critically reflecting upon their own actions and experiences, forming abstract concepts and testing the implications of these concepts in new situations. Practitioners can create their own knowledge and understanding of a situation and act upon it, thereby improving practice and advancing knowledge. For the current study the lesson plans shall be based on various storytelling strategies. Implementation of the strategies is observed and the entire process documented. Class content and task achievement levels are reflected on daily. Implementation is then revised accordingly and the cycle goes again. Action research has a number of further distinctive features, as described by Zuber-Skerritt (1982). For her, action research is a critical collaborative enquiry involving reflective practitioners employing self-evaluative participative problem solving in their continuing professional development. According to this view, action research is critical in the sense that practitioners not only look for ways to improve their practice within the various constraints of the situation in which they are working, but are also critical change agents of those constraints, and of themselves.

To facilitate reflection after each storytelling lesson, various focus group interview sessions were conducted to determine the reaction of the participants (students) towards the activities. Focus group interviews are among the most widely used qualitative research tools in social science studies. The term ‘focus’ simply means that the interview is limited to a small number of issues (Smith, 1954). A ‘group’ represents a number of interacting individuals having a community of interest, and interviews involve the presence of a moderator who uses the group as a device for eliciting information (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). Focus groups are unique in that they openly call for respondents to interact with one another in formulating responses to interviewers’ questions.

A benefit of this approach is that interviewees feel greater confidence in a group setting, which may encourage them to offer comments and discuss matters they would not feel able to in a one-on-one interview with a researcher (who is often perceived as an authority figure) where they do not feel supported by others. A low level of structure and a medium level of researcher involvement with the study population are important to allow the group the freedom to develop its own direction (Axinn & Pearce, 2006).

The McCroskey Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety (PRPSA) survey, the most widely used psychometric tool for public speaking anxiety, was used to assess student public speaking anxiety. PRPSA responses are scaled on a 1-5 Likert scale. A Likert scale provides a range of responses to a given question or statement. Categories in the responses should be discrete and exhaust the range of possible responses the respondents may give (Likert, 1932). The subtlety of the response that is built into the rating scales renders this type of research instrument very attractive and it is widely used (Cohen et al., 2007).

3.2 Storytelling activities in the Classroom

The classes in the study employed two standard types of storytelling activities that are outlined below (See Table 1). The self-made cartoon pictures that were used were based on a different theme each week or two, and the following theme was announced on the preread handouts given to students before the next class at the end of each theme. The themes were chosen from the Confucian “four social bonds and eight virtues”, translated here as Propriety, Justice, Incorruptibility, Honor, Loyalty, Duty, Benevolence, Love, Honesty, Justice, Peace, and Fairness (忠孝仁愛信義和平).

The theme for the following storytelling speaking activities (See Figure 1) is one of the eight virtues, Justice (義), and the small group of students was asked to create a base narrative on the theme before delivering the story in public. For example: *John is a righteous person, and he thinks that helping the small boy is the right thing to do, so he helps the boy.*

Theme	Pre-discussion questions from the cartoon pictures
Justice	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Who is John? 2. What does he see? 3. What does he do next? 4. Why does he not wait for the police to come? What does he decide to do? Is it dangerous? 5. What happens next? 6. Who comes to help? 7. What does the small boy tell the policeman?
Storytelling and discussion	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. If John saw one big boy fighting with another big boy, would he do the same thing? 2. Do you think there is a difference between seeing two big boys beat up a small boy and seeing two big boys fighting?
In-class Storytelling Speaking Activities	

Table 1. Introduction for the mini Lesson Plan

Figure 1. An Example from Storytelling Activities

3.3 The Participants

39 participants initially attended the course, but 2 quit mid-term. The final number of students was 37, including 9 males and 28 females, all second-year college students aged between 18 to 22 taking the public speaking class at a four-year technical-vocational college in Taiwan. The students enrolled in the class for the September 2018 to August 2019 school year. Student participants averaged 10 years of formal English L2 education prior to their participation. All the students participated in the PRPSA surveys for pre- and post-tests during the 12-weeks of sessions. All were encouraged to discuss and critique the various story lessons in the light of their understanding of the particular theme from the four social bonds and eight virtues. Each student was then assigned a role in their cooperative learning group and a criteria sheet for their model, and given guidelines for producing a constructive written and oral storyline. The teacher observed and provided feedback on positive and negative aspects of each story lesson after the group speaking in public, and gave constructive suggestions for alternative approaches and improvement. The groups were empowered to revise the story based upon the teacher's feedback and their own group individual reflection. Their revised stories formed the basis of their group oral presentation.

