

PSYCHOLINGWISTYCZNE I KULTUROWE SPOJRZENIA NA BŁĘDY POPEŁNIANE W TRAKCIE NAUKI JĘZYKÓW OBCYCH

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TAIWANESE ENGLISH LEARNERS' PERCEPTIONS OF ERRORS IN SPEAKING

JAK TAJWAŃSCY STUDENCI UCZĄCY SIĘ JĘZYKA ANGIELSKIEGO POSTRZEGAJĄ WŁASNE BŁĘDY W MÓWIENIU

Słowa kluczowe: Tajwan, kolektywizm, percepcja/postrzeżenie, błąd w mówieniu, język angielski jako obcy, niepokój

Streszczenie. Niniejszy artykuł poświęcony jest spostrzeżeniom tajwańskich studentów na temat błędów w mówieniu po angielsku. Celem badania jest dogłębniejsze zrozumienie przeżycia towarzyszącym tej grupie uczących się i zmniejszenie bariery nieporozumień mogących pojawić się pomiędzy nimi a ich lektorami, w przypadku gdy ci reprezentują odmienne kręgi kulturowe. Sygnały niewerbalne wysyłane przez tajwańskich studentów, towarzyszące potknięciom językowym, bywają często mylnie interpretowane przez nauczycieli nieznających azjatyckiego podłoża kulturowego, zdominowanego przez światopogląd kolektywny. Tajwańczycy bywają postrzegani jako spokojni i nieśmiali, lecz, jak wykazuje analiza ich wypowiedzi, w rzeczywistości jedynie maskują niezwykle żywe uczucia wstydu i porażki, gdyż popełnienie błędu kojarzy się większości z nich z utratą twarzy i zagrożeniem ich pozycji w grupie. Myślą przewodnią tekstu jest umożliwienie lektorom zachodnich języków obcych lepszego wglądu w świat odczuć ich tajwańskich podopiecznych i zachęcenie do tworzenia na zajęciach atmosfery wzajemnego zrozumienia i zaufania.

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1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The purpose of this study is to examine how Chinese-speaking students from Taiwan perceive their own errors in spoken production in English in order to get deeper understanding why they tend to be much quieter than students from other linguistic backgrounds and, as such, often labelled as “shy” and “timid”. Is the picture that we gain from their external behavior accurate? Do we, foreign language teachers, demonstrate enough empathy to let them benefit from our instruction? How do they interpret our reactions, both verbal and non-verbal?

From the researcher’s experience as a Polish lecturer at the University of Lodz (Poland) and as an English instructor in Taiwan, it seems that there is a constant need to bridge the culture gap between Chinese-speaking foreign language learners and their Western teachers. This may help avoid unnecessary misjudgments and actively facilitate classroom management. At this point, it is also reasonable to establish the author’s perspective as a Westerner, specifically from Poland, a country in Eastern Europe, where both collective and individualistic worldviews are influential. This point of view shapes the writer’s perception of Taiwanese students and their behavior and highlights the actions which remain in contrast with practices common in West. At the same time, for an observer from a country where the individualistic worldview is more dominant (take Germany or the United Kingdom) such contrasts would be still stronger. This standing point, however, may sometimes result in unnecessary simplifications.

Chinese-speaking EFL² learner anxiety has recently received a lot of researcher attention. Chan and Wu (2004), for instance, have examined anxiety of elementary school students, identifying the negative correlation between foreign language anxiety level and English learning achievement. Five major sources of anxiety have been pointed out: low proficiency, fear of negative evaluation, competitiveness of games, anxious personality, and the pressure from students themselves and their parents. Among the most common anxiety-provoking situations, speaking in front of others and speaking to native speakers were listed. In the academic context, Liu (2006) looked at undergraduate non-English majors in China, finding that a considerable number of students reported anxiety when speaking English in class. Here again, a negative correlation between the language advancement and anxiety level was observable. The participants felt the most anxious when responding to the teacher or singled out to speak English in class. This project is aiming to address the need for deeper understanding of Chinese-speaking students grown up in Taiwan and their perceptions of errors in spoken output, as shaped in the specific local context.

The central question to be investigated is how Chinese-speaking EFL learners perceive their own errors in speaking and what experiences might have shaped

² EFL – English as a foreign language.

their attitudes. The study was carried out in March 2015 in Taiwan among 205 students at the academic level.

