



CONTRIBUTING FACTORS TO EFL STUDENTS' SPEAKING ANXIETY

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Abstract.

Anxiety is one of the most influential factors on students' learning, especially speaking. English speaking is a language skill that is highly affected by anxiety. Therefore, it suggested that the cause of this anxiety be explored to reduce its significant effect on learner. This research aimed at describing contributing factors to EFL students' speaking. Qualitative inquiry was used as the main framework in completing the analysis. The participants of this research were EFL learners enrolled in English department in a private university in Garut. They were involved based on volunteer participation. Their identity was presented as pseudonym in order to comply with the research ethical conduct. The interviews were used to explore many contributing factors to speaking anxiety experienced by EFL Learners. The result revealed that there are nine dominant factors identified as the cause of students' speaking anxiety, they are: cognitive and linguistic factors related to classroom procedure, strict and formal classroom environment, classroom presentation, fear of making mistakes and apprehension about others' evaluation, role of language instructors, linguistic difficulties, pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary.

Keywords: Speaking, Speaking Anxiety, Foreign Language

INTRODUCTION

Teaching speaking to foreign learners seems to be challenging. It deals with some boundaries that need to be overcome during the learning process. Speaking is one of the two productive skills in language after writing. It requires the learner to be more active. But as other learning process, the problem will consistently appear during the process. Many students said that they couldn't express their idea in speaking class, some of them experienced nervousness, they often said 'I always feel nervous when speaking English in front of the other students', 'I'm afraid of making mistakes', 'my grammar usage is very bad'. Such statements are commonly uttered by learners and are too familiar to the English teachers. These statements show an important problem that the majority of students face in learning and particularly speaking class. They seem uncomfortable when asked to speak or to respond questions in English. Many learners express their inability and sometimes even acknowledge their failure in learning to speak English. These learners may be good at learning other skills but, when it comes to learning to speak another language, they claim to have a 'mental block' against it (Horwitz et al., 1986: 125). What, then, hinders or stops them to succeed in learning a foreign language? In many cases, students' feeling of stress, anxiety or nervousness may impede their language learning and performance abilities.

Theorists and language researchers have frequently demonstrated that these feelings of anxiety are specifically associated with learning and speaking a foreign language, which distinguishes language learning from learning other skills or subjects. Both teachers and students are aware and generally feel strongly that anxiety is a major hurdle to be overcome when learning to speak another language. Learning a language itself is "a profoundly unsettling psychological proposition" because it directly threatens an individual's 'self-concept' and world-view (Guiora, 1983 cited in Horwitz et al., 1986: 28). The existing phenomena were frequently found by the writer in speaking class. Various methods have been applied by the writer in order to encourage the learners to speak freely without feeling anxious. But still the mental block of speaking English become the major problem for the students and impede their learning. Not only University student perform this language anxiety, but also many other learners from lower level education show the tendency to feel anxious in language learning.

The intrinsic nature of language anxiety poses an additional challenge to language learners as well as teachers. Several recent approaches to foreign language teaching, such as Communicative Language Teaching and Suggestopedia, are explicitly directed at reducing learner anxiety. These approaches lay emphasis on pair or group work and learning through communication in the target language as a way to reduce language anxiety. Conversely, the demand on communication in the modern language classes may enhance students' anxiety, as there are more chances for their weaknesses to be exposed in front of others. Consideration of learner anxiety in the modern language classroom is deemed highly essential in order to help learners develop their communication skills in the target language. The major purpose of the research is to find out why Language learners, especially students of English education program, feel anxious or unconfident or even embarrassed while learning to speak English Language despite the fact that it is the compulsory competence that they need to acquire during the study and what influence it casts on their communication in the target language. In other words, what are the factors or sources that make speaking English more stressful in some situations than in others.

