Speaking Anxiety in ESL/EFL Classrooms: A Holistic Approach and Practical Study

Mohammad Shaukat Ansari 1*

1. Associate Professor of English, M.L.S.M. College, (L.N. Mithila University), Darbhanga, Bihar, India.

* Corresponding Author’s Email: shaukata12@yahoo.com

Abstract – Despite the fact that second/foreign language speaking anxiety is a counter-productive phenomenon in the teaching and learning of English and language anxiety has a debilitating effect on the oral performance of speakers of English, teachers do not always identify anxious students, and often attribute their unwillingness to participate in speaking tasks to factors such as lack of motivation, or low performance. This paper analyses a research-oriented case study concerning the conceptualization of second/foreign language speaking anxiety, the relationship between anxiety and language performance, and the major reported causes of speaking anxiety. Furthermore, the paper aims to contribute to the literature on language anxiety and to provide teachers with practical strategies for reducing foreign language speaking anxiety stemming from students’ fear of negative evaluation from their peers and perception of low ability.

Keywords: English as second/foreign language, debilitating anxiety, humanistic approaches, teacher’s awareness

I. INTRODUCTION

Many English language teachers are familiar with governing problems being faced by their students in speaking classes. Most of time they are seen ignoring and hesitating to speak in classes and this is, as well, a common complaint levelled by ESL/EFL teachers about their silent students. It is against this backdrop, teaching spoken language is deemed as a rather demanding task for teachers to achieve as compared to the other aspects of language teaching (Brown & Yule, 1999) and for learners, speaking is a highly anxiety-provoking situation (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986). This reality essentially points to the psychological construct termed as “anxiety”, which has been in the limelight of language research since 1980s (e.g. Horwitz et. al., 1986; Young, 1991) and has been found to excessively influence students’ oral skill (Fang-peng & Dong, 2010). Despite its significant impact on language learning, EFL teachers have failed to identify students suffering from anxiety in speaking classes, even worse, instead of taking steps, teachers misconceive their students’ anxiety as low ability, reluctance to engage in speaking activities or low motivation (Tsiplakides & Keramida, 2009) and have rarely taken measures to handle this serious issue (Riasiti, 2011). It is for these reasons that this paper attempts to shed light on the sources of speaking anxiety and provides practical as well as functional suggestions to tide over its adverse effects on learners’ performance in speaking classes.
Anxiety is a negative way to present human feelings. When we are anxious, we feel nervous, worried, and fearful. We struggle, tremble, perspire, and our hearts beat quickly. In general, anxiety can be defined as a complex concept dependent upon not only on one’s feelings of self-efficacy but also appraisals concerning the potential and perceived threats inherent in certain situations (Tobias, 1986). In plain words, anxiety is usually associated with unpleasant feelings and is similar to fear (Lader, 1975). Anxiety in communicating in a second/foreign language, especially when that language is English can have a debilitating effect and can influence students’ adaptation to the target environment and ultimately their educational goals. There is also a well-asserted agreement that anxiety is related to performance, and that anxiety has been shown to have a counter-productive negative effect on learning and achievement.

Hence, anxiety is one of the most well-documented psychological phenomena. The definition of anxiety ranges from an amalgam of overt behavioural characteristics that can be studied scientifically to introspective feelings that are epistemologically inaccessible (Casado & Dereshiwsky, 2001). Broadly speaking, anxiety is the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the automatic nervous system. Traditionally, the nature of anxiety has been differentiated into trait anxiety, situational anxiety, and state anxiety. Though no clear delineation between these three categories can be claimed, the differences can roughly be identified on a continuum from stability to transience, with trait anxiety related to a generally stable predisposition to be nervous in a wide range of situations on one end, and a moment-to-moment experience of transient emotional state on the other.

The anxiety pertaining to the speaking of English as SL/FL consists of “self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviours related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process” (Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope, 1986: p.128). Foreign language learning process is a unique process, because learners are required to communicate using a language which they have not mastered perfectly. Three components of foreign language anxiety have been identified (Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope 1986): a) communication apprehension, b) fear of negative evaluation, and c) test anxiety. Students who exhibit communication apprehension do not feel comfortable communicating in the target language in front of others, due to their limited knowledge of the language, especially in relation to speaking and listening skills. Students who experience fear of negative evaluation do not consider language errors as a natural part of the learning process, but as a threat to their image, and a source for negative evaluations either from the teacher or their peers. As a result, they are silent and withdrawn most of the time, and do not participate in language activities (Ely 1986). Students who experience test anxiety consider the foreign language process, and especially oral production, as a test situation, rather than an opportunity for communication and skills improvement. As a matter of fact, Six types of sources of foreign language classroom anxiety have been identified (Young, 1991): personal and interpersonal anxieties, learner beliefs about language learning, instructor beliefs about language learning, instructor-learner interactions, classroom procedures, and testing. Apart from general foreign language classroom anxiety, many learners are highly perturbed with respect to participation in speaking activities. Indeed, it is often suggested that speaking is the most “anxiety provoking aspect in a second language learning situation” (Cheng, Horwitz, and Schallert, 1999: p.420). An exploration of
sources of foreign language speaking anxiety vindicates a correlation between a) anxiety and fear of negative evaluation, and b) anxiety and perception of low ability in relation to peers and native speakers (Kitano, 2001).

