

SPEAKING ANXIETY AS A FACTOR IN STUDYING EFL

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study was designed to investigate the speaking anxiety factors in EFL classes. The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) questionnaire adapted and modified from Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), and Yahya (2013) was used in collecting the data. Sixty five second grade, year 11 senior high students from SMA Negeri 5 Banda Aceh were asked to fill in the questionnaire to find out what factors lead to speaking anxiety among these EFL students. The findings indicated that communication apprehension factors lead to 71% of students' speaking anxiety followed by fear of negative evaluations, 53%; then test anxiety, 48%, and the lowest was 39% for anxiety about English classes. English teachers are expected to be able to understand the character of each of their students in the classroom, because the anxiety level for each student can be different, one from the other.

Keywords: *Speaking, Anxiety Factors, Communication Apprehension.*

INTRODUCTION

It has become a common belief that anxiety has been the most dominant factor influencing students not to speak English in the classroom. Students can feel threatened, unsafe and uncomfortable when asked to speak English in front of their peers in the classroom. Many feelings are experienced by students when they are in an English classroom, such as apprehension, fright, even fear (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986, p. 126). Anxiety is not only faced by the English Foreign Language (EFL) students but also by the English second Language (ESL) students. Even students who are categorized as smart also experience feelings of anxiety when they have to convey their ideas in English in front of their classmates.

The researcher conducted interviews with several English teachers at SMA Negeri 5 Banda Aceh to find out the problems faced by the students in speaking classes. Some of the English teachers surprisingly revealed some problems such as: students are rarely willing to come forward to speak English orally in front of their classmates, they prefer to note all the teacher's explanations on speaking skills rather than to practice English orally in the front of the class. Students prefer to answer questions on a worksheet provided by the English teacher rather than to practice their speaking skills directly in the classroom. On other occasions, the teachers also explained that when the students were forced to speak directly in front of their classmates, many were reluctant to speak; only some students were willing to speak in front of the class but with limited intensity. Sometimes, the students look at notes to read them when asked to speak. The teachers

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added that students seem to have very high levels of anxiety to speak English orally in the front of the class. Even, if they speak in the English classroom, most of them prefer to speak in Indonesian rather than in English. Students preferred to be good listeners rather than being active speakers in their classroom. This indicates that these students are afraid to speak in English, a foreign language. There are several factors of anxiety that hinder and prevent these students from performing well in speaking in the classroom, such as “communication apprehension; test anxiety; and fear of negative evaluation” (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986, p. 127).

A lot of studies have been conducted that show that anxiety due to various factors greatly affects performances in speaking English, in particular factors such as proficiency in communication, level of confidence, the inter-language system of the students and their level of determination to study a foreign language. Anxiety is not only experienced by EFL students but also by ESL students.

First, a study conducted by Naghadeh et al. (2014) with Iranian English major students at Payame Noor University in which the position of English is a second language showed that there was a significant relationship between anxiety faced by students and their speaking ability. Naghadeh et al. (ibid) have written that the higher the anxiety faced by the students in oral communications, the lower the speaking ability of those students.

Second, a study by Osboe et al. (2007) revealed that anxiety has affected the level of students' confidence at a university in Japan. Their data showed that students who were asked to perform in front of the class individually tended to have less confidence which affected their appearance whilst speaking. But, the researchers found that the same students would have high confidence and speak lots of English if they were placed in small discussion groups or in pairs.

Third, Mahmoodzadeh (2012) investigated foreign language speaking anxiety faced by Iranian students within their inter-language system and found that these students had high levels of anxiety in their inter-language system when speaking English. The findings revealed that females were more susceptible and had higher levels of anxiety than males. That researcher also found that students with low levels of proficiency may not have high anxiety in their inter-language system. Students with high proficiency were more vulnerable to experience high anxiety in the inter-language system. Based on the exposure of these problems faced by students, and some preliminary studies that had shown how anxiety greatly affected and disturbed students when speaking English, the researcher was interested to conduct this study.

Research Questions

Based on the problems encountered above, the researcher formulated this research question: “What are the factors that lead to speaking anxiety amongst EFL students at SMA Negeri 5 Banda Aceh?”