Throughout, all participants implemented cooperative learning strategies under the guidance of the teacher to facilitate their interaction in small and big group.

3.4 Instruments

In this study, to measure the Public Speaking Anxiety (PSA) of the student participants, the McCroskey (1970) Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety (PRPSA) survey, a validated scale strictly tailored for public speaking anxiety, was used. PRPSA is a 34 item, Likert-scaled survey with an alpha reliability of higher than 0.9. Participants are asked to choose from five scored answers (Strongly Disagree = 1, Disagree = 2, Neutral = 3, Agree = 4, or Strongly Agree = 5) on various statements regarding speech anxiety. Scoring is accomplished by computing the following: $72 - (\text{Sum of the scores for items 4, 6, 7, 8, 11, 12, 15, 16, 17, 18, 24, and 26}) + (\text{Sum of the scores for items 1, 2, 3, 5, 9, 10, 13, 14, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 25, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, and 34})$. The total score should fall between 34 and 170. If the score is below 34 or above 170, there must be a mistake in the computation. Public Speaking anxiety is considered high if the score is above 131, low if below 98, and moderate if score is between 98 and 131 (McCroskey, 1970).

3.5 Procedure

This study was conducted on one EFL public speaking class with 37 sophomores.

The Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety (PRPSA) was administered before the first session after the teacher's class introduction. After that, a total of twelve action research cycles with various lessons and task complexities were implemented. All students reflected on the process and produced data for the Action Research. The class proceeded in five phases:

Phase 1. Thirty-seven students are split into seven groups.

Phase 2. Group storytelling activity guided exercises (e.g. scripted cooperation based on the cartoon characters, plot creation and guided improvement, etc.) to produce the different characters' personalities and relationships, and the story's climax and resolution. The students are told they will be required to act as understudies for other students during the final stage, creating interdependence and mutual support which will help the students deal with public speaking anxiety. It is key that the students understand the importance of raising group awareness of this interdependence.

Phase 3. Each group is assigned one each of the main characters. The different groups will each be responsible for presenting a section of the storytelling activity after group discussion, a total of three sections of storytelling, including the beginning, body and the end. Each group member presents their ideas to the other members of the group. There are additional guided activities in which the groups assess their group's overall performance of their section of the storytelling presentation.

Phase 4. Each of the seven groups performs its 3-5 minute section of the storytelling presentation.

Phase 5. The groups are awarded stickers and other prizes based on their presentation as a group in the storytelling activities.

The PRPSA was administered again and focus group interviews were conducted in the 12th week. The researcher conducted data analysis. For the quantitative data, multiple analysis of variance (MANOVA) was used to analyze the pre- and post PRPSA surveys to determine the overall impact of exercising students' public speaking skills throughout the storytelling activities.

4. Results

4.1 Results of Research Question One

After all the students completed the PRPSA scale, the researcher analysed the data. The scores fell between 34 and 170 (See Table 2), which indicates no computation errors. All of the students completed the PRPSA survey twice (pre-test and post-test). The scores for each student in each survey were calculated using the formula: $PRPSA = 72 - [\text{Total from Step 2}] + [\text{Total from Step 1}]$. The PRPSA defines levels of anxiety from scores thus:

Low = 34 –97
Moderate = 98 - 131
High = >132 – 170

Table 2. Three level of anxiety in PRPSA from McCroskey (1970).

Table 3 shows the results of Level of Anxiety from the study group of the pre-test and post-test PRPSA:

Level of Anxiety	Pre-test Number of Participants	Post-test Number of Participants
Low = 34 - 97	17	19
Moderate = 98 - 131	20	18
High = 132 - 170	0	0
Total	37	37

Table 3. Level of anxiety from the study of the pre-test and post-test.

