

Speaking Anxiety Among Turkish EFL Students (Case of IBSU)

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Abstract

Since English is one of the most widely spoken languages in the world, speaking anxiety could become a serious problem for learners. Hence, to prevent further negative consequences, caused by this issue (such as loss of motivation while learning the target language, avoiding speaking in public, etc.), it needs to be deeply studied. The study investigates the feelings of English language anxiety among Turkish EFL students. The study revealed that the majority of the participants, despite their gender and level differences, more or less experienced English language anxiety. The article seeks to find out the types of anxiety felt by foreign language learners and also provides several ways how to cope with it.

Keywords: Foreign Language Anxiety, Speaking Anxiety, Fear, Hesitancy

Introduction

Emotions determine the quality of our lives. They occur in every relationship we care about - in the workplace, in our friendships, in dealings with family members. They can save our lives, but they can also cause a real damage. They may lead us to act in ways that we think are realistic and appropriate, but our emotions can also lead us to act in ways we regret terribly afterward (Ekman, 2003, XVII).

Very many foreign language learners experience some kinds of anxiety in their learning. Language anxiety is indeed one of those emotions that may and most probably will cause one a lot of damage and problems. Learners who feel anxious in their foreign language learning may find their study less enjoyable, they tend not to engage in situations which can make them feel anxious, for example, not to participate in class, practice speaking with group-mates, etc. Denying the anxiety factor may lead to loss of learning motivation and weak results. These are the reasons why this topic needs to be paid attention to.

II. Research Questions

This study attempts to answer the following questions:

- Is there a relationship between speaking performance and second language speaking anxiety?
- What are the major stressors reported by Turkish EFL students as the contributions to the speaking anxiety?

II. Literature Review

This study attempts to answer the following questions:

Generally, anxiety can be associated with “threats to self-efficacy and appraisals of situations as threatening” (Pappamihel, 2002, 331) or an uneasy feeling due to something threatening (Koba et al, 2000). Anxiety is a physiological response and is generally defined as “a state of apprehension, a vague fear” (Scovel, 1978:137). According to Freud (1933:81), anxiety is “an unpleasant affective state or condition similar to dread or nervousness, with physiological and behavioral manifestations” and “anxiety (or dread) itself needs no description”.

Researchers have consistently described learning a foreign language as a complex process, which implies the study of new grammar, pronunciation, memorization of new words; but first and foremost it tests the learner’s ability in terms of his / her flexibility to take risks and make mistakes in front of other people. Over the years, the factors characterizing such processes have been clearly outlined: these factors may be strictly linguistic (e.g. grammar, syntax) or extra-linguistic, such as socio-contextual (Schuman, 1978), the input received by the learner (Krashen, 1982).

Steinberg & Horwitz (1986) affirm that persons who usually perceive themselves as sociable and reasonably intelligent may experience difficulties when they have to communicate even basic concepts in a foreign language. Therefore, evidence does indicate that anxiety plays an important psychological role as language students are concerned.

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According to Tobias (1979), anxiety may work as a mental block to cognitive performance at all three cognitive stages: Input, Processing, and Output. In other words, anxiety arousal, which is typically associated with self-deprecating thoughts, fear of failure, or worry over performance procedures, may compete for cognitive resources that normal cognitive processing will demand. Researchers have been unable to draw a clear picture of how anxiety affects language learning and performance. Some researchers reported a negative correlation between language anxiety and achievement (Clement, Gardner, & Smythe, 1977).

One of the most studied topics in the field of speech communication is the tendency on the part of some people to avoid, and even fear, communicating orally (Daly, 1991p. 3). In the 1980s, Steinberg (1982) revealed that anxiety negatively affects foreign language learners' speaking performance when they find themselves under stressful conditions and forces them to use different kinds of communication styles which cause the cut/lack of communication in the on-going conversation.