The identity theory has provided the theoretical framework for the research. In order to answer the two major questions raised, a survey was conducted at the initial stage of the study. The data gathered this way was then coded and analyzed. Next, a series of group interviews were held to discuss the major findings with students and get more detailed understanding of their points. To have the data triangulated, researcher's classroom observation was included.

2. RESEARCH CONTEXT

In the last two decades, language policy in Taiwan has undergone a massive transformation from monolingual (under Japanese occupation and the Kuomintang) to multilingual one: recently, internationalization through English as a foreign language and Taiwanisation through the introduction of indigenous languages at schools have been taking place (Hubbs 2013), with the former one as the most commonly studied foreign language all over the country (Chern 2002). Nowadays, around 80% of the population are bilingual: they speak both standard Mandarin and Taiwanese, a variant of the Min Nan dialect spoken in the coastal provinces of Fujian and Guangdong (Kaplan, Baldauf 2008). Despite the Taiwan's Ministry of Education's (MOE's) efforts in promoting Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), the test-oriented instructional practices are still common and inclined toward memorization, grammar, and translation (Chung, Huang 2009). In numerous classes, like those with 50 students enrolled into a conversation course, it is often easier for the teacher to brush speaking off and stick to a teaching style which does not promote individual interactions with learners who, in turn, do not get enough opportunities for oral practice. Students remain silent, unless called upon by the teacher, and they are trained to simply follow his or her instructions. Even language classes usually take form of a lecture. Learners' relationships with instructors are based upon a blend of respect and small amount of fear (Sun 2008: 4). As a result, they often tend to underperform in speaking³, which becomes a vital source of stress and anxiety. From Western perspective, the students seem to be passive, unresponsive, and unwilling to interact, as reported by Wu and Ke (2009).

In order to better understand Taiwanese educational setting, we must keep in mind that it has been strongly conditioned by collectivism. One's sense of belonging to a group and their position in it are strongly related to their overall well-being (Lu et. al: 2001). Learners' identity is strongly shaped by the group to which

³ As pointed out by S. Miller, the Regional Director for Cambridge English Language Assessment in East Asia at the *Cambridge English for Schools Conference* in March 2015, Taipei.

they belong, let it be family or school (Hall 2004) and, thus, it is crucial for them to maintain their positive image within the community. Making an error is seen as a face-threatening act and, as such, needs to be avoided, especially when speaking in front of the entire class (Young 2008).

Taiwanese EFL learners, highly concerned about how others perceive them, tend to act in ways that minimize the likelihood of negative assessments. This pattern includes avoiding or withdrawing from social situations in which others might view them not positively (Edmondson 1999, 96, Liu 2001, Sun 2008). When relating to others, they often fail to take initiative or participate minimally in conversations. This may be one of the factors shaping their relatively marked tendency to engage in on-line activities instead of face-to-face interactions and be at high risk of developing the mobile phone addiction⁴. In the language classroom, this is observable in behaviors such as keeping silent, responding only when necessary, being passive, or avoiding class entirely (Oxford 2005). Many Taiwanese EFL learners easily fall into the trap of perfectionism which, in turn, results in high language anxiety level, demonstrated in following ways: general avoidance (low levels of verbal production, lack of volunteering in class, seeming inability to answer even the simplest questions), over-studying, conversational withdrawal, lack of eye contact, image protection or masking behaviors (exaggerated smiling, laughing, nodding), excessive self-effacement or, finally, self-criticism (Oxford 2005: 66). Interestingly, Taiwan, along with Japan, has been reported as one of the two countries all over the world, with the highest shyness level (Zimbardo 2007).

3. DESCRIPTION OF THE PARTICIPANTS

The study has been conducted among 205 English learners from three universities and one college in northern Taiwan. All of the units are actively involved into various international student exchange programs with partners in the European Union (including Poland), the United States, and eastern Asia. Many of the students invited to the enquiry have been awarded prestigious scholarships or taken internships abroad. In other words, they may be seen as representative and, as such, giving a reliable picture of the problem to be investigated.

