

SPEAKING ANXIETY AMONG PUBLIC SECTOR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract

Many students who are doing their majors in English often suffer from English speaking anxiety. The purpose of this study was to examine the reasons that hinder the process of speaking English in the students who had English as their major course of studies in a public sector university in Karachi. The study was conducted using qualitative research approach and the data was collected using focus group discussion. The participants of this study were selected using convenient sampling technique for focus group discussion. The findings revealed that the pronunciation, syntactic structures, insufficient lexical knowledge, fear of negative evaluation, role of a teacher, financial and social factors are the main causes of English-speaking anxiety among English majors. Recommended measures by the students disclosed that if the institution provides them with the suggested speaking opportunities, it could help them improve their anxiety towards speaking in English.

Keywords: Speaking skills; focus group discussions; anxiety; ESL

Introduction

Command over speaking skills is one of the most important elements in effective communication. According to (Raja 2013, 154)¹, "Communication has become one of the markers of social solidarity; social ranking and professional capabilities and most of the components of the language are learnt through this medium". Speaking can be defined as a medium of conveying information, expressing one's thoughts and feelings in spoken language. Speaking Anxiety is the feeling of nervousness when one has to speak in front of a group, teacher or public. Speaking anxiety is normal and when it comes specifically to the students, it occurs mainly while giving presentation, class speeches or even answering teacher without being negatively evaluated by their peers. English Anxiety among English Majors must be addressed because these people, when graduate, are required to teach at different institutions. It is important for English Majors to understand what affects their oral performance in English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom setting and how they can overcome it.

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¹ Raja, Farhan Uddin. "Spoken Communication Skills Taught at English Language Institutes as A Second Language." *Journal of Research (Humanities)* 49 (2013): 153-163.

There are several factors to explore that can be the causes of English-speaking anxiety for English Majors, whether in the classroom or outside the classroom. Many students tend to avoid responding to teachers in the class unless pointed to speak. They mostly presume that their poor command over English speaking could cause them humiliation by their classmates. (Horwitz et al 1986)² put this as the fear of negative evaluation that can hinder their L2 performance in the classroom. (Raja 2012)³ asserts that it is important that teachers design such activities that help students improve their skills. Speaking Anxiety is a natural process, but it has a debilitating effect on L2 learners while learning the target language. According to (Krashen 1982)⁴, most students lose interest in learning, give up on the task assigned and most importantly end up having low self-esteem. According to (Kayaoglu and Saglamel 2013)⁵, speaking in a second language can make one anxious and that this anxiety is triggered by situational anxiety. Speaking in English in the classroom for many students can be difficult. They may be short of the lexical resource while conveying their ideas or they may not be confident in using spoken grammar or their responses are critically responded by their facilitators. Moreover, an individual's educational and financial background, social and cultural factors can also be the factors in causing speaking anxiety among undergraduate English Majors. There are many students in the Public sector university in Karachi who acquire admissions on quota and are from diverse backgrounds.

The purpose of the study is to explore the factors that cause English speaking anxiety among undergraduate English Majors and to recommend measures that can help them overcome their English-speaking anxiety. The following research can facilitate both teachers and learners to improve their strategies in L2 classroom settings. The following research questions help us explore learner's English-speaking anxiety.

Literature Review

Anxiety is an emotional state that can cause uneasiness, frustration or nervousness. According to (Scovel 1978)⁶ anxiety is associated with a non-precise fear which is indirectly associated with an object. Researches on anxiety describe various levels of anxiety. *Trait anxiety* is associated with one's personality where one feels anxious about every other thing because anxiety is a permanent trait of personality in that individual. Whereas, anxiety caused by any particular event or action causes nervousness at a situational level, which is also referred to as *state anxiety*. (Young 1999, 18)⁷ summarizes that emotions like anxiety were once treated as "subjective states of

² Horwitz, Elaine K., Michael B. Horwitz, and Joann Cope. "Foreign language classroom anxiety." *The Modern Language Journal* 70, no. 2 (1986): 125-132.