Many educators claim that foreign language anxiety can have an impact on learners, which is absolutely right in many different contexts. They argue that its existence can affect the fluency of learners' speech and learning in general. For instance, Kondo and Ying-Ling (2004) maintain that FL anxiety can impact negatively learners' performance. It is also known that the students who have a low oral ability in their native language have a higher possibility of experiencing FL anxiety than those who are more competent in their native language use (Onwuegbuzie et al., 1999). According to Horwitz, and Cope (1986) study, the majority of studies have followed similar procedures in studying the relationship between FL anxiety and achievement in the target language (Kunt & Tüm, 2010). Those studies which followed similar ways have demonstrated that a negative correlation exists between foreign language anxiety and achievement in the target language in different settings and conditions. (see Horwitz, 1986; Horwitz, 1996; Sellers, 2000; Yan and Wang, 2001).

The study of Gregersen and Horwitz (2002) demonstrated that perfectionist tendencies cause language anxiety. As a result of their study it is concluded that the students who have anxiety nearly have the same 'unpleasant' emotions that are caused by perfectionist tendencies which makes language learning hopeless and dissatisfied. Beside those anxious students, non-anxious language learners who do not have perfectionist tendencies incline to be satisfied with their even little accomplishments.

Most studies on language anxiety concentrate on understanding the mechanism of anxiety in the process of language learning either in foreign language or second language settings (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994) and many also focus on looking at the approaches used to help students reduce their language anxiety (Kondo & Ying-Ling, 2004).

In order to fight and overcome speaking anxiety, one should try to find the reason for him/her feeling uncomfortable while speaking a foreign language. There are several commonly named speaking anxiety reasons.

The first one is lack of preparation (spontaneous speaking). The second cause of anxiety is the feeling that the students have too many points to cover in the allotted time period. The third cause is worrying that the audience will be overly critical. Fear about not entertaining or arousing the interest of people is the fourth cause of public speaking anxiety. Speakers who compare their perceptions to audience expectations and public speaking anxiety are revealed when audiences' expectations are perceived greater than the speaker's ability (Ayres, 1986). The fifth cause is that students intend to emulate other speakers rather than be themselves. Other possible causes of anxiety can be the fear of potential negative outcomes and stuttering or difficulty finding the necessary words. The next cause is where students spend too much time over-preparing instead of developing confidence and trust in their own natural ability to succeed. The last two causes are dislike in being the center of attention and also low self-confidence. Ayres, Schliesman and Sonandre (1998), in their research, found that students who feel they have skill deficiencies in public speaking apprehension often experience anxiety.

In the context of speaking English as a second language Young (1990) listed six potential causes of language anxiety which include both personal and interpersonal factors, learners' beliefs about language learning, instructors' beliefs about language teaching, instructor-learner interactions, classroom procedures and language tests. However, to date, findings by Horwitz et al. (1986) have been the most influential. They identified three causes of language anxiety, that is, communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation.

In general, educators have two options when dealing with anxious students: they can help learn to cope with the existing anxiety- provoking situation; or they can make the learning context less stressful. But before either option is viable, the teacher and the student must first acknowledge the existence of foreign language anxiety. Specific techniques which teachers may use to allay students' anxiety include relaxation exercises, advice on effective language learning strategies, behavioral contracting, and journal keeping. Therapists employing behavior modification techniques, such as systematic desensitization, have successfully treated a variety of specific anxieties related to learning, and these techniques should prove equally useful in the case of foreign language anxiety. Foreign language anxiety can probably be alleviated, at least to an extent, by a supportive teacher who will acknowledge students' feelings of isolation and helplessness and offer concrete suggestions for attaining foreign language confidence (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986).

Several different strategies of how to cope with this issue are advised by different psychologists and scientists who have done research of this issue. Most common shall be named in the scope of this study:

First – Preparation: This strategy suggests preparing better before class, trying to obtain good summaries of lecture notes. This would definitely increase student's confidence and decrease anxiety of being asked something he/she doesn't know.

Second – Relaxation: If one is well prepared and still is struggling with the feeling of anxiety and fear, relaxation, which involves tactics that aim at reducing anxiety symptoms, is offered. Some basic tactics are as follows: “take a deep breath, try to be calm and do your best to participate in lecture, be a part of the team”, also “you are well-prepared for the class and as smart as your friends, so there is no reason to worry.”

Third – Positive Thinking: These strategies are intended to divert attention from the stressful situation to positive and pleasant cues (e.g., discussing an exciting topic), and bring relief to the anxious student.

