

An Investigation into the Sources of English Language Speaking Anxiety from the University Students' Perspective

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ABSTRACT :

This study attempts to investigate the sources of foreign language speaking anxiety from the university students' perspectives. It makes an attempt to shed light on the elements that the students attribute to the development of foreign language speaking anxiety. Sixty of university students enrolled in the University Preparatory Programme at Ahfad University were chosen randomly as a sample. The participants were female. Two tools were used in this study; Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety Scale (FLSAS) to measure the foreign language speaking anxiety levels of the students beside an interview with the students. The data was analyzed and the results revealed that the students attributed the speaking anxiety to personal reasons and teaching procedure.

Keywords: *Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety (FLSAS), University Preparatory Programme (UPP), Ahfad University, university students.*

المستخلص :

سعت هذه الدراسة إلى تقصي مصادر قلق التحدث باللغة الأجنبية من وجهة نظر الطلاب بالمرحلة الجامعية. حاولت الدراسة أن تلقي الضوء على الأسباب التي يعزى الطلاب انها تؤدي إلى زيادة قلق التحدث باللغة الأجنبية. ستون من الطالبات بجامعة الأحفاد في برنامج السنة التحضيرية للجامعة قد تم إختيارهم عشوائيا كعينة للدراسة. تم استخدام أداتان في هذه الدراسة: مقياس قلق التحدث باللغة الأجنبية لقياس مستوى قلق الطلاب عند التحدث باللغة

الأجنبية ، بجانب إجراء مقابلة معهم. تم تحليل البيانات وعزا الطلاب قلق التحدث باللغة الأجنبية إلى أسباب شخصية وطريقة التدريس.

INTRODUCTION :

English as foreign language learners often express a feeling of stress, nervousness or anxiety while learning to speak English Language. Even highly advanced learners feel anxious while speaking English in some situations. Horwitz and Young (1991) express that, “we have been truly surprised at the number of students who experience anxiety and distress in their language classes” (p.14). Theorists and second language acquisition researchers have demonstrated that these feelings of anxiety are specifically associated with learning and speaking a foreign language. Teachers and students are aware and generally feel strongly that anxiety is a major hurdle to be overcome when learning to speak a foreign language. Vogely (1998) debates about why do some students learn a foreign language easily whereas others have difficulties and cannot achieve the desired level of proficiency? To give a

sound answer, researchers examine various factors that may affect a student’s foreign language learning. Among these factors, affective variables are important to understand the true nature of language learning. Brown (2000) argues that the affective domain is the emotional side of human behaviour and it involves a variety of personality factors such as anxiety and feelings about ourselves and about others with whom we come into contact. In recent years, Young (1999; Brown (2000); Onwuegbuzie et.al (2000); Rodrigez and Abreu (2003) have proposed that affective differences can account for success or failure in foreign language speaking. Believing that anxiety is one the affective variables, Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) tried to explain its important role in language learning. According to Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982), anxiety contributes negatively to foreign

language learning process, which makes an individual less responsive to input. Horwitz (2001) also asserts that anxiety negatively influences foreign language learning since it has been found to interfere with many types of learning.

Objectives of the Study

This study attempts to investigate the sources of foreign language speaking anxiety from the university students' perspectives. The research is of great benefits and advantages because it:

a- explores the sources of foreign language speaking anxiety from the university students' perspectives.

b- discusses the phenomenon of foreign language anxiety from the language classroom settings.

c- considers the factors originate from the learner's own sense of self, from the language learning process, or from the situation or social environment he/she is a part of.

d- suggests some strategies for language teachers in order to alleviate language anxiety in the learners.

e. encourages students to develop their way of thinking about the anxiety and challenges of a foreign language.

Significance of the study

The study in this area according to Phillips (1992) and Onwuegbuzie (1999) will be of considerable interest to language educators as well as students because of the negative impact of foreign language speaking anxiety on students' attitudes and perceptions of language learning in general. The study is also significant with respect to its implication for foreign language pedagogy. The investigation of the anxiety sources that arise while learning to communicate in the target language will hopefully broaden the insight into the issue of foreign language anxiety and will help foreign language teachers in making the classroom environment less stressful.

Materials and methodsSubjects

Sixty university students engaged in the University Preparatory Programme (UPP) at Ahfad University in English Language classes were chosen as a sample. The participants were female.