The average age of the participants is between 19 and 23. In terms of gender, two thirds of them are female and one third are male. They all reported having started learning English in the kindergarten or at the primary school, which means

⁴ This well-known phenomenon was recently researched by Masiak and Pawłowska (2013) in their comparison study among students from Poland, the USA, and Taiwan. The results reveal that Taiwanese students, in contrast to their Polish peers, demonstrate intensified symptoms of addiction to talking on the mobile phone and texting. They use cell phones satisfy their need for acceptance, affiliation, and self-disclosure.

that to the moment, they have been exposed to the language for at least 10-15 years. Many of the participants have passed internationally recognized exams, obtaining certificates which confirm their advanced fluency level (often as a condition of admission to the target university)⁵.

The students involved are Taiwanese. In almost all cases, their first language is Mandarin (Chinese), several of participants, however, reported speaking Taiwanese as their mother tongue. The latter have learned Mandarin in the kindergarten or at the primary school, since this is the official language used in the country. Their majors vary from language studies (including English and other European languages) to liberal arts and the sciences.

From the researcher's experience as a lecturer previously based in the School of Polish for Foreign Students at the University of Lodz, Poland, Asian students are perceived as shy, silent, and polite. Such simplification, confirmed by the prevalent stereotype, however, may be unnecessary and limiting. What is more, it does not help us brake the wall of cultural difference. In order to better understand the position of Chinese-speaking students in Western educational setting, it may be helpful to highlight the substantial difference between how confident Asian learners feel interacting in their first language and in the foreign language being actually learned (in this case English, but it could be any other language).

Participants have been asked to indicate the level of confidence in their ability to perform three kinds of tasks: getting engaged into conversation in everyday life situations, answering teacher's questions (in class, when pointed out to do so), and, finally, voluntarily speaking and sharing their ideas (in class, again). Each of the tasks was to be considered as performed in Chinese and in English. The estimated level of confidence was to be marked from 0 till 100% (with 0 indicating no confidence at all and 100 meaning complete certainty that one is able to do well). Next, the two levels of confidence for each task were compared by the researcher.

When getting engaged into conversation in everyday life situations, 91% of the participants reported less confidence in English than in Chinese, 16% would feel no difference, while 1,5% reported to gain more confidence in English than in their mother tongue.

Answering the teacher's questions in class was seen, again, as much easier to be done in Chinese than in English (85%), while one in ten students would see no difference (9,5%), and every twentieth would feel more confident in English language setting (5,5%).

73% of the students involved in the study would feel more confident to voluntarily share their opinion in Chinese than in English, while 20% would see no difference and 7% would prefer to do that in English.

This reveals a huge gap between how Chinese-speaking students may act in class in L2 setting (such as language schools in Western countries) and how

⁵ The admission requirements and, thus, the level of students' linguistic advancement vary.

they would actually behave in analogical situation in their home country. Their Western teachers, however, are hardly ever aware of this striking difference. Someone who completely lacks confidence in English may still feel perfectly free to talk in their mother tongue without being labelled as shy and quiet. As confirmed by the researcher's own observation at work (anecdotal evidence), many students struggle with expressing themselves in English, although they demonstrate full confidence to do so in Mandarin.

Interestingly, a small number of participants reported higher confidence in performing the tasks if in English. This may be due to the gradually changing approach to teaching which emerges as a result of growing westernization (manifested in increasing number of foreigners hired by schools) and may be taking place in local educational settings. It seems that for those few, creating an English speaking environment is equal with more opportunities to speak out, something that is not always the case in Chinese-lectured classes.

4. FINDINGS

Before we analyze the findings, let us briefly look at the most typical behavioral patterns followed by many Chinese-speaking students. How would they behave when they make an error? They may smile, first of all. Their body language leakage may, additionally, reveal subtle signs of nervousness: trembling eyelids or palms of their hands, bending head, or blushing. The graceful smile, however, may be enough for the teacher to fall into the trap of thinking that they do not really care much about being wrong. Such judgements are, unfortunately, far from being accurate, as the findings show.

Unsurprisingly, positive emotions will get dominated by negative ones. The scope of the variations within the latter one may seem overwhelming, tough. This is not to say that students from other parts of the world feel absolutely comfortable making errors. It is, instead, to look closer at those who, pretending to be fine, for some reasons often find themselves stuck, helpless, and blocked.

4.1. HOW DO YOU FEEL WHEN YOU MAKE AN ERROR IN SPOKEN ENGLISH?

The open character of the question was intended to ensure the objectivity of students' answers. In other words, the researcher's intention was to keep the respondents free from any suggestion so that they could put them frankly.