II. DEFINING KEY TERMS

Language anxiety can be rhetorically described as “the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language texts, including speaking, listening, and learning” (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994, as quoted in Subaşı, 2010: p.30). Various types of anxiety have been categorized by researchers. For instance, Dörnyei (2005) classifies anxiety in two categories: (a) facilitating and debilitating and (b) trait and state anxiety. Facilitating anxiety is considered to be helpful for students to some extent, whereas debilitating anxiety to be harmful and to impede performance and achievement. State anxiety is experienced in certain situations, hence situational, while trait anxiety is taken as an inherent characteristic of the individual. “Speaking-in-class anxiety” is acknowledged to be situational occurring only on certain occasions in which speaking is concerned (Mak, 2011: p. 204). State anxiety is considered, by many researchers, to be more detrimental to learners than situational anxiety.

III. RESEARCH AIM

The research questions of the case study that I conducted to make an in-depth examination of speaking anxiety were:

- What are the characteristics of students who suffer from second/foreign language speaking anxiety,
- What are the sources of second/foreign language speaking anxiety?
- Can the incorporation of case study findings and supportive classroom atmosphere help target students overcome their anxiety?

The objective of the research study was not to establish a link between language anxiety and performance. In contrast, the research aimed at linking the theoretical construct of second/foreign language speaking anxiety with everyday classroom practice. The overall aim was to provide English teachers worldwide with a useful array of suggestions, arising from a classroom-based case study, which would help them reduce language anxiety, promote motivation to learn, and, in the long run, increase English language acquisition.

IV. METHODOLOGY

A. Participants

The sample consisted of thirty students in the higher secondary level (12th class) at my college. They were aged 17-19 years. Lessons and sessions were held four times a week for a period of fifty minutes each. Lessons were conducted during two weeks.
B. Data collection

Qualitative research techniques were employed in the case study, since research questions pointed to the need to gain access to “a wealth of detailed information” (Patton, 2002: p.14), and to “processes and meanings” that are difficult to measure (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994: p.4). The following techniques of qualitative data collection were used: a) semi-structured interviews, b) group discussion, c) question-answer sessions d) interactions on situation-based spoken English and e) direct observation.

V. RESULTS

After data was collated, I found to my astonishment that about ten of these students were experiencing English language speaking anxiety as a result of: a) fear of negative evaluation from their peers and b) perception of low ability in relation to their peers. Their anxiety was attributed to the above factors, on the basis of the following:

First, these students were unwilling to participate in speaking activities. While a number of factors can potentially account for this, research showed that their unwillingness was not due to the fact that they did not realise the value of learning English, laziness, or lack of interest in the English language. These students’ narratives provided strong evidence that they did not participate in speaking activities, because they believed that they were not good at speaking. Consequently, they feared that their fellow students would evaluate them negatively. As Rakesh, a highly anxious student placed his viewpoint: “I like English, but don’t take part in speaking, because I’m so bad at speaking, and my friends will laugh at me.”

Rakesh’s grievance highlights his concern with his social image and his pre-occupation with how his peers would perceive him. Another source of fear of negative evaluation was the belief that he should produce faultless sentences. This finding seems consistent with Gregersen’s (2003) suggestion that anxious learners tend to focus on form rather than content. All of these anxious students feared that mistakes in speaking activities would destroy their social image as able students.

Sunita, another anxious student describes feelings created by her exaggerated focus on avoiding language mistakes: “When I speak I always make an awful lot of mistakes, and I don’t like it. I also speak very slowly to avoid mistakes. If you listen to me speaking English, you’d think I’m not confident, but it is not so.”