They are almost of the same age and all of them are attending twenty hours English language classes per week. Four hours are allocating for speaking skills. **Instruments** In order to collect the data, the following instruments were employed in this study:

Foreign Language speaking Anxiety Scale (FLSAS)

For the purpose of collecting data, the questionnaire is distributed to the all students involved in this study. It is a self-report tool used to elicit the participants' anxiety responses towards speaking a foreign language in oral classes. The questionnaire contains 23 items all related to the degree of foreign language speaking anxiety as well as possible causes attributed to it. It is a modified version of the original Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz et al. (1986) which is composed of 33 items. The existing Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale used to measure language learning anxiety did not meet the purpose of the current study, which is investigating the sources

of foreign language speaking anxiety exhibited by the UPP students at Ahfad University. For this reason, the foreign language speaking anxiety scale (FLSAS) was designed. The students were asked to rate the 23 items of the questionnaire on a five-point Likert scale ranging from (1) strongly agree to (5) strongly disagree. Moreover, they were given simple instructions on how to complete the questionnaire and were asked to think of their experiences in previous oral classes. To motivate the students to give reliable responses, they were informed that there were no rights or wrong answers. To maintain confidentiality, they were told that they do not have to write their names on the questionnaire sheet. This questionnaire takes about 10-15 minutes to complete.

Interview

For the study purpose, a qualitative semi-structured interview format was adopted to investigate the sources of foreign language anxiety from the students' perspectives. Robson (2000) debates that a semi-structured face-to-face interview technique was preferred as it was essential to ensure that the

researcher was “in a position of being able to access the degree of the interviewee’s interest and involvement” (p. 90). Moreover, Gillham (2005) sees that it was also appropriate because of “its flexibility balanced by structure and the quality of the data so obtained” (p. 70).

The rationale behind the use of interview as a data collection tool for this study is that it can provide access to things that cannot be directly observed, such as feelings, thoughts, intentions, or beliefs. It also provides participants with opportunities to select, reconstruct, and reflect upon details of their experience. The nature of the study was explained to the participants: that it was voluntary, and that all interviews would be conducted in English and would be tape-recorded for accuracy and transcription purposes. The participants were ensured that all the recordings would be deleted and the information gained through them would be kept strictly confidential. The volunteer students were scheduled for interviews. Afterwards, they were contacted through mobile text messages and phone calls.

DISCUSSION :

In general terms, anxiety as defined by Horwitz , Horwitz and Cope, (1986:125) is "an unpleasant emotional state or condition which is characterized by subjective feelings of tension, apprehension, and worry, and by activation or arousal of the automatic nervous system". Psychologists such as Hilgard, Atkinson & Atkinson (1971) cited in Scovel (1991:18) commonly describe anxiety as " a state of apprehension, a vague fear that is only indirectly associated with an object". Brown (2000) considers anxiety as a complex psychological construct consisting of many variables. In its simplest form, anxiety is often associated with fear, frustration, apprehension, uneasiness, insecurity, self-doubt or worry. According to Woolfolk (2005); Horwitz et.al. (1986); MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) anxiety is a general uneasiness, a feeling of tension. For many students, language class can be more anxiety-provoking than any other course they take. Students may experience anxiety at different levels and in different situations:

a- Trait anxiety, which is a stable predisposition of perceiving safe situations. Spielberger (1966) thinks that it is a relatively permanent and steady personality.

b- State anxiety, which according to Chan & Wu (2004), is experienced in only some particular event or act for example taking exams. It is temporary and can be changed in time.

c- Facilitative anxiety which according to Mac Intyre & Gardner (1991a) is considered energizing and helpful. Some concern or worry over a task contributes positively to language learning. Spielmann & Radnofsky (2001) talked about good kind of tension and an optimal degree of anxiety that can be helpful for learning.

d- Debilitative anxiety shows too much anxiety over a task that may hinder learning. Kleinmann (1977) concluded that high levels of debilitative anxiety can affect the use of communication strategies as well as language performances.