³ Raja, Farhan Uddin. "Adapting Prescribed Tertiary Level ELT Textbooks in Pakistani Classrooms." *Market Forces* 7, no. 3 (2011).

⁴ Krashen, Stephen. "Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition." (Pergamon Press Inc, 1982).

⁵ Kayaoglu, Mustafa Naci, and Hasan Saglamel. "Students' Perceptions of Language Anxiety in Speaking Classes." *Journal of History Culture and Art Research* 2, no. 2 (2013): 142-160.

⁶ Scovel, Thomas. "The Effect of Effect on Foreign Language Learning: A Review of the Anxiety Research." *Language learning* 28, no. 1 (1978): 129-142.

⁷ Young, D.J. "A Perspective on Foreign Language Learning: From Body to Mind to Emotions." *Affect in Foreign Language and Second Language Learning: A Practical Guide to Creating A Low-Anxiety Classroom Atmosphere* (1999): 13-23.

consciousness". It was years after when the language anxiety was recognized as a separate idea or theory and the researchers started to research on its definition, reasons, and effects (Horwitz et al., 1986)⁸. Language anxiety deals specifically with the situational nature of *state* anxiety.

(Young 1992) ⁹emphasizes that language learning anxiety is caused by the surroundings of language learning and describes the language learning environment idiosyncratic to language anxiety. Whereas, (MacIntyre 1999, 27)¹⁰ defines language anxiety as the feeling of nervousness that causes reactions of negative emotions while using or learning a second language. Moreover, foreign language anxiety is referred to as anxiety causing hindrance in acquiring skills of oral communication, plus it also comprises of fear of communication, anxiety caused by test and the fear of being negatively evaluated by both the teachers and peers (Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope, 1986)¹¹. Macintyre and Gardner (1994) ¹²defined language anxiety as to be mainly associated with L2 that have symptoms of tension and apprehension associated specifically with speaking, listening and learning in second-language. (Kayagolu and Saglaml 2013)¹³ conducted a research undertaking Department of Basic English at a State University in northeastern Turkey. The researchers discussed possible reasons, effects, manifestations and ways to cope with language anxiety. They conducted semi-structured interviews with graduate and post-graduate participants. These researchers examined factors under linguistic difficulties, cognitive challenges, competitiveness and the role of teachers. They concluded that learners want an external stimulus to ease their language learning environments. Likewise, (Von 2003)¹⁴ conducted a study on Students' perspectives on Foreign Language. The researcher conducted interviews as a validity check. These interviews revealed that the activities in which, speaking was focused, learners were unable to comprehend. There were negative experiences of learners in the classroom, fear of being negatively judged and nonetheless some teaching practices and teachers themselves were reflected as the causes that provoke language anxiety.

In addition to it, (Woodrow 2006) distinguishes between in-class and out-of-class anxiety and notices that while performing in front of the class or while communicating with teachers, learners seem anxious. These instances are the major reasons of language anxiety in the classroom where speaking is focused. To be more peculiar, activities like role-playing, formal class discussions, giving oral presentations and giving answers to the questions asked by the teacher were observed as the main factors causing anxiety in-

⁸ Horwitz, Elaine K., Michael B. Horwitz, and Joann Cope. "Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety." *The Modern Language Journal* 70, no. 2 (1986): 125-132.

⁹ Young, D.J. *Op.cit.*

¹⁰ MacIntyre, Peter D. "Language Anxiety: A Review of the Research for Language Teachers." *Affect in Foreign Language and Second Language Learning: A Practical Guide to Creating a Low-Anxiety Classroom Atmosphere* 24 (1999): 41.

¹¹ Horwitz, et.al. *Op.cit.*

¹² MacIntyre, Peter D., and Robert C. Gardner. "Language Anxiety: Its Relationship to other Anxieties and to Processing in Native and Second Languages." *Language Learning* 41, no. 4 (1991): 513-534.