METHODOLOGY

During the initial contact with the participants, the nature of the study was explained: that it was voluntary, and that all interviews would be conducted in English and would be tape-recorded for accuracy and transcription purposes. They were ensured that all the recordings would be deleted and the information gained through them would be kept strictly confidential. For their satisfaction, they were also informed that permission had been sought to contact them from a private university in Garut. The volunteer students were also scheduled for interviews. Afterwards, they were contacted through mobile text messages, e-mails, and phone calls.

The interview data was analysed and interpreted following the grounded theory data analysis techniques and procedures. The grounded theory approach is a qualitative research method that “uses a systematic set of procedures to develop an inductively derived grounded theory about a phenomenon” (Davidson, 2002). Its primary objective is to expand upon an explanation of a phenomenon (language anxiety) by identifying the key elements of that phenomenon, and then categorizing the relationships of those elements to the context and process of the experiment” (2002: 1). The audio-recorded interviews were listened and transcribed, which itself is a process of data analysis and interpretation” (Gillham 2005: 121).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

a. Cognitive and Linguistic Factors Related to Classroom Procedure

How learners perceive the language learning process, their perceptions about themselves and how they should be performing in any communicative event, and the linguistic obstacles they encounter while communicating in English have been found to be strongly linked with language anxiety. This section discusses the findings in relation to some such psychological and linguistic factors that may cause language anxiety in speaking.

b. Strict and Formal Classroom Environment

Consistent with the past research, the participants appeared to be blaming a strict and formal classroom environment as a significant cause of their language anxiety. They view the classroom a place where their mistakes are noticed and their deficiencies are pointed out. With regard to this issue, a participant expressed, “In the class if you say because I did not know much of a language, you will be blamed. That means you are not hard to study”. Another learner expressed, “I feel more anxiety in the class because it is more formal but out of class I don’t feel stress, talk to my friends, not afraid of mistakes”. Such expressions of the fear of being negatively evaluated under formal classroom environment lend support to the previous research that learners feel more anxious in highly evaluative situations, particularly in the classroom where their performance is constantly monitored by both their teacher and peers (Daly, 1991: cited in Onwuegbuzie et al., 1999: 218). Thus, these perceptions, can be considered a clear indication that the teachers should recognize that the language classroom could become a highly anxiety-provoking environment for students (Tsui, 1996: cited in Ohata, 2005: 148).

The perceptions suggest that learners feel more anxious and under stress in the classroom environments that follow the traditional behaviourist theories of learning; for instance, the classrooms where the students as a whole class constantly drill or repeat the learning tasks like machines (e.g. audio-lingual language teaching method) and thus the power or status differentials between students and teachers is upheld. Contrarily, students feel less anxious and stress in classroom environments that follow the constructivist theories

of learning; these emphasize collaborative activities by forming learning communities including both teachers and students.

c. Classroom Presentation

Like discussion in open-class-forum, giving a short talk or presentation in the class has also been reported to be highly anxiety inducing, one which makes the classroom environment more formal and stressful for the learners. All the participants agreed that speaking in front of the whole class or in public caused anxiety for most of the learners. A student expressed, "In class maybe I stand up and do the presentation, I usually feel nervous. I don't know when I talk to other students in normal class, I think it is ok. Maybe I lose the confidence". Thus, the study reinforced the findings of the earlier studies by Koch and Terrell (1991), Young (1990, cited in Young, 1991: 429), and Price (1991), who found that a large number of their subjects considered oral presentation as the most anxiety-provoking activity in the class.

d. Fear of Making Mistakes and Apprehension about Others' Evaluation

The evidence gained through past research, "both ethnographic and empirical, supports the notion that language anxiety, for untold number of learners, has its origin in the fear of making mistakes and attracting the derision of classmates" (Jones, 2004: 33). The findings of this study were in agreement in this respect too. The participants frequently expressed that learners feel afraid, and even panic because of the fear of committing mistakes or errors in front of others, or in Jones' words (2004: 31) because of "a fear of appearing awkward, foolish and incompetent in the eyes of learners' peers or others". As a result of the fear of making mistakes, some learners expressed that learning and speaking a foreign language in the classroom is "always a problem".