Foreign language speaking anxiety

Foreign language speaking classroom has often filled many students with

nervousness and dread. Horwitz et al. (1986) claim that students suffering from foreign language speaking anxiety report feelings of apprehension, worry, and uncomfortable about speaking in class. They believe that only correct English must be spoken and comparing their skills with native speakers of the target language. They fear that their pronunciation is not good enough. Kitano (2001:550) argues that “speaking skill is usually the first thing that learners compare with that of peers, teachers, and native speakers”. According to Boyce et al. (2007), anxious students may have difficulties in concentrating, and experience some symptoms like nausea, sweating, weak knees and a dry mouth. These anxious students may also skip classes, exhibit some disruptive behavior in class or quit studying altogether. Foss and Reitzel (1988: 437) introduced these statements of students who experienced certain problems while speaking a foreign language “Why can’t I speak what to think a lot in English? I’m so bitter, trying hard. I’d like to speak a lot, however, I can’t. Finally, I think my

basic abilities of English ran short. I'm disgusted with myself." So, foreign language anxiety can be distinguished from other types of anxiety by that it can have a negative effect on foreign language speaking process. Foreign Language Anxiety deals with performance assessment in an academic and social context. Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope (1986) relate it with three types of performance anxieties:

1- Communication apprehension

According to Brown (1980) this type of anxiety arises when the learners feel themselves unable to express their own thoughts or ideas to the other students. Mc Croskey (1977) argues that it is also a type of shyness stemming from the fear of communicating with the other people. In language classrooms, communication apprehension occurs in speaking activities where students feel themselves unable to control the communicative situation and where they feel they are continuously being watched. Mac Intrye & Gardner (1991c) also state that speaking in a foreign language causes anxiety in classroom. Daly (1991)&Young (1986) debate that

most students feel anxious while speaking in front of their peers.

2- Fear of negative evaluation

Tsui (1996) believes that language learning is not only a process of acquiring linguistic rules or participating in communication activities, but a process in which individual learners are constantly putting and subjecting themselves to negative evaluations. Watson and Friend (1969) define fear of negative evaluation as apprehension about others' evaluations, avoidance of evaluative situations and expectations that others would evaluate one negatively. Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope (1986) suggest that fear of negative evaluation is aggravated by the nature of the foreign language classrooms. When the students are not sure of what they are saying, they may experience fear of negative evaluation and they may worry that they could not make a proper impression. Aida (1994) states that students with fear of negative evaluation sit passively in the classroom, withdrawing from classroom activities that could otherwise enhance their improvement of the language skills.

3- Test Anxiety

Test anxiety, as explained by Horwitz et al. (1986:129) "is a type of performance anxiety stemming from a fear of failure". Test anxiety is quite pervasive in language classrooms because of its continuous performance evaluative nature. Unfortunately, a foreign language for highly anxious students, requires continual evaluation by the instructor who is the only fluent speaker in the class (1986: 129).

Data analysis

Having collected the required data based on the above methodology, the

researcher conducted the analysis of data for the present study as follows:

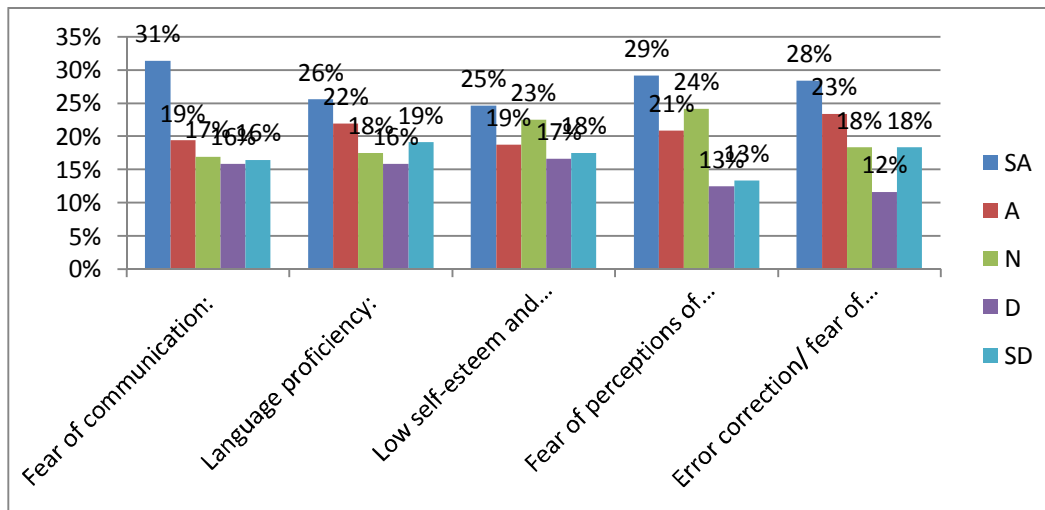
Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety Scale (FLSAS)

The students' responses were classified into five categories: agree, strongly agree, neutral, disagree and strongly disagree. When the responses were transformed into numbers, they were tabulated and stored for analysis. The data analysis was conducted quantitatively. Microsoft Excel was used to analyze the data generated from the questionnaire. Descriptive statistics were performed as percentages.