Fear of negative evaluation from their peers was also evident by the following characteristic, which was common to most of such students. When asked to participate in speaking tasks with the teacher only, without their fellow students listening to them, these anxious students were markedly more willing to participate and experiment with language. Apart from anxiety due to fear of negative evaluation from their peers, all anxious respondents compared their speaking skills negatively in relation with their peers. As one student, Adil Ahmad spelt out:

“You listened to them (fellow students), didn’t you? They’re so much better than me. The reason is that I just listen and not speak.” The language here is one of desperation and low...
self-confidence. Not unsurprisingly, this student was withdrawn and silent during speaking activities.

During my critical observation I also found that about thirteen students were not in a mood to engage themselves into speaking exercises at all. Despite my possible efforts they remained hesitant and back-benchers throughout. But on getting motivated on my part they attempted to speak and felt happy. They pleaded that they lacked vocabulary and techniques to form sentences; even they were uncomfortable in pronouncing English words. Also, they complained that they were not provided with such opportunities in other English classes and hence they could not practice speaking. Besides this, I was amazed to discover that eight students vindicated their right doses of worth in enthusiastic manner. They gladly participated in speaking exercises, and made my heart explode with excitement.

VI. SOURCES OF SPEAKING ANXIETY

Having established the sources for English language speaking anxiety on the basis of my own teaching experiences in India and Saudi Arabia in general and on the basis of this case study in particular I reached the igniting points as illustrated below:

While foreign language speaking anxiety is a common phenomenon in the teaching of English as a foreign language, it seems that teachers do not always identify anxious students, and attribute their unwillingness to engage in speaking tasks to factors such as lack of motivation, or “poor attitude” (Gregersen, 2003: p.30).

However, the common sources can be enumerated as fear of making mistake, tests and assessments, social comparison, competition (Dörnyei, 2001), negative evaluation and perceived low ability (Subaşi, 2010), additionally, negative judgments towards English classroom and insufficient wait-time. Students with debilitating speaking anxiety tend to display avoidance of involvement in tasks by remaining silent, sitting in the back row, avoiding eye contact with the teacher, to name a few.

Problems pertaining to Students' speaking

- Limited vocabulary
- Inaccurate grammar
- Lack of fluency
- Imperfect pronunciation
- Lack of active listening
- Fear of speaking in public
- Fear of expressing certain views
- Diminishing confidence
- Dominance of hesitation
- Lack of group skills
- Fear of making mistakes
- Lack of exposure and practicing platforms
VII. WAYS TO REDUCE STUDENTS’ SPEAKING ANXIETY

a) The primary role in reducing speaking anxiety is definitely associated with the teachers who organize, conduct the tasks and evaluate students’ performance. Yet, their manners have also been reported to be the main cause of oral anxiety along with those of their peers (Riasiti, 2011; Subaşı, 2010). Therefore, the first step to reduce speaking anxiety is to raise teachers’ awareness about their harmful manners towards learners. These might incorporate ways of error correction, comparing students to each other, forcing students to talk, humiliating students. Solutions to this might be the implementation of techniques from humanistic approaches such as Silent Way, Total Physical Response, Suggestopedia and Community Language Teaching (Richards & Rogers, 2001). In addition, errors must be considered a natural art of learning mechanism. Teacher needs to avoid on the spot correction in speaking activities, since it can undermine students’ confidence, and because it discourages learners who are anxious about “sounding silly” to experiment with new language (Lightbown and Spada, 1999). There is also a necessity to tactfully foster the belief to anxious students that they should aim at continuing a speaking activity, despite making errors. These approaches entail teachers to establish good rapport with students, accept them as individuals, tolerate their mistakes, and create a supportive and relaxed classroom environment. If required, the teacher should take up a doctor-like role and diagnose where the problem exactly lies and accordingly dispose of the displeasing effects of anxiety. These measures could specifically minimize fear of committing mistakes, negative evaluation by teachers and peers, social comparison and competition, which can result in high student participation in speaking activities.

b) The conduct and selection of activities are also of great importance in decreasing the level of anxiety, as some activities tend to cause tension and distress on students. The activities should be centered on students’ interests and be appropriate for their proficiency levels. Given that each student has individual differences, provision of various activities is recommended to encourage each student to raise their voice. Activities conducted in cooperation with peers may lessen tension and increase attendance to tasks because collaborating rather than competing with others makes anxious students feel less threatened.

c) A few activities to anxiety-reduction are presented in the following lines. First one is based on role plays. In such tasks, students generally take on a new persona with pseudo names. This enables them to protect their self-image by disguising their true self with a new identity and this can, somehow, mitigate their fear of negative evaluation and assessment, and perception of low ability. Furthermore, group discussions (groups are to be formed from mixed ability students) might create more space for anxious learners to participate, since there is no right or wrong in what is said. Games such as picture describing and guess through wh-questions – like who is, what is – based on group and pair work can be embroidered into speaking activities, for such learning is by definition less face-threatening.