Research Objective

The objective of this study is to investigate the factors which lead to speaking anxiety amongst EFL students at SMA Negeri 5 Banda Aceh.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Anxiety

Anxiety is an innate natural factor which affects each individual from the time of birth. Anxiety can appear on its own when someone is in a stressful situation and/or something threatens her. Anxiety is a feeling in which a person feels anxious, nervous, confused and/or flustered in a situation that could marginalize her. Mayer (2008, p. 4) has said that “anxiety is defined as a state of intense agitation, foreboding, tension, and dread, occurring from a real or perceived threat of impending danger”. Actually, the feeling of anxiety is natural and is experienced at times by everyone. But, excessive anxiety sometimes makes the sufferer unable to do anything. Excessive anxiety can cause physical disorders such as “shallow breathing and/or hyper-ventilation, an intense rush of adrenaline and other stress hormones, pounding heartbeats, heart palpitations, sweating, shaking limbs and trembling, body and muscle tension, a dry mouth, headaches, nausea, diarrhea, and/or vomiting” (Mayer, *ibid*).

Foreign Language Anxiety

It has become a tradition for students to experience anxiety when dealing with English lessons as a foreign language at school. The excessive feelings of anxiety that students face in the foreign language classroom often makes them appear to have no ability in learning English, especially in learning speaking skills. One of the reasons why students can experience excessive anxiety when asked to speak English orally is because of unsystematic teaching-learning in the classroom which limits the time for students to talk directly. Students assume that they come to school just to listen to all the explanations from their English teacher, then they write all their answers to the topic without directly using the English language to talk about what they have understood and what they have not yet understood (Nunan, 1999).

Then too, the feelings of anxiety that the students face when they have to speak English also comes from the lack of opportunities given by the teacher to her students to practice speaking English. Whereas, the students’ speaking ability will automatically increase if they practice speaking the English language intensively in their environment (Thornbury, 2005). But unfortunately, many authoritarian teachers do not give many opportunities for students to practice their speaking skills.

Rivers (1986) has claimed that there were many language teaching classes which have an authoritarian system of teaching. This is caused by the teachers knowing the language that is being taught very well, whilst, on the other hand, the students know little or nothing. Then the teachers are always in the right and always criticize the mistakes and errors made by the students (Rivers, *ibid*). Further, the students assume that their teacher is their role model and the source of truth.

Many situations can trigger or stimulate students’ anxiety in learning English. These situations include speaking in public, examinations and/or participation in front of the class (Ellis, 1994). Thornbury (2005) has claimed that a student who is not fluent in speaking English can suffer from stress and embarrassment. It cannot be denied that students who aren’t fluent can feel anxiety when they are asked to speak in English. They may not have much self-confidence because of their limitations in speaking English.

However, students who are reliable in the field of linguistics can also often feel anxious when facing an English test. This can happen so that they forget what they know because of their anxiety. Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986, p. 126) have written “students

commonly report to counselors that they ‘knew’ a certain grammar point but ‘forgot’ it during a test or an oral exercise when many grammar points must be remembered and co-ordinated simultaneously”.

Anxiety can also occur due to too deep understanding of semantic meaning in speaking. Students who concentrate deeply on the level of understanding in semantic meanings in a language, can directly feel anxiety due to them (Gass & Selinker, 2001). Semantic understanding of the use of a language is important, however, if students are too burdened with a high level of understanding about semantic factors, the students themselves can suffer because of it. Anxiety faced by the students can lead to negative reactions. According to Bailey (1983) as cited by Gass and Selinker (2001:357) “anxiety depends on the situation in which learners find themselves”.

Based on the statements above, anxiety is not only faced by students who have low proficiency but also by students with high proficiency. It all depends on how the students respond to the anxiety that they face. Occasionally, inflexible prerequisites will be embedded in the students’ minds which can raise high levels of anxiety due to excessive self-monitoring. Excessive self-monitoring is one of the sources of students’ speaking anxiety (Thornbury, 2005). Tsui (1996) in Bailey & Nunan (1996) has explained that one of the ways that teacher can reduce the anxiety faced by students