Fourth – Peer-Seeking: This strategy is a good solution to the problem for the students, who seem to have trouble understanding class or controlling their anxiety. For such students, the realization that others are having the same problem may serve as a source of emotional regulation by social comparison.

Goal:

The goal of the research was to find out, how much anxiety while learning English is a problem for students at International black sea University and what factors of anxiety students view as especially important.

Method:

The research has been held within the scope of Turkish students learning English as their second language. Among the Turkish university EFL students, speaking is a highly anxiety-causing activity because of the fact that the speakers have to perform a series of complex operations that they are not used to. Most of them struggle to force themselves to speak, try to avoid eye-contact or answering at all. This behavior decreases the probability of having good results or improvement.

The Participants consisted of Bachelor Level Turkish EFL students in the International Black Sea University. It is an international university whose instruction language is English and where many Turkish students are enrolled. A 33-item survey was used for this study. This is the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale by Horwitz., Horwitz, & Cope (1986) which I found very appropriate for the purpose. It contains a 5-point evaluation Likert scale from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”.

The procedure was as follows: the researcher visited freshman classes of English in the 8th week of the spring semester (to give them time to be used to the university atmosphere and the course) and administered the survey with Turkish students after the class. Answering the questionnaire was on a volunteer basis. After the survey forms were collected (totally 32 undergraduate students), the data were analyzed with a simple statistic procedure, where the percentages of corresponding answers were calculated.

Results

The results of the survey are presented in table 1 below.

III. Discussion

Answers to question 26 “I feel more tense and nervous in my language class than in my other classes” reveal that more than one third of students (35.5%) have chosen the answer “I agree”, which is a serious problem.

Question 17 tells us that about a third of respondents (31%) even do not want to attend the English class, one of the reasons to which may be their anxiety.

Questions 1, 3, 9, 10, 12, 13, 16, 20, and 27 concerned the existence of a high level of anxiety. The results show that the answers “strongly agree” and “agree” were chosen by between 32% and more than half (68%) of respondents, which emphasizes that students have anxiety problems.

On the other hand, questions 2, 5, 11, 14, 18, 22, and 28 reveal that quite many students are not really stressed (between 34.7% and 56%). Thus, the problem of anxiety is serious enough, but not as critical, as I expected.

What is interesting, 41-58 % of students are more relaxed when communicating with a native speaker (questions 14 and 32), than during the English class which tells us that, probably, the classroom atmosphere (including the fact that students are being assessed there) is not friendly enough.

Among the causes for anxiety that students name (answers “strongly agree” and “agree”) are (according to rating, from top to bottom):

Public speaking (in front of friends) (question 24) – 63%;

Giving spontaneous (unprepared) answers (question 33) – 58%;

Competition with “stronger” students (questions 7 and 23) – 48-55%;

Language difficulties (question 30) – 46%;

Lack of understanding of what the teacher is saying (questions 4 and 29) – 45-46% or correcting (question 15) – 36%), which can be also interpreted as language (perceptive) difficulties;

Fear of being laughed at by peers (question 31) – 38%;

Lesson pacing (speed) (question 25) – 37%;

Problems with preparation for testing (inefficient methods? difficult materials?) (question 21) – 31%;

Too much error correction (question 19) – 26%.

The question concerning the impact of testing anxiety (question 8) is written in the reverse form, so here I paid at-