¹³ Kayaoğlu, et.al. *Op.cit.*

¹⁴ Von Worde, Renee. "Students' Perspectives on Foreign Language Anxiety." *Inquiry* 8, no. 1 (2003): n1.

class amongst the learners. In addition to it, (Tanveer's 2007)¹⁵ study examines that different perceptions and beliefs of learners along with poor command of language can lead to language anxiety. Moreover, there may be some social and cultural factors that could provoke anxiety. For students, speaking English in the classroom can be very perplexing. According to Ripple (1964)¹⁶, teacher's and student's affective interaction is directed towards cognition and therefore is very important. It is observed that the students' behavior is affected by the teacher's behavior during their speaking. Moreover, the teachers do not have the same personalities to motivate their students. Furthermore, (Ripple 1964), related to classroom speaking stated various factors that affect classroom speaking. He recognized six main factors provoking anxiety and learners' characteristics, teacher and learner behavior, characteristics of the teacher, behavioral settings' physical characteristics. All these factors are observed as an effective issue that promotes anxiety amongst learners while speaking in English in the classroom. (Raja 2014),¹⁷ a language is considered as a source of power and connectivity.

According to (Kayaoğlu & Sağlamel 2013)¹⁸, language anxiety is activated by social context. For example, a classroom where tough competition is observed, some students seek to point at others' errors to make fun of their classmates. Moreover, a classroom where the relation between students' group is bitter, leads to the rising of anxiety. Learners constantly compare themselves with the ones more confident in language than them in a competition. Hence, they lose their interest or sometimes give up the task or avoid the task. Furthermore, they experience a low self-esteem, which has negative implications on their learning process. The language anxiety one experiences has its basis on how one perceives his/her self-image.

Lastly, a significant number of studies deals with language anxiety and ways to cope it. (Tanveer 2007)¹⁹ suggested classroom surroundings to be learner-friendly, drama-like activities (plays/role-plays), avoidance of superficial pronunciation and non-heterogeneous classes to ease anxiety in learners. Whereas a study (Price 1991)²⁰ directs teachers to be familiar with the students, classroom size should be small, positive reinforcement, language teaching should start from an early age and friendly role of the teacher can inhibit stressful environment for language learning.

¹⁵ Tanveer, Muhammad. "Investigation of the factors that cause language anxiety for ESL/EFL learners in learning speaking skills and the influence it casts on communication in the target language." *University of Glasgow, Scotland* (2007).

¹⁶ Ripple, Lillian. *Motivation, capacity, and opportunity: Studies in casework theory and practice*. No. 3. School of Social Service Administration, University of Chicago, 1964.

¹⁷ Raja, Farhan Uddin. "Bilingual education system at primary schools of Pakistan." *Journal of Research (Humanities), L* (2014): 77-89.

¹⁸ Kayaoğlu, Mustafa Naci, and Hasan Sağlamel. "Students' perceptions of language anxiety in speaking classes." *Journal of History Culture and Art Research* 2, no. 2 (2013): 142-160.

¹⁹ Tanveer, Muhammad. "Investigation of the factors that cause language anxiety for ESL/EFL learners in learning speaking skills and the influence it casts on communication in the target language." *University of Glasgow, Scotland* (2007).

²⁰ Price, Mary Lou. "The subjective experience of foreign language anxiety: Interviews with highly anxious students." *Language anxiety: From theory and research to classroom implications* (1991): 101-108.

The following study explores factors that cause speaking anxiety among undergraduate English Majors in a Public Sector University in Karachi and aim to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the factors that cause English speaking anxiety among undergraduate English Majors in a public sector university in Karachi?
2. What are the remedies that can help undergraduate English Majors in a public sector university in Karachi to overcome their English speaking anxiety?

Methodology

The qualitative research method was used to explore the factors causing anxiety in the students of English Major while speaking English in the class. Focus group discussions were used to discover the causes and obstacles involved in having anxiety while speaking English and the opinions of students on coping strategies.

Sample

The sample was taken from a public sector university in Karachi by applying convenient sampling technique for this researcher. 9 students participated in a focused group discussion session. All of the participants were undergraduates studying English.

Data Collection Tools

Focus group discussion was used as a data collection tool for the purpose of the study. Cell-phone recorder was used to record the discussion and participants were asked to sit in a circle in order to have an interactive discussion.