18% of the participants report their positive or at least neutral attitude toward errors in their own utterances. Eight out of ten (82%) share their clearly negative reactions which can be loosely divided into two categories: emotions and self-evaluation.

4.1.1. Comments revealing the negative perception of one's own errors in spoken output

The most common reaction described by participants was embarrassment (28% of the overall number of answers), followed by feeling shy and nervous (each in 10% of the cases). There is nothing surprising in the fact that learners find no delight in being wrong. We should not, however, overlook the contrast between how their external behavior may be perceived by their Western instructors and what they actually report to feel. Other expressions of sorrow occur in the words like: *frustration, anger, fear, shame, discomfort, blame, guilt, sadness, disappointment, stress, humiliation, or confusion*. Before citing some of the participants' comments, let us briefly look at the second group of responses, which includes answers indicating a strong connection between one's error and their self-esteem, like *I'm not good enough, I'm an idiot, unable to communicate at all, regret that I said anything at all*. The responses that revealed the feeling of embarrassment when making an error in spoken production include the following⁶:

- *I feel embarrassed and stressful, upset about couldn't express myself directly in English.*
- *Feel embarrassed I may think the one I speak to didn't know what I'm talking about, and maybe he or she doesn't want to speak with me next time.*
- *I feel embarrassed when I make a mistake. Whenever I speak English, I'm used to thinking it.*
- *I feel embarrassed, very embarrassed.*
- *I feel embarrassed because sometimes people will look at you in weird eyes when you have mistakes. That will make me lose confidence.*
- *It is embarrassing for me to make mistakes in front of a native English speaker.*

Nervousness is revealed in 24 utterances, including the following comments:

- *I just feel nervous and can't stop shake.*
- *Nervous. I afraid people don't understand my meanings.*

Here are two of the 23 remarks about feeling shy:

- *Shy. Because I'll think I was so stupid when I make a mistake.*
- *I feel shy, humiliation.*

⁶ All quotations from students' responses are cited without corrections.

There are countless examples of honest expressions of fear and sorrow, which, from a teacher's point of view, are far too often perfectly hidden under a calm façade.

Next, let us briefly review the statements in which the connection between errors and low self-esteem is explicitly indicated and questioning one's achievements takes place:

- *Oh, no! I feel that I'm not good at English and I should practice more.*
- *Nervous, shy, poor English, etc.*
- *I feel shame and shy. Like that it will be better if I don't talk.*
- *I feel I'm idiot, because I study long time ago but why I can make a mistake in spoken English.*

In addition to those, some comments reveal a fear that committing an error will result in a communication failure, the speaker may also feel blocked (both in class and in everyday interactions):

- *I think that others won't understand what I'm talking about. There may be a gap between us.*
- *I might feel less confidence to speak English next time. And sometimes I'll be afraid of making another mistake next time.*

4.1.2. Comments revealing positive or neutral perception of one's own errors in spoken output

Now, let us see the brighter side, as declared by one fifth of the students participating in the project. Generally, these expressions of positive or, at least, neutral position may be divided into three categories. The first one includes statements indicating acceptance of errors. The second type of answers may suggest that they may be good starters for further improvement. There are also students who used to feel really bad about their imperfect performance in terms of speaking, but they learned not to dramatize. Examples listed below may successfully illustrate the overall character of these comments:

- *Making mistakes are acceptable to me cause the person I'm talking to will still understands what I'm talking about.*
- *I think making a mistake in spoken English is like a check. It allows me to know what are the parts I've already learned but haven't succeeded in using them.*
- *At the moment, I feel a little bit nervous and sad. But later, I will feel happy because I can correct it and don't make the same mistake next time.*
- *I was thought making a mistake is embarrassed, but now I will try to learn from making a mistake.*
- *In the past, I would feel embarrassed but now I don't care about it very much.*

4.2. CAN YOU RECALL ANY EXPERIENCE FROM YOUR PAST THAT INFLUENCED THE WAY YOU FEEL ABOUT COMMITTING ERRORS?

The next step is to see the experiences which may have shaped participants' beliefs about errors in their performance. Having a bunch of foreign students in class means much more than just dealing with new sources of potential linguistic interferences. In fact, students' native cultures create different educational backgrounds and nurture various learning experiences. In order to better understand how the participants' perceptions had been shaped, they were asked to describe the situations that had influenced their attitudes toward making errors in spoken production. It was, again, an open question so that the respondents were free to describe their encounters, as long as they were able to recall any. In other words, the researcher did not give them any pressure to connect their current perceptions with their own stories. The suggestion for students was to share "any situation that popped up in their minds" whenever they made an error in speaking.

