Speaking anxiety and its effects on students' in-class speaking performance: Brief literature review and implications

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Abstract: *Anxiety and nervousness are commonly seen when language learners learn to speak a foreign language. These feelings are considered to have a potentially negative effect on communication in the target language. The use of modern communicative language teaching approaches in the language classrooms and the wide-spread use of English language have increased the demand to learn good communication skills but existence of such feelings in the learners may prevent them from achieving the desired goal. It is highly important for a language teacher to take learners' anxiety in learning to speak foreign language into consideration in order to support them timely in performing in the target language. This paper provides literature review of speaking anxiety, including definitions of anxiety and speaking anxiety, factors causing speaking anxiety for EFL learners in learning speaking skill in their classrooms. Pedagogical implications for both teachers and learners are also discussed thanks to the findings of some research carried out in the same field.*

Keywords: *Anxiety, speaking performance, factors, effects.*

1. Introduction

Anxiety experienced in the course of learning a foreign language is reported to have been specific and unique (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989). According to Krashen (1982), anxiety contributed negatively to an "affective filter", which made an individual less responsive to language input (as cited in Liu, 2007, p.119). This principle had considerable impact on communicative teaching approaches in subsequent years. Since then, there have been many research articles carried out to approach the foreign language learning anxiety by Horwitz et al., 1986, MacIntyre and Gardner, 1989, Florez, 1999, Wilson, 2006. In order to identify anxious university students and measure their anxiety, Horwitz et al. (1986) developed the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) which consisted of three dimensions—communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. It was reported that many students in foreign language learning experienced significant foreign language anxiety, which unfavorably affected their performance in that language.

2. Literature review

2.1. Overview of anxiety

In Pappamihiel (2002)'s work, the author displayed the development of anxiety theory which moved from generalized theories by Bandura (1991) and Pekrun (1992) to more situation-specific theories of language learning anxiety by MacIntyre & Gardner (1994) and then to theories that focus on contextual levels of anxiety within individuals by Pappamihiel (1999). It means that anxiety is a complex issue which has been taking a great deal of time and effort of the researchers to be able to comprehend its character.

According to Hilgard, Atkinson, and Atkinson (1971, as cited in Spielberger, 1983), anxiety is defined as a state of apprehension, a vague fear that is only indirectly associated with an object. For more specific understandings on the issue, Spielberger (1983) did differentiate anxiety from fear by showing that although anxiety and fear are both unpleasant emotional reactions to the stimulus conditions perceived as threatening, fear is usually derived from a real, objective danger in the external environment while the threatening stimulus of anxiety may not be known. Furthermore, the author defined anxiety as the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system.

Three categories of anxiety: trait anxiety, state anxiety, and situation-specific anxiety are clarified by MacIntyre and Gardner (1989). Trait anxiety is an individual's likelihood of becoming anxious in any situation. Because the fact that trait anxiety is a relatively stable personality characteristics, a person

who is trait anxious would probably become anxious in many different kinds of situations, more frequently or more intensely than most people do (Woodrow, 2006). This approach to anxiety has been condemned as that interpretation of trait anxiety would be a gibberish if it was out of interaction with situations because a particular situation may be perceived as anxiety- provoking by some but not by other even though those people share the similar trait anxiety scores (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991).

State anxiety is defined as a transient anxiety, an unpleasant emotional temporary state, a response to a particular anxiety-provoking stimulus such as an important test (Spielberger, 1983). This type of anxiety is in contrast to the stable nature of trait anxiety. It is the apprehension that is experienced at a particular moment in time (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991).

Situation-specific anxiety refers to the persistent and multi-faceted nature of some anxieties (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1981, as cited in Horwitz, 2001). It is aroused by a specific type of situation or event such as public speaking, examinations, or class participation. According to MacIntyre and Gardner (1991), situation- specific anxiety can be treated as trait anxiety, which is limited to a specific context. This perspective discusses anxiety reactions in a well-defined situation such as public speaking, during tests, when solving mathematics problems, or in a foreign language classroom.

Besides, there are also two other categories of anxiety: facilitating anxiety and debilitating anxiety, which were reported by Scovel (1991). Facilitating anxiety enhances learning and performance whereas debilitating anxiety is associated with poor learning and performance. Facilitating anxiety occurs when the difficulty level of the task triggers the proper amount of anxiety, motivates learners to fight the new learning task and gears the learners emotionally for approach behavior (Scovel, 1991). However, although a certain level of anxiety may be beneficial, too much anxiety can become debilitating: it discourages the learner to encounter the new task, and stimulates the individual emotionally to adopt avoidance behavior which may lead to avoidance of work and inefficient work performance (Scovel, 1991). On the one hand, to some extent, anxiety can motivate the learner and help the performance be enriched; on the other hand, anxiety contributes as a factor causing learner's failure.