In line with the study of Gregersen and Horwitz (2002) on 'perfectionism', fear of making mistakes has been found to be strongly linked with the learners' concern to save their positive image or impression in the mind of their teacher and peers. Another learner said, "I learn words, next day I forget. Teacher may think I am a lazy guy, have bad memory, don't work hard". Not surprisingly, students get more apprehensive about making mistakes in front of teachers because they think it is more likely to influence their end-of-course results. Another learner said, "I get nervous because teacher always scores". Another learner offered, "I get conscious, don't want to make mistakes in the class, teacher will put this in the mind and will give grades at the end...I may feel better if no grades at the end. Teacher will not collect mistakes". This seems to indicate, as found by Tobias (1986: cited in MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991: 296), that language anxiety is negatively correlated with language course grades. These findings suggest that assessment type and teachers' attitude towards assessment can significantly contribute to learners' anxiety. It might be beneficial if future research explores this issue in depth, particularly in the classroom.

Students, in spite of reporting feelings of anxiety over error correction, also expressed their desire to be corrected in order to overcome their language imperfections, which a seasoned teacher stated was a "tricky job". Consistent with the literature on language anxiety (e.g. see Horwitz et al. 1986; Young, 1991), he remarked: Teacher has several different possibilities at his disposal for giving feedback with respect to errors, it's very tricky. Students expect and say to correct their mistakes but, when you correct, especially in front of the whole class, then it is stressful for them. But, sometimes, if you try to do so in a tactful way that really does not help. They know you are being tactful and they feel that they must have made a terrible mistake if you are being so tactful.

This view suggests that sometimes even not correcting errors, as a technique to lower anxiety levels, makes some students anxious because many students believe that speech correction is necessary in order to learn to speak a language well. Even if teachers do not correct their errors, they find it difficult, particularly adults, to endure a perceived high degree of inaccuracy in their speech. Resulting from a fear of negative evaluation, the apprehensive students reported that whenever they anticipate that complete communication is not possible and that they are unable to express a particular point fully, they either try to escape or “end up being quiet and reticent, contrary to their initial intention to participate” (Ohata, 2005: 135, Jones, 2004: 31). “I try to be silent, keep quiet...so that no body should notice me, I try to escape...try to keep my conversation short as much as I can”, one learner said. Thus, it appears, as Horwitz et al. (1986: 127) believe, that frustration experienced when a learner is unable to communicate a message can lead to apprehension about future attempts to communicate. This would explain why anxious learners tend to avoid classroom participation (Ely, 1986: cited in MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991: 297), because they are either unsure of what they are saying or lose confidence when giving an answer to a question in the classroom. For example, another student expressed, “Sometimes I know the answer....but I try to hesitated....I may be, I’ll predict this answer may be wrong”.

e. Role of Language Instructors

In accordance with the results of the studies previously cited, this study also found that students’ embarrassment may be aggravated by the role played by lecturer in the class (Horwitz et al., 1986; Price, 1991; Young, 1991; Brandl, 1987; Young, 1990: cited in Onwuegbuzie et al., 1999: 220). The teachers’ attitude towards and beliefs about language learning and teaching, their reaction to the learners’ errors, and the way they create stressful environment in the class have been reported to be significantly related to language anxiety. It emerged during focus group discussion that the authoritative, embarrassing and humiliating attitude of the teachers towards students, particularly when they make mistakes, can have severe consequences on learners’ cognition and their willingness to communicate in the class. A learner’s mistake, as Jones (2004: 32) views, “may bring about humiliating punishment from the teacher under the concentrated gaze of one’s peers”.

f. Linguistic Difficulties

In addition to the fears regarding committing mistakes and being negatively evaluated by one’s teacher or peers in the formal setting of a language classroom, the participants reiterated some of the most common linguistic difficulties, which cause these fears in the first place. The SLA researchers have frequently reported students complaining that English pronunciation is too hard to adopt, and that the English language system is so complicated, so irregular, and with so many exceptions in spellings and meanings of vocabulary items. In spite of awareness of these difficulties, the results indicate that anxiety still continues to flourish in the learners. This suggests that a series of more in-depth research studies need to be undertaken regarding solutions, rather than just the identification of these inherent difficulties in learning English language as a means to enhance students’ proficiency and to reduce their language anxiety.