Interestingly, only every fifth student had been able to recall any encounter from their past. This means that many of them may not even realize why they have certain attitudes toward the issue: they may have been shaped by a series of events from school and family background. It seems easier, however, to implement some long-term changes in the attitudes if learners themselves are able to identify potential obstacles and then consciously reevaluate them.

4.2.1. Negative experiences that shaped students' perceptions of errors in spoken English

Since the negative experiences dominated the positive ones (27 vs. 17, respectively), let us look at them first. They may be divided into three categories: self-reprimand, external reprimand, communication failure.

The first category includes stories about one's confidence and self-esteem eroding as a result of an error: one can have been dissatisfied with the performance or feel like a low-achiever. The second case may adversely influence their own identity, as they experience the discomfort of performing worse than other members of their group. Here, it is the student himself or herself that remains the source of strict judgements:

- *I tried to put a English word into my idea, but I used a wrong word. Although it's embarrassed, it also remember forever. And I will not make this mistake again.*

- *I stuttered when I delivered a speech in the contest. I feel embarrassed.*
- *When some of my classmates didn't make mistakes on English, but I make.*

That I will feel sad or a little angry.

- *I once joined a workshop, which most participants are super fluent in English. Therefore, I felt like I can't really involve in the program, because I was so afraid to say or even share any idea.*

Secondly, students reported having gone through experiences in which the source of negative feedback was external: it came from someone else, let it be a teacher, a classmate, or a parent. In a test-oriented educational setting, the former one may feel pressed to have his or her students perform high enough to reach both the school standards and parents' expectations. His or her teaching achievements will be carefully measured and then displayed in public (or at least, during a staff meeting, where the pressure of the group may be excessive). As recalled by the participants, educators are often responsible for:

- **physical punishment**- a common practice till date, as confirmed in the group interviews. Many Taiwanese parents still approve this way of maintaining discipline in class and many of the informants could recall having witnessed such practices: *When I was ten in school if we made a mistake our teacher will use a stick to hit our hands.*

- **exclusion** – a powerful, though destructive tool, especially in a collective society where one's identity is strongly related to their position within a group: *Some teachers and classmates will think you are bad in English ability. So, if they have some activities with English, they won't ask you to join them.*

- **strict corrective feedback**, often in presence of others, which may automatically undermine student's position in a group of peers: *It was the first time I started learning English, I can't see the difference between A and a, My English teacher correct me in class loudly, then the whole classmates burst into laughter* – wrote a female respondent who started learning English when she was 10; now, whenever she commits an error, she would feel *embarrassed and not willing to speak English again.*

- **negative body language signals** of the teacher may be also scary enough for one to get discouraged. One of the informants recalls the following situation: *When I was interviewed to be a exchange student, I making mistakes answering the questions, I know it: but when I saw the interviewers wrinkle their eyebrows, I felt more nervous.*

Now, after looking at the situations in which the teachers contributed to learners' negative perceptions of errors in spoken production, let us consider the influence of their peers. Once again, the factor that is powerful in any cultural setting, becomes far more critical in a collectively oriented society. What is more,

in Taiwan it is easy for the students to create and maintain an atmosphere of tough competition: plain to see who scores higher, when each single point matters and increases the chances to get admitted to a better college⁷. In the comments given by the participants, the dominant motive was being bullied and laugh at, the sort of behavior which the researcher has witnessed and curbed immediately in her own classroom. Here is a report by a student who started learning English at the age of 4: *In high school, I study in an English-talented class. So my classmates are all good at English. I said Do you sure? in front of the whole class during a presentation I made. Therefore, I was teased about this for a long time. This experience made me feel ashamed and sad.*

The external pressure, as already stated, can also come from the family. Once again, the collectivist perspective encourages parents to expect their children to perform better than others, so that in the future they can go to a well ranked high school or prestigious university (which, in turn, has a great impact on their professional career and overall reputation). In the students' responses, two models of abusive parental behavior have been found: psychical violence and emotional pressure. Let us see two examples:

- *I didn't get high scores in my English exam, so my mum beat me.*
- *Making mistakes is not allowed in my family since my parents consider that people must do their best all the time. For example, when I got 100 in my math exam in the elementary school, they did not praise it but told me that it was my job. Job should be done with excellence.*

The last group of responses includes the reports of one's failure in their attempt to communicate with a foreigner (with strong emphasis on the encounters with native speakers), a situation which may be seen as a touchstone of achievements. If negative, it may shake learner's confidence, as clear in the reports given below:

- *When I had been in USA, I wanted to order something, by the clerk didn't understand what I was talking about, so I thought it was so embarrassed.*
- *When a foreigner didn't understand my sentence, I felt very disappoint in English.*

4.2.2. Positive experiences that shaped students' perceptions of errors in spoken English

Some of the participants reported having positive experiences. Interestingly, most of them still claimed that whenever they make an error in their spoken production, they find themselves "shy" or "embarrassed", so their responses seem

⁷ The grading system is based on 0-100 scale with 60 points as the threshold enabling students to pass.

quite contradictory. Here, analogically, three main categories can be distinguished. They are, though, not mutually exclusive, since, for instance, a realization can be experienced as a result of a positive interaction in the target language. Let us consider the following:

1. Internal realization;
2. External influence;
3. Successful communicational experience.

The first group includes opinions that an error is not necessarily a failure, that language may be simply seen as a communication tool and one needs to be able to express themselves effectively, though not always perfectly:

- *Since I noticed that language is to “communicate” with others, I am not so care about how fluently I speak the language.*
- *When I was in Taiwan University⁸ listening to a speech given by a professor, I found that when he asked their students to express themselves, they make mistakes as well. I learned from the experience that perfect people also make mistakes!*

Next, several samples will be given to illustrate how teachers, parents, or peers can shape one’s attitudes and beliefs. Interestingly, among all attempts to describe positive experiences, this type is the most frequent one (13 samples in total):

- *Teachers always encourage me when I make a mistake. It’s help a lot.*
- *My first English teacher always said that making mistakes is okay, before, so I think making mistakes in speaking is normal and it can be accept.*
- *My parents and teachers always encourage me.*
- *My good friend is a confident girl. She doesn’t feel afraid to make mistakes and this astonishes me a lot. It makes me think other way of value, we needs to improve, so we must make mistakes during the time we improve ourselves.*

The last group includes stories in which respondents share the moments of their success, when they finally experienced being able to communicate effectively: *When I went to Europe before, I communicated with the foreigners in English. I finally knew that they won’t care about the mistakes I have made. That helped me reduce the afraid to make mistakes.*

4.3. ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS

Next, the respondents were asked to specify the level of agreement or disagreement with a set of ideas related to errors in spoken EFL production. This point was designed to give a clear picture of their attitudes. A Likert-scale type

⁸ National Taiwan University - the best university in Taiwan. Even though the respondent is studying at a very prestigious national university, she is aware of the dominant position of NTU in all national rankings.

of questions was involved to measure the degree to which informants were or were not of the same mind about certain issues. It was necessary to prevent the students from providing non-committal replies which are frequently used in Taiwanese moderate discourse but give a vague notion of the problem. This is why the middle option, traditionally used in Likert scaling method (*Neither agree nor disagree*) was not included. The data gathered is presented in the chart below:

Table 1. Additional questions

| | Statement | Strongly disagree | Disagree | Rather disagree | Rather agree | Agree | Strongly agree |
|-----|--|-------------------|----------|-----------------|--------------|-------|----------------|
| 1. | Mistakes are OK. | 3,5% | 3,5% | 2% | 27% | 36% | 28% |
| 2. | I am afraid of making mistakes in spoken English in class. | 5% | 5% | 15,5% | 28,5% | 33% | 13% |
| 3. | My fear of making a mistake stops me from speaking English in class. | 12% | 16% | 23% | 23% | 17% | 9% |
| 4. | Everybody makes mistakes. | 0% | 2% | 3% | 10,5% | 18% | 66,5% |
| 5. | If I work really hard, one day I can totally eliminate mistakes in my spoken English. | 3% | 9% | 13% | 21,5% | 30% | 23,5% |
| 6. | If one day I speak English like a native speaker, I will never make mistakes. | 15% | 26% | 20% | 20% | 16% | 3% |
| 7. | A good student never makes mistakes when speaking English. | 25% | 39% | 19% | 13% | 3% | 1% |
| 8. | A mistake in speaking indicates lack of knowledge. | 14% | 18% | 28% | 26,5% | 10,5% | 3% |
| 9. | My mistake in spoken English will influence how the teacher will perceive (see) me. | 8% | 11% | 17% | 37% | 22% | 5% |
| 10. | If I make a mistake in speaking, my English teacher will think I'm not a good student. | 17% | 30% | 28% | 16% | 6,5% | 2,5% |
| 11. | My mistake in speaking will influence how my classmates will perceive (see) me. | 17% | 12% | 17% | 34,5% | 18% | 1,5% |
| 12. | If I make a mistake in spoken English, it's fine. It's not the end of the world! | 2% | 4% | 1% | 11% | 32% | 50% |

| Statement | | Strongly disagree | Disagree | Rather disagree | Rather agree | Agree | Strongly agree |
|-----------|---|-------------------|----------|-----------------|--------------|-------|----------------|
| 13. | It's better to keep quiet than to make a mistake. | 16% | 21% | 30% | 20% | 4% | 9% |
| 14 | It's a shame to make a mistake in speaking English. | 19,5% | 19,5% | 24,5% | 24,5% | 7% | 5% |

Generally, the responses given by the informants can be seen as the expression of their perception and evaluation of errors. We can, thus, talk about positive and negative attitudes towards making them. Some of the findings, however, remain contradictory, which complicates the overall picture but, nevertheless, highlights the importance of empathetic approach to classroom management.

90% of the respondents did not report perceiving errors as something wrong, quite on the contrary: they were eager to agree that “Mistakes are OK”. They were also willing to forgive themselves for making one (*If I make a mistake in spoken English, it's fine. It's not the end of the world*). 50% of the students strongly agreed with the latter idea. What is more, 95% agreed that “Everybody makes mistakes”. In other words, they were able to see incorrect performance as something common and human. 60% of respondents would not agree that it “indicates lack of knowledge”. At the same time, however, 40% would agree with this notion. Far more than this, three quarters of all students involved, reported their anxious fear of committing errors in speaking, while 6 out of 10 people feel blocked and overawed, not to say “speechless” (*My fear of making mistakes stops me from speaking English in class*). Over half of participants think that making an error will have a direct correlation with how they will be perceived by the teacher (64%) and peers (54%, though 46% disagree with this idea). This may result in threatening one's social face. Interestingly and, to some extent contradictorily, three quarters of the respondents expressed their disagreement with the notion that the teacher, witnessing an error in spoken production, would think they are not good performers. 67% disagreed with the idea that “It is better to keep quiet than to make a mistake”, at the same time, every third person tends to agree with it. Finally, to better understand the vision of success in EFL learning, let us see that three quarters agree that if they work really hard, one day they can totally eliminate errors in speaking. It is hard to imagine how much pressure this attitude may exert on a humble language learner. And, although 67% of respondents disagree with the notion that if one day they speak English like a native, they will never make errors, still every third person sticks to that unrealistic vision.

5. DISCUSSION

The analysis of the responses revealed the presence of a severe internal discomfort arising from making an error, especially when it happens in public or causes failure in interaction with a foreigner/native speaker. This feeling of anxiety may occur even though the learner thinks that introducing an error is a common practice. Imperfect performance in speaking is seen as forgivable and human, but still, embarrassing and far too often threatening enough for one to refrain from speaking. Maintaining face through avoidance is regarded as a sound practice to be adopted in EFL setting, so that individual's positive image may be projected. A language classroom is seen as a community in which the quality of one's statement remains correlated with their in-group position and boosting or eroding of their self-esteem.

Not all students report perceiving errors in speaking as a failure, though. Some of them tend to see it as an opportunity to grow.

At the same time, a sharp contrast can be drawn between the way a Western language instructor can interpret Taiwanese students' behavior (especially non-verbal signs) and feelings hidden under their pseudo-calm masks. A smile can become an attempt to cover one's helplessness and embarrassment and the teacher should not be misled by such signs, traditionally connected with positive state of mind. What is seen by a Westerner as a sign of well-being, can actually be nothing more than a trick to maintain a positive image in a group, since it remains a crucial framework of reference for a Taiwanese.