d) Kitano (2001) suggests that teachers should find ways to support students with fear of negative evaluation, which may involve providing these students with positive reinforcement, such as positive comments. In relation to learners’ perception of low ability, teachers should make interventions in the classroom environment and practices, and create a smart “sense of community in the classroom”, so that students do not perceive it a competitive, while pair and group work can be in incorporated.
e) The preliminary responsibility is to identify students experiencing debilitating anxiety and help them develop coping strategies. Teachers should give special attention to such students by attending to their needs and concerns even outside the classroom by taking individual-specific measures. One appropriate way of doing this is to make encouraging remarks on students’ attempts, praise their efforts, provide feedback written or oral, and have a private talk with them outside the class. In process, willingness to engage in speaking activities ought to be taken into account because unless students have ample opportunities to practice oral fluency and accuracy, they will not develop these skills.

f) Complementary to the prior measures, Tsiplakides & Keramida (2009) suggest similar countermeasures as implicit correction of errors, inclusion of humor, addressing students with first names, non-verbal praise such as patting on shoulders or giving a warm smile and sufficient wait time for answers. Such small steps might operate as icebreakers in the fight against speaking anxiety.

g) Silent students of ESL in general and EFL in particular need to be promoted and activated towards speaking English as per situations, even outside classes too. Teachers can again play exclusive role in practical sector. They should make such students aware of the importance of English and stimulate them to use maximum English while interacting with classmates, and even with seniors and teachers. Teachers let such students realize that practicing English speaking to greater extent is appropriate way to battle against speaking anxiety.

Keeping in mind that each learning situation is unique and problems faced might differ from one situation to another, the recommendations offered above could not work each time to the same extent for each case; consequently, teachers, in harness with professional prowess, should constantly be in the probe of answers to situation- and individual-specific needs.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Teachers should realise that language learning, and particularly oral production, is a potentially stressful situation for some students, and that the “tension and discomfort related to language learning call for the attention of the language teaching profession” (Horwitz, 2001: p.122). The final conclusion is that teachers need to assume the role of the researcher in their own classrooms. Before employing strategies to help students overcome second/foreign language speaking anxiety, foster motivation, and increase foreign language performance, practitioners should get to know their students, their attitudes toward oral production, and to consolidate the reasons that underlie their low performance and their unwillingness to engage in speaking activities. It is suggested that “teacher as a researcher” approach is an invaluable tool. Such an approach, which brings together theory and practice, can have positive effects both on the professional flowering of English teachers and on students’ anxiety levels, motivation and language acquisition.

To contribute to the solution of speaking anxiety, a variety of suggestions drawn from my conducting case study and my own pedagogic experiences have already been offered. As emphasized previously, as practitioners, teachers should bear much of responsibility by critically evaluating their own manners, identifying needy students, applying suitable
treatments. The issue in hand still requires further research, especially, longitudinal, more practically oriented and applicable in the case of confronting anxiety-related barriers while teaching spoken language. As a final remark and summary, the suggestions for the removal of “anxiety-provoking elements” from speaking classes are to be reiterated in Dörnyei’s (2001) own words for teachers to [a]void social comparison, [p]romote cooperation instead of competition, [h]elp learners to accept the fact that they will make mistakes as part of the learning process, [m]ake tests and assessment completely ‘transparent’ and involve students in the negotiation of the final mark (p. 94).

REFERENCES


Subaşı, G. (2010). What are the Main Sources of Turkish EFL Students’ Anxiety in Oral Practice? Turkish Online Journal of Qualitative Inquiry, 1(2), 29-49.


**Bio-note**

Of

**DR. MOHAMMAD SHAUKAT ANSARI**

Dr. Mohammad Shaukat Ansari is working as Associate Professor of English at M.L.S.M. College (L.N. Mithila University), Darbhanga, Bihar, India. He is Senator of L.N. Mithila University. He worked as Professor in Saudi Arabia. His areas of interests in teaching are EAP, ESP, ELT, Grammar, Composition, History of English Literature and Poetry. He has published thirty-six articles/papers so far in reputed journals, and also two ISBN books. His one book titled “Improve Your Functional English” is in press for publication. He is also in process of finalizing another book titled “Issues, Trends and Challenges in English Language Teaching”. He has presented papers in fifteen International Seminars/Conferences, and chaired six technical sessions. He has conducted three workshops and attended five ones. He is associated with several reputed research journals as Reviewer/Member on their Editorial Boards. He loves to supervise and evaluate research works/dissertations/case studies on issues related with English Language and Literature.