Table 1: The Sources of Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety from the Students' Perspectives

No	statement	A		SA		N		D		SD	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1	Fear of communication:										
	1- I tremble when I know that I am going to be called on in the oral class.	13	21%	33	55%	6	10%	5	8%	3	5%
	2- I am usually at ease during the oral class.	6	10%	5	8%	11	18%	17	28%	21	35%
	3- It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my oral class.	11	18%	14	23%	12	20%	13	21%	10	16%

	4- I can feel my heart pounding when I am going to be called on in the oral class.	13	21%	20	33%	10	16%	9	15%	8	13%
	5- I feel very self-conscious about speaking English in front of other students.	15	25%	19	31%	12	20%	7	11%	7	11%
	6- I feel nervous in the oral class when the English teacher asks me questions and I must reply in the oral class.	12	20%	22	36%	10	16%	6	10%	10	16%
2	Language proficiency:										
	1- I don't worry about making mistakes in the oral class.	7	11%	5	8%	11	18%	19	31%	18	30%
	2- It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in the oral class.	16	26%	22	36%	7	11%	9	15%	6	10%
	3- During the English class, I find myself thinking about things that have nothing to do with the course.	14	23%	19	31%	11	18%	7	11%	9	15%
	4- In the oral class I can get so nervous I forget things I know.	17	28%	18	30%	13	21%	5	8%	7	11%
	5- It would not be nervous speaking English with native speakers.	5	8%	7	11%	13	21%	13	21%	22	36%
	6- I get nervous and confused when I am speaking English in my oral class.	20	33%	21	35%	8	13%	4	6%	7	11%



The major sources of speaking anxiety were extracted from the students' responses. These five anxiety-provoking sources were reported in table 1 to help identify the causes which are the highest among the students. From table (1) and the chart, (31%) of the respondents strongly agree that fear of communication disturbs them and stops their production of language whereas only (16%) of the students express strong disagreement. While (29%) of the participants strongly agree that fear of perceptions of others leads to make them anxious, (13%) of them show strong disagreement about the effect of fear of perceptions of others. (28%) of the respondents strongly agree that error correction and fear of negative

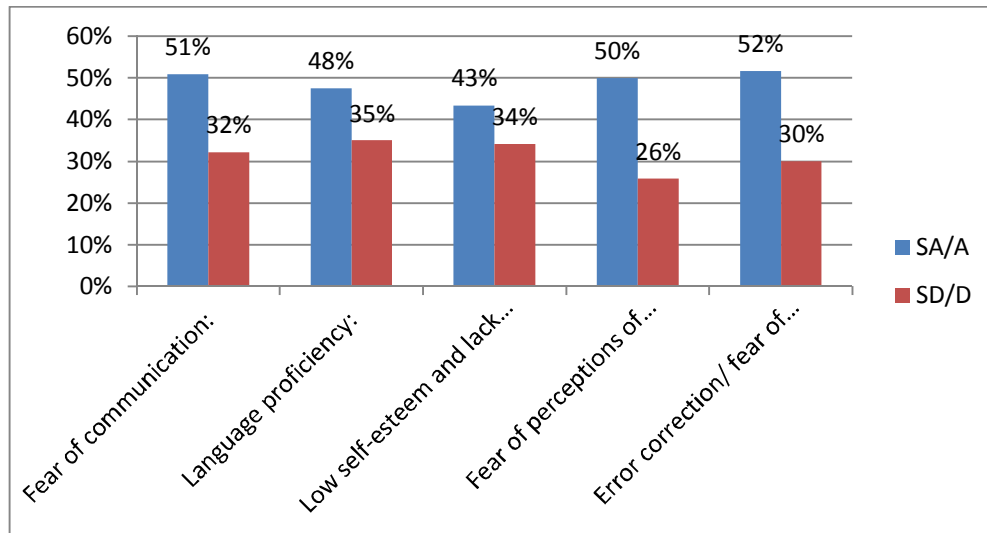
evaluation hinder the flow of words and sentences while speaking in a foreign language, about (18%) of them have an opponent idea and they think that error correction and fear of negative evaluation have no effect on their performances. (26%) of the students strongly agree that language proficiency contribute negatively to their achievement when they can't understand what their instructors saying and forget what they know. On the other hand, about (19%) of them oppose the idea and think that language proficiency doesn't develop speaking anxiety. A quarter of the participants strongly agree that low self-esteem and lack of confidence play an important role in engaging them into a mood of instability and tension.