Furthermore, the analysis of the students' responses revealed that learners often are constrained by perfectionism. They stick to bold vision of a high potential to speak with no errors, a goal hard to achieve even for expert users of any language. This may be limiting and create false self-evaluation patterns: striving for excellence, one may easily lose the joy of gaining knowledge and suffer from poor self-esteem, whenever witnessing his or her own imperfection. This is how a vicious circle begins: I am not good enough, so I seek for a solution (more cramming) or I get discouraged and give up. In the first case, working hard does not really help, since the reason of the problem is not always in insufficient vocabulary or problems with grammar. It is the attitude toward one's own performance that becomes the main obstacle.

At the same time, the collectivist culture nurtures a set of conditions shaping specific attitudes. Experiences gained during in-class interactions and conversations with foreigners, with the latter ones seen as a touchstone of learning achievements, are vital. The feeling of shame and performing worse than other in-group members can form negative perceptions, but it does not work in both directions: there is no guarantee that positive experiences will result in same attitudes. Sub-

jects who reported remembering situations that positively influenced their self-confidence when facing a failure in speaking, still expressed the overall feeling of discomfort when making errors.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

To sum up, whenever dealing with Taiwanese language learners, an instructor should keep in mind that their behavior and attitude are often strongly influenced by collectivist outlook, stressing concepts like *social face*, *shame*, or *embarrassment*. In multicultural groups, such attitudes may not necessarily be shared by other students, which can lead to unnecessary misjudgments and simplified evaluation of Taiwanese FL learners. Even though some of them may share more “westernized” conceptions and take errors easily, it seems reasonable to assume that an average Taiwanese will perceive it as a face-threatening act.

Favorable attitudes, however, may be cultivated by an empathic FL instructor, both explicitly and implicitly, by providing a positive model. Certain issues can be discussed to help the students reevaluate their initial assumptions and help them understand that, at some stage, errors are unavoidable. A teacher is always entitled to give supportive feedback and ensure the student that he or she is still doing well. It is also good to create a safe atmosphere based on acceptance and understanding. Introducing certain standards of behavior may also work satisfactorily: a code to be abided by all group members (“We do not make fun of each other” etc.) What is more, and probably quite difficult for most of the teachers, we can set an example of a language user that has enough courage to admit to (and embrace!) his or her own imperfection. Giving up the mask of an infallible sage releases the burden and brings authenticity in. If language instructors believe that they are good enough even though they sometimes commit errors, the students will finally accept their condition, too. If educators demonstrate how to gracefully deal with such “slip-ups”, learners will do that as well. As a conversation instructor, working with hundreds of Taiwanese students every year, I can assure you that this is possible.

7. LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

One of the assumptions underlying this research project is that attitudes toward errors in speaking English will be the same or at least quite similar to attitudes toward errors in speaking any other foreign language. These two may re-

main correlated, but still, we should keep in mind that the participants have been learning EFL for many years, in most cases since childhood. Therefore, when approaching a new linguistic environment as young adults, they may be, to a certain degree, free from the record of past educational experiences. Comparing their perceptions would be a fascinating issue to get investigated in the future.

It would be also beneficial to compare Taiwanese FL learners with a group of students from another country, especially one whose culture is strongly conditioned by individualism. This would give a clearer picture of how Taiwanese students' perceptions may differ from the beliefs held by learners from other countries.

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TAIWANESE EFL LEARNERS' PERCEPTIONS OF ERRORS IN SPEAKING

Keywords: Taiwan, collectivism, perception, error, speaking, EFL learner, anxiety

Summary. The main purpose of this article is to examine the Taiwanese EFL learners' perceptions of errors in speaking in order to better understand this group of students and reduce the barrier of unnecessary misinterpretations and incorrect judgments of one's behavior. Non-verbal signs sent by Taiwanese students committing errors can be misleading if one is not familiar with the basic principles underlying this Asian culture, strongly conditioned by collectivism. Often labelled as quiet and shy, Taiwanese language learners actually experience a high level of anxiety, since making an error is seen as a face-threatening act. The author looks closer at the reasons conditioning their attitudes and suggests possible solutions to overcome the problems discussed.