At the beginning of the course, there were 17 students with low scores of anxiety, 20 students with moderate scores of anxiety and no student of a high score of anxiety. After completing the course, there were 19 students with low scores of anxiety, 18 students with moderate scores of anxiety and no student of a high score of anxiety. In total, 2 students with moderate scores of anxiety had reduced their speaking anxiety after the 12-week session.

These students' English speaking presentation during the 12-week sessions was also evaluated. A discussion of the benefits and problems of using storytelling activities for diminishing students' speaking anxiety level based on the assessment and survey results, followed by a consideration of the pedagogical implications, will appear below.

To collect relevant data regarding students' speaking anxiety in class, interviews were conducted with several focus groups. One respondent, Deng, expressed how group members helped each other with the storytelling speaking tasks:

We could actively help each other in the group while sharing individual storytelling tasks related to a cartoon given by the teacher, so we were not afraid to speak on the stage. (Deng, Group Name)(看圖說故事)組員都會主動幫忙, 不會害怕上台說話

Regarding the storytelling tasks, Deng expressed a feeling of accountability to her fellow group members while sharing group tasks set by the teacher, and those sharing tasks positively reinforced interpersonal relationships during the group process helping diminish individual speaking anxiety.

As a team leader, I found it very gratifying when we got our final report to see that our team had worked very hard. (Lily, Group Chris)

我覺得我們這組在做期末報告的時候, 都非常的努力, 作為組長的我, 看到覺得很欣慰。

Lily expressed a sense of pride in the group's hard work in her final reflection on the storytelling final presentation. For her, what was key was how group work increased the time given to this activity. Final group presentations are a major contributor to individual anxiety, and Lily as a group leader seemed to feel that group work reduced the anxiety that she felt her group were under. That truly helped her feel a sense of gratification after the final task.

Another positive outcome in terms of speaking tasks; *(I) spoke confidently and eagerly* (Wang, Group Frog)有自信的發言有進取心

However, some students seemed had different views on speaking tasks as follows:

I was not satisfied with myself because I practiced well at home, but I was still a little nervous and forget some lines when it came to speaking in public. In the end, though, I did it. (May, Group Kiwi)對自己不满意, 在家練的明明不錯, 但在人群中還是有點緊張會忘詞, 但是還是順利完成了

May frankly talked about her individual problems doing a public presentation, even though she practiced successfully at home. However, she was finally able to conquer her fear.

Another student, John, did it successfully:

If you want to be successful, you need to prepare. (John, Group Popcorn) 不錯有事先準備

John confidently responded that his final speaking task seemed very successful because he made a lot of efforts in practicing his public speech before talking on the stage.

Above are many good examples showing that storytelling tasks enable EFL students to reduce their public speaking anxiety. For example, some students could conquer inner fears and reducing speech anxiety by making a lot of efforts in and out of class to allocate speaking tasks among the group, working hard in speaking and writing tasks, practicing speech at home, etc. Five out of the seven groups gave this kind of positive feedback in their interviews.

4.2 Results of Research Question Two

To collect relevant data regarding students' speaking anxiety in class, interviews were conducted with several focus groups. In addition, the researcher studied the weekly logs written by the students. Some example excerpts relevant to the research question are presented here (the interviews were conducted in Chinese):

(Group work) gave everyone in the group a sense of participation and we learned a lot through group cooperation. From the experience of dividing up the work of dealing with unfamiliar (English) vocabulary, we all got to know one another, and because of that each of us was able to successfully complete his or her own part of the task much faster. (Liao, aged 20, 2019/05/17)

Liao, in her weekly log, linked successful task completion to the experience of being in a group, thereby displaying consciousness of the five essential characteristics of CL identified by Johnson and Johnson (1993 and 1994), namely positive interdependence, promotive interaction, individual accountability, social skills, and group processing. In a very striking example of how CL works, her group divided up the various unfamiliar English words related to the theme glossary given by the teacher, and then each student defined their words for the group. Liao, in reflecting on this, talked almost as if exchanging the meaning of words reduced the cognitive uncertainty of initial interpersonal contact: to her, learning about the words from her group felt a lot like learning about her classmates. A reduction in cognitive uncertainty is shown to lead to a reduction in the anxiety caused in interpersonal relationships.