Table 1. Survey results

	Questions	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree, Nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my foreign language class.	13.3%	50.0%	20.0%	13.3%	3.3%
2	I don't worry about making mistakes in language class.	28.1%	28.1%	15.6%	25.0%	3.1%
3	I tremble when I know that I'm going to be called on in language class	0.0%	32.3%	35.5%	19.4%	12.9%
4	It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in the foreign language	16.1%	29.0%	16.1%	22.6%	16.1%
5	It wouldn't bother me at all to take more foreign language classes.	9.4%	25.0%	50.0%	12.5%	3.1%
6	During language class, I find myself thinking about things that have nothing to do with the course.	6.5%	29.0%	25.8%	29.0%	9.7%
7	I keep thinking that the other students are better at languages than I am.	9.7%	45.2%	32.3%	9.7%	3.2%
8	I am usually at ease during tests in my language class.	9.7%	45.2%	19.4%	25.8%	0.0%
9	I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in language class	18.8%	50.0%	6.3%	18.8%	6.3%
10	I worry about the consequences of failing my foreign language class	18.8%	37.5%	25.0%	15.6%	3.1%
11	I don't understand why some people get so upset over foreign language classes	0.0%	45.2%	32.3%	19.4%	3.2%
12	In language class, I can get so nervous I forget things I know	9.4%	46.9%	25.0%	12.5%	6.3%
13	It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my language class	18.8%	34.4%	21.9%	18.8%	6.3%
14	I would not be nervous speaking the foreign language with native speakers	9.4%	31.3%	37.5%	18.8%	3.1%
15	I get upset when I don't understand what the teacher is correcting	3.2%	32.3%	22.6%	35.5%	6.5%
16	Even if I am well prepared for language class, I feel anxious about it	6.5%	35.5%	29.0%	22.6%	6.5%
17	I often feel like not going to my language class	0.0%	31.3%	31.3%	28.1%	9.4%

18	I feel confident when I speak in foreign language class	16.1%	23.4%	25.8%	19.7%	15.0%
19	I am afraid that my language teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make	3.2%	22.6%	29.0%	38.7%	6.5%
20	I can feel my heart pounding when I'm going to be called on in language class	16.1%	29.0%	32.3%	12.9%	9.7%
21	The more I study for a language test, the more confused I get	3.1%	28.1%	25.0%	31.3%	12.5%
22	I don't feel pressure to prepare very well for language class	6.3%	21.9%	40.6%	25.0%	6.3%
23	I always feel that the other students speak the foreign language better than I do	9.7%	38.7%	35.5%	12.9%	3.2%
24	I feel very self-conscious about speaking the foreign language in front of other students	13.3%	50.0%	20.0%	10.0%	6.7%
25	Language class moves so quickly I worry about getting left behind	6.7%	30.0%	40.0%	16.7%	6.7%
26	I feel more tense and nervous in my language class than in my other classes	0.0%	35.5%	25.8%	35.5%	3.2%
27	I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my language class	3.2%	38.7%	25.8%	22.6%	9.7%
28	When I'm on my way to language class, I feel very sure and relaxed	25.8%	25.2%	16.1%	19.7%	13.2%
29	I get nervous when I don't understand every word the language teacher says	7.1%	39.3%	25.0%	25.0%	3.6%
30	I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules you have to learn to speak a foreign language	12.9%	32.3%	38.7%	16.1%	0.0%
31	I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak the foreign language	3.2%	35.5%	25.8%	25.8%	9.7%
32	I would probably feel comfortable around native speakers of the foreign language	16.1%	32.3%	45.2%	6.5%	0.0%
33	I get nervous when the language teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance	16.1%	41.9%	25.8%	12.9%	3.2%

tention to answers "strongly disagree and disagree" – 26% of students have a high level of anxiety during tests.

As for answers to question 6 (During language class, I find myself thinking about things that have nothing to do with the course), they may be interpreted as students are bored or cannot understand what is going on, so this question is not very informative.

IV. Limitations and Directions of Further Research

This study deals with one university in one country. Of course, results may be different enough in other universities and countries. However, it does permit us to make the below conclusions, as it is in the streamline with the researches that I have analyzed. More surveys need to be held in more universities, to come to really conclusive results. Some other

questions need to be added to the questionnaire, to find out the particular language factors that are problematic for students and the problems with testing.

V. Conclusions

The results of the survey show that the freshman students' anxiety level with connection of communication in English is definitely higher than it should be to permit communication run flawlessly. Among the gravest reasons for Turkish EFL students according to the questionnaire results are:

- Fear of public speaking
- Feeling unprotected when giving spontaneous answers
- Realizing that other students are doing better
- Language difficulties
- Lack of understanding
- Peer reactions
- Speed, at which the lesson develops

Surprisingly, testing and error corrections were not viewed as really grave problems. What is interesting, the majority of difficulties deal with social factors rather than educational factors. This is why improvement of classroom atmosphere is one of the main recommendations that can be given to teachers. Of course, removing language difficulties, providing quality explanations, and efficient timing should not be neglected, either.

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