Contrastingly, (18%) of the students see confidence are not one of the elements that low self-esteem and lack of that provoke speaking anxiety.

Table 2: Average proportion of students who experience foreign language speaking anxiety

Sources of foreign language speaking anxiety	A/SA	D/SD
Fear of communication:	51%	32%
Language proficiency:	48%	35%
Low self-esteem and lack of confidence	43%	34%
Fear of perceptions of others (fear of Audience)	50%	26%
Error correction/ fear of negative evaluation:	52%	30%

A/SA = agree and strongly agree - D/SD = disagree and strongly disagree



The students' responses were transformed into percentages, both strongly agree (SA) and agree (A) responses were combined together to gain a general degree of agreement. The responses disagree (D) and strongly disagree (SD) were also matched to get

an overall measure of disagreement. The responses marked with Neutral (N) were dropped because they reveal students indecisiveness as whether they experienced speaking anxiety or not. As table (2) shows, the capacity of the respondents (52%) attribute foreign

language speaking anxiety to Error correction/ fear of negative evaluation. The students think that their instructors are ready to correct every mistake they make and their knowledge and performance of English will be judged negatively by their teacher and their classmates. On the other hand, (35%) of the students express disagreement towards language proficiency and see that it isn't a cause behind foreign language speaking anxiety. Only (43%) of the participants believe that low self-esteem and lack of confidence create an atmosphere of stress and tension. (26%) of the students reject the idea that fear of perceptions of others (fear of Audience) can develop speaking anxiety whereas a considerable percentage of the students (50%) have a different point of view and see that fear of Perceptions of others (fear of audience) contribute negatively and increase the students' anxiety. Half of the students (50%) argue that fear of communication stands behind speaking anxiety whereas (32%) of them think that fear of communication can't develop speaking anxiety.

Interview

Three questions were design to obtain more information about foreign language speaking anxiety, they are as follows:

Q 1: How do you feel about your experience of speaking English?

Q 2: What disturbs you most about speaking English and why?

Q 3: Do you think speaking English as a foreign language is very difficult? What kind of difficulties or problems do you feel when speaking English?

The majority of the responses from the students reveal that the students experience debilitating anxiety since it prevents the production of language. Here are some of the students' comments on the questions above: "My hands become cold and my legs are moving when I'm asked to answer questions in English".

"Our teacher is strict and corrects every mistake".

"I hate English classes because they are heavy and slow".

"My classmates laugh at me when I make a mistake while speaking".

"I can't speak correctly so it's better to keep silent".

On the other hand, some few students express positive views about English speaking classes:

"I really enjoy my English classes".

"I enjoy leading discussions in English classes with my teacher and my classmates".

"English is a simple language and can be learnt easily".

"I don't face difficulties in English. It's my favourite subject".

"I love English and I hope to be like the native speakers soon".

Results

The results show that the students attributed foreign language speaking anxiety to fear of communication, language proficiency, low of self-esteem and lack of confidence, fear of perceptions of others, error correction and fear of negative evaluation.

The findings of this study can be beneficial to the English language instructors to employ some strategies to alleviate the degree of anxiety among the students and encourage them to develop their speaking skills. From the responses of the participants we can draw some suggestions that may help the English

language instructors that may help reduce speaking anxiety:

a) Correcting students' mistakes indirectly while they are speaking.

b) Avoiding negative error correction.

c) Making students more comfortable in the classroom.

d) Reassuring students that mistakes are part of their learning.

e) Giving positive feedback to the students and encouraging remarks and rewards to raise their self-confidence.

f) Encouraging students to speak English outside the classroom and interact with their peers.

g) Allowing discussions in smaller groups so that students do not have to face the whole class.

h) Presenting new vocabulary associated with the topic before starting the speaking lesson so that the students get familiar with it.

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