g. Pronunciation

In line with the past research, pronunciation appeared to be a big cause of stress for learners in this study. An student said, “Pronunciation is an important issue across language groups

because of its immediate effect on interaction. When you feel somebody does not understand you, you need to improve your pronunciation within a second, which is often hard and stressful". The issue of pronunciation anxiety has been found to be at higher level learners in this study. a student remarked, "I am really afraid of some... we [Sundanese] are really confused what we are talking about. We cannot pronounce like Western people. I am worried about my pronunciation when I talk to my lecturers or to someone who speaks English well". Consistent with Chen's (2005) study on "barriers to acquiring listening strategies for EFL learners", the participants mentioned the difficulties pertaining to immediately linking the word they hear to its meaning. "During listening, I cannot find to get the word meaning in time. I can note the word but I cannot find the meaning", said another student.

h. Grammar

With regard to linguistic difficulties, grammar has been found to be the second most important aspect that the find difficult when learning to speak English. "When I want to speak", said a female student, "I am not sure which tense to use". Another female learner practitioner expressed, "When I speak I am unsure which form of verb to use, I always have to think before I say". She further explained that verbs only have one form in Bahasa and people use the words like 'today, yesterday, tomorrow, last time, etc.' to indicate present, past and future time instead of changing the verb form. She elaborated this point with an example, "I go to the supermarket today, I go to the supermarket yesterday". This difference in language patterns is a big trouble for learners. When asked about the most embarrassing grammatical difficulties they encounter, the student mentioned that their difficulty is with English 'word classes'. She explained that the problem with the English language is the adjectives, verbs, adverbs or nouns that are from the same root, like confidence, confident, confidently, etc. The learners face difficulties with the word endings or suffixes that are not the part of their mother tongue system.

Similarly, difficulties regarding prepositions, different uses of article systems in different languages, use of English modal verbs, etc. were mentioned as significant problems learners face. some students specifically reported that the complex article and modal verb system of the English language cause trouble for them. Such difficulties can lead to the impression that anxious students are not capable communicator in the second language (1991: 296) as they impede learners' fluency in conveying the spoken messages. "It is because they know that this is a problem and every time they see this problem is coming while speaking, they get frightened.

i. Vocabulary

The classical reasons and the most common reason given by the students when they are asked to speak in the speaking class are the lack of vocabularies. The subjects' responses regarding the difficulties of remembering and retrieving vocabulary items are also consistent with past research. The responses lend support to MacIntyre and Gardner's (1991b, cited in MacIntyre, 1995: 93) research, which found a significant negative correlation between language anxiety and the ability to recall vocabulary items. "I don't have exact words to express my ideas", "sometimes I am conscious I am not using the right word", "I always feel nervous speaking English because I do not have enough vocabulary", are some of the utterances participants made to show their difficulties regarding vocabulary.

As mentioned above, many factors have significant effect on the students' anxiety in speaking class though some of them are still enjoying learning this subject. But the exposed

factors contributing to the student anxiety in this subject are not the only factors. There are many other problems to be revealed as the influencing factors. For the development and the improvement of English language teaching and learning, it is mandatory for the teachers and educators to pay a better attention on the factors discussed above. Language anxiety, it can be postulated, may not require any 'special treatment' but what it does demand is the careful attitude of the language teachers in order to understand and to effectively diagnose this phenomenon in the learners. Then, it requires the application of modern approaches that lay emphasis on enhancing learning opportunities in an environment that is conducive to learning.

CONCLUSION

Although the existing research has provided a valuable insight into language anxiety from both statistical and descriptive aspects, the phenomenon, because of its complicated and multi-faceted nature, requires further exploration from a variety of perspectives and approaches. This study was an attempt to apprehend the true nature of the phenomenon from a different perspective.

The results of this interview study clearly indicate that the most anxiety provoking skill in English learning is speaking skill. Almost all research subjects acknowledged that they feel anxious and nervous while speaking English in front of others. Some learners even expressed that they feel 'stupid' when they cannot speak English well and others maintained that they try to skip or escape the situations, which demand speaking in front of others, either in the classroom or outside of the classroom. What seems to distinguish speaking is the public nature of the skill; this poses a threat to peoples' self-concept, self-identity, and ego, which they have formed in their first language as reasonable and intelligent individuals (Horwitz et al., 1986: 128). Every factor or situation that creates possibilities or enhances the chances of exposing their deficiencies and language imperfections in front of others is likely to cause language anxiety for learners. This situation could be either classroom interaction in the form of open class forum, group participation or class presentation, or giving a short talk in any public event is likely to challenge learners' communicative abilities.

What makes a foreign language classroom a highly anxiety-evoking place is its evaluative nature: evaluation by the teachers, peers, and by a learners' own 'self', accompanied by high expectations and beliefs about language learning. It was found that the feelings of anxiety become more threatening when the teachers or lecturers manner of error correction is rigid and humiliating and when they consider language class a performance rather than a learning place. Anxiety has also been found to be exacerbated by students' feeling of low proficiency or lack of confidence in general linguistic knowledge, the evidence of which students do not want to display. The subjects expressed many problems and difficulties in learning English language, like grammar, pronunciation, English word-class system, modal verbs etc., which were commonly thought to impede the fluency of the language learners and hence, were perceived to be major obstacles in achieving the desired performance goals in English language.

Whenever the learners anticipate these problems while speaking English, as elaborated by a teacher, they get frightened. This lack of success when trying to achieve the expected performance reinforces learners' lack of confidence in their general linguistic knowledge and results into debilitating level of anxiety in them when they are called upon to fulfill the demand of any communicative situation. A major cause of facing these language difficulties was found to be the lack of sufficient input and chances of practicing speaking skill

(output) in the social contexts where English is not used as an L1. Many times students reported that they know certain vocabulary items and sentence structures but they do not come out right when needed in any communicative situation. This indicates, from psycholinguistic perspective, that when learners' cognitive processes of using a language (speaking) are not regularized due to lack of practice, either in the classroom or in the society, these difficulties are likely to continue causing trouble for the learners.

In addition to these psycholinguistic factors, some cultural aspects of English language learning can also contribute to language anxiety for learners. In their interaction with the English-speaking interlocutors, the learners may have a good command of linguistic knowledge (patterns of language, grammar, vocabulary, etc.) but may feel apprehensive to use it because they are not sure of the cultural rules. This uncertainty of the learners as to when and how much they should talk in an interaction with English speaking people, creates an unequal social or status relationship between them which "disfavours attempts at negotiation" (Wolfson, 1989: 131). This explains why learners feel anxiousness or stress in intercultural communication, in situations where they feel inferior to the target language speakers, both in terms of cultural awareness and linguistic competencies. Furthermore, they may feel anxiety in speaking English because of the fear that they may lose their positive self-image or self-identity they have formed in their first language.

However, for effective alleviation of language anxiety, the comparison of the results obtained in this study with those of the past studies suggests that there do not seem to be any specific remedies for language anxiety. The strategies found in this study, as well as recommended by the researchers and theorists, could "certainly work as prescription for anxiety but it might as easily be advice on 'what good teachers' should routinely do" (Oxford, 1999: cited in Jones, 2004: 37). All such advice is excellent but also applicable to students who do not show signs of anxiety; therefore, the advice cannot be other than general (2004: 37). Language anxiety, it can be postulated, may not require any 'special treatment' but what it does demand is the careful attitude of the language teachers in order to understand and to effectively diagnose this phenomenon in the learners. Then, it requires the application of modern approaches that lay emphasis on enhancing learning opportunities in an environment that is conducive to learning.

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