Data Analysis

Analysis of the discussion was recorded in a form of summary containing the most important themes, quotations and unexpected findings leading to the study. Discussion is recorded in a pattern of thematic structure. It covers all the details conveyed by the participants on the subject in the frame of a focused group discussion.

Discussions and Findings

Nine students participated in the research in one focus group discussion to contribute to the study related to speaking anxiety. 5 participants were students of second-year English Major class whereas 4 of them belonged to third-year English Major class. To initiate the discussion, the researcher introduced the main idea of the research that is speaking anxiety amongst English Majors. Speaking about the Speaking anxiety there were various factors that the participants mentioned as the reasons behind the speaking anxiety.

Physical manifestations

The very first responses generated by the participants were that they started to “stammer”, “turn red”, “start to sweat” and sometimes “feel chills” through their bodies. One of the learners shared “*Studying with your classmates for past two years you have an idea of people in the class that do not perform better than you but still, you cannot stop yourself from shivering and stammering when it comes to speaking in English.*” These physical manifestations become visible when learners are anxious.

Syntactic structure and insufficient lexical knowledge

When asked what exactly happens when they were asked to speak, or they wanted to speak in the class, but they could not? There were various responses to this question. One of the participants reported, “*we try to convey our message in a simpler way in English, but when we are not able to do so, we shift our speech in Urdu.*” Another participant supported the statement while adding “*It is one of the most embarrassing moments when you really want to say something, and you are trying hard but then you are short of words of how exactly to say it.*” Insufficient lexical knowledge provokes anxiety in students. One participant added, “*Wrong use of language is what cause anxiety in me while speaking.*” Another responded, “*I struggle with the formation of the sentences*”. Students seemed to be nervous and not spontaneous in their responses in class due to syntactic structures. One of the learners reported, “*Sometimes we want to say a lot of things in response to teacher’s questions, but we don’t know how to put those ideas into words.*” Participants appear to be confused in the choice of words and sentence structures that they can use confidently while speaking. It can be the reason of L1 interference.

Pronunciation

Pronunciation is one of the major factors that cause anxiety in the students of English Major. Some of the students studying at this public sector university belong to interior Sindh and come from diverse backgrounds where English is taken as the third language. Such students fear to speak in English in front of the class or even out of the class. “*I fear that I will be made fun of*” one of the participants reported. A student from the interior Sindh reflected on this issue, “*I really want to communicate in English but whenever I start to speak in English I hear giggles at the back. This demotivates me from speaking English or even to participate in the class.*” Moreover, one of the learners made a very critical point, “*We are encouraged from the very beginning to follow posh British accent whereas when we see Indians speaking in English... they don’t speak in British English. Indian English is very simple and relatable to our language and easy to acquire.*” To follow up with this statement one of the students said, “*British accent is so superficial that it is not easy to catch up. And when you don’t speak properly in a British accent, people mostly poke fun at us. Such factors hinder our struggle of speaking English without being anxious.*” Moreover, one student pointed, “*Our department of English is our identity. Our families, teachers, and society have high hopes from us. They expect us to be fluent in English but unfortunately, they are the ones who judge us negatively on different mediums and pronunciation is one of the main factors on which they judge us on!*”

Fear of Negative Evaluation

Fear of being negatively judged is one of the most common fears related to speaking anxiety. *"I always avoid speaking in English in class because of my peers. I know they will make fun of us and it is one of the most embarrassing moments."* One of the participants supported this statement saying, *"Giggles... this happens a lot. Even if you are giving presentations or even sharing an idea, people are making faces."* They further added, *"They don't mock at us on our faces but I'm sure they laugh at us on our back."* Moreover, one of them said, *"There are some really competitive students in our class that make such weird facial expression when we are performing or giving presentations that cause anxiety."* Another participant supported the previous statement, *"We've thought of those competitive students so highly that we feel anxious while speaking in front of them."* Discussion took another turn when a student reported, *"Sometimes, teachers also make fun of the answers provided by the students and that somehow demotivates us from answering any further."* Another student counter-argued and said, *"I think teachers are not making fun of the students or even language, but the ideas presented by the students."* One of the students added, *"I believe, some teachers do this strategically to see if we still stick to the idea on which the fun is made on!"*. Learners seemed to justify that there is a fear of negative evaluation from peers and teachers both but teachers though poke fun on them, but they took it as the teacher's teaching strategy.