Another example:

Whenever anyone had a problem they couldn't solve, they could talk about it with the others so the amount of time we could spend tossing ideas amongst ourselves and teaching each other things. Some of us didn't really get the first time or hadn't seen before was a lot more (Ko, aged 22, 2019/05/10)

The phrases, tossing ideas amongst ourselves and teaching each other things, with which Ko described the group processing and promotive interaction of the group presented with individual problems, covered a range of ideas in English including: members of the group presenting their own ideas, the group developing ideas through discussion, the group is trying out ideas etc. She identified a sense of freedom and lower risk of blame in her reflection. For her, what was key was how group work increased the time given to this activity. For students, especially in the East Asian education system, time pressures are a major contributor to anxiety, and Ko seemed to feel that group discussions relaxed the individual time pressure the students felt they were under. Notice how the time taken in this group approach to using 'information gap' in the language classroom is greater than when using pair work, where one student in group quickly told the other 'the answer,' and the pair moved on quickly whether the information has been learned or not.

And the other example:

Today, our topic was Shame (耻), and the story was about John. John is a 6th grader, and he just completed his mid-term exam, but he cheated on the exam due to his careless attitude to completing preparation for the exam. The story ended with his teacher not punishing him because John had already felt shame after cheating the exam and apologized to the teacher and admitted his faults on his own without being asked to. So we as a group all felt that John should be given another chance to learn how to get it right after making a big mistake, and because of that each of us was able to fully complete his or her own part of the story task much easier and more effectively. (Wen, aged 20, 2019/05/24)

Wen talks about how the group reached the common goals and completed the story task. In addition, she expressed a feeling of being fully supported by her group members by understanding how to solve their problem through making their own group decision, and that group decision helped the group alleviate the cognitive uncertainty felt by each member. This is another data point that suggests that a reduction in cognitive uncertainty leads to a reduction in individual anxiety that may arise in interpersonal relationships during the group process.

Above are a couple of good examples of students recognizing how group processing differs from individual work (and pair work) in helping members to feel less anxiety in the classroom. The students' body language when talking about the process also attested to lower anxiety. Five out of seven group members gave this kind of positive feedback in their interviews. Elsewhere, students' journals were broadly enthusiastic, with 26 of 37 claiming to like the group tasks in class. However, less than 10 of the subjects complained of a lack of opportunities for practices and using English speaking skills in public. Most subjects reported having encountered difficulties caused by storytelling pictures activities. Some of the students reflected that these difficulties made them ask their group members for help. During the 12-week group process, most subjects accustomed themselves to public speaking in class. Therefore, not only the individual's but also the group storytelling tasks enable most EFL learners to feel less anxiety about speaking.

5. Conclusion

In this study, I found that the storytelling approach with cooperative learning methods motivated my students and keep them awake in class, despite a large class size and rigid time constraints. In light of this, it would be worthwhile to further investigate the relationship between enhancing students' public speaking abilities through storytelling and other measures of learning effectiveness, and the extent to which teachers can choose specific storytelling tasks in the classrooms to find the balance that helps most EFL learners best walk the line between instructional methods and the actual learning environment they and teachers face every day. The results indicate that the actual experience of performing individual and group storytelling tasks with the help and guidance of teachers lowers the affective barrier and alleviates speaking anxiety in the classroom, giving students at an early stage the confidence to express themselves confidently in their future careers.

Further follow-up studies on the areas of need identified in this study should address in greater depth the issue of the effect of developing students' public speaking skills and alleviating their speaking anxiety through well-planned storytelling lessons and a cooperative learning approach as it is practiced according to existing research.

Finally, it is a not unimportant side point that the students, in forming their narratives, were involved in a group discussion of the meaning of the Confucian four social bonds and eight virtues and their application in daily life. Stories, in the form of parables, have throughout history been the main and most effective means of transmitting ethical norms, and students writing stories on moral themes are encouraged to consider the relevance to their own lives of Confucian ideals which may seem remote when studied as dry texts. Further investigation of the use of storytelling in Content Based English instruction is also worthy of consideration.

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