2.2. Overview of speaking anxiety

There are various aspects of L2 learning which seem to provoke anxiety in students, but speaking courses appear to produce greater anxiety than other skill courses according to ElKhafaifi (2005) (as cited in Al-Sibai, 2005). Besides, one of the problems of speaking activities given by Ur (1996) is that the feeling of anxiety makes learners feel unwilling to speak or their minds become blank so that they seem to get stuck with their speech.

It is reported that there are several reasons why L2 learners feel anxious while speaking in L2. Firstly, due to the consequences of communicative speaking activities in a large class such as noise, students' diverting from the focused lesson, teacher's disability to control all the students, difficulties in making disciplines, the lectures are delivered with only asking and giving questions and answers between teachers and students. There is no chance for communicative speaking activities as well as limited opportunities for students to really immerse in the target language. Thus, when they have to speak by themselves, they certainly have difficulties. The ideas, to some extent, share the similar viewpoint given by Al-Sibai (2005). He reports that second language (L2) is considered as a knowledge subject in some areas; thus, it is analyzed, explained, and practiced like many other subjects. Because of classroom size and examination-oriented teaching and learning method, L2 is said to be learned for the sole purpose of passing tests. It makes the communicative skills be disregarded and as a result, L2 learners lack competency in speaking as well as have considerable difficulties in pronunciation. Hence, L2 learners feel reluctant whenever they have to impart in the target language for fear of being ridiculed or, simply, for being wrong (Al-Sibai, 2005).

Another reason is the students' characters themselves. For example, as reported by Beck (2006), the reason for the Japanese students' anxiety when speaking out in an L2 is their typical unwilling nature to stick out. They do not want to work with their peer and keep silence during the class. They choose the way of asking the teacher after class instead of discussing with peers. And one notable point is that they are not willing to volunteer answers even though they know the answers.

According to Pappamihiel (2002), foreseeing negative, potentially harmful events in which individuals cannot see themselves as effective mediators often produces anxiety. Similarly, Bandura's (1991) theory of self-efficacy posits that when a situation is perceived as threatening, the resultant anxiety is dependent on an individual's perception of his/her ability to deal positively with that threat. Beck (2006) also agrees with this opinion that many individuals who report significant anxiety

while speaking in public do not suffer anxiety in other social contexts. Bandura (1991) additionally argues that self-esteem can act as a mitigating factor in anxiety-producing circumstances beside a lack of teacher engagement and limited cognitive skills in English (as cited in Pappamihiel, 2002).

As can be seen so far, there are various factors which contribute to speaking anxiety namely lack of practice, vocabulary, preparation, low English proficiency, low self- esteem, fears of making mistakes and being laughed at, fear of being unable to follow and understand other, competition, speaking situation and lack of teacher engagement.

3. Implications

3.1. For teachers

Based on the discussions in the previous section, it can be concluded that anxiety, which was provoked by multiple variables such as lack of practice and low English proficiency, was prevalent among students in different classroom activities, even when they got prepared. However, most of the students seemed to be helpless about being anxious when speaking English in class. Consequently, it is necessary for English teachers to help them enhance their awareness of anxiety and find out coping strategies.

In order to help reduce student anxiety, first and foremost, English teachers themselves should be aware of the existence of anxiety among EFL learners and show sympathy to them in class. Besides, teachers can also encourage students to share their feelings with one another. As Donley (1998) claimed, students might feel more comfortable in the language class if they found out that other students and their teacher empathized with them and thus became more active (cited in Liu, 2007).

In addition, as suggested by the students, English teachers should try to establish a friendly, supportive and non-threatening classroom-learning environment. It is important for teachers to be friendly rather than strict and critical in class, which helps to make students feel less intimidated to speak English, especially when responding to teachers. It is also useful for English teachers to design and organize various classroom activities to help students to get to know one another during the first few lessons. Besides, the teachers can pick up to ask students questions and then support their ideas. That will help students practice to speak under pressure.

In addition, English teachers should teach and train students to be supportive of one another in class. According to Bailey (1983) and Zou (2004), competition often caused students to become (more) anxious to speak the target language, while a supportive relationship among students usually made them feel free to do so in class (as cited in Liu, 2007).

3.2. For students

EFL students should also be aware of and acknowledge the existence of anxiety when speaking English in class. After that, they might consciously take the initiative to seek strategies to cope with anxiety. For example, they are encouraged to be more open- minded to share their problems with peers and teachers so that they know how to solve those problems and can gradually achieve their goals (both short and long terms) by themselves. It is important and useful for them to improve their English proficiency, expand vocabulary, have more oral practice of English, and get prepared for oral English lessons. All of these can be achieved as long as they can be hard-working and persistent.

In conclusion, it is necessary for both EFL teachers and learners to be aware that anxiety is a serious issue for EFL learners and that a multitude of variables contributes to it in language classrooms. More importantly, they should realize the urgent need to search for strategies to help students reduce or even eliminate anxiety when speaking English in class. However, because both anxiety levels and anxiety-provoking variables may vary from context to context, more research is called for with different groups of learners in various situations to better understand the issue and promote the learning of oral English.

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