Role of a Teacher

Teacher's role is one of the basic factors that cause anxiety for students to speak in class. One of the students stated, *"Fearing our peers is not that striking when it comes to teachers. We know our classmates are of approximately the same level as ours, but we know that the teacher has a higher level of knowledge. They expect us to answer up to their level. To identify what exactly is their level and how to answer on that level? Such thoughts cause anxiety."* In addition to it, one added, *"Teachers focus on students that participate more in the class. I think because of that they become judgmental of the fact that if your classmate is able to speak like that why aren't you?"*. To this statement, one participant added, *"Some teachers are supportive, they help us overcome our speaking anxiety, but some teachers don't tend to even notice us because of the highly active students in the class who participate a lot."* The discussion provided with a reflection on the teacher's role in causing or reducing speaking anxiety.

Financial and Social Factors

The financial and social background of a student matters a lot in speaking anxiety. When asked about the financial and social status and if it had any role in provoking anxiety in speaking. Participants came up with different conclusions on this matter, *"People with strong financial status have more exposure with the native speakers and they mostly use English as their medium of conversation both at home and within their social circles. Having continuous usage of English speaking they don't feel anxious while speaking it as we do. Our families speak in Urdu and so do we speak in Urdu within our social circles. Therefore, we are more nervous while speaking English."* One of the students added, *"My classmate has done A levels, I feel hesitant while speaking in*

English in front of him. He has friends who talk to him in English continuously. I also wanted to be the part of his group but being less proficient in English speaking I always feel like an odd one out.” In addition to this, a participant stated, *“The reason of our speaking anxiety lies in our complexes. We feel inferior to those who have done their schooling from Cambridge Board or have studied in Convent schools. Having different educational mediums is also one of the factors why today we feel hesitant while speaking English.”*

In-class and Out-of-class Anxiety

Participants were asked if they have out-of-class English speaking anxiety? To this, all of them reported that they don't feel hesitant while speaking in English out of the class because they know they will not be negatively evaluated or commented but in-class speaking anxiety is not easy to deal with. Someone pointed, *“In-class speaking anxiety is provoked when we are asked to comment on things whose context we are not aware of. If we have not read about something and then if are asked to speak about it, it obviously creates anxiety.”* One of the group members stated, *“We generally don't speak in English out of the classroom. We speak English out of the classroom with people we don't know informally.”*

Conclusion and Recommendations for Improvement

The aim of this study was to investigate the factors that cause anxiety among undergraduate English majors while speaking English. The findings drawn from the data prove that English speaking anxiety among undergraduate majors of English is experienced due to linguistic difficulties and some external factors. To overcome speaking anxiety participants suggested different measures and if taken they will be able to reduce their speaking anxiety. Among them, first suggestion was classrooms to have multimedia. According to them multi-media classrooms can help them reduce speaking anxiety because they will be able to share their point of view with the help of images, videos, and audio tapes. Second, they suggested class speeches with weekly assigned topics by the teachers. *“If the topic is easy then it is interesting to participate and speak about.”* Third, the culture of presentations should be developed. Fourth, teachers should facilitate English speaking in the classes and avoid being bilingual. They should encourage students to speak in English by complimenting positively on their performance and participation. Fifth, student-based societies should be developed that can help students with English speaking-anxiety. Sixth, students suggested that they should speak in English with their peers in order to improve their fluency. Seventh, role-play activities should be introduced. One of the learners commented, *“Role-play activities are really good because people will be judging the character and not you.”* Eighth, the university should provide its students with the supporting English-speaking courses to help them. Ninth, Indian-English dialect should be promoted to ease the tension of pronunciation between the learners. Last but not the least, students should keep their self-esteem high in the learning environment because people with high self-esteem learn better. They understand that English department gives them identity so in order to improve they need to (as stated by one of the participants) *“accept that I cannot always be right. I can be wrong while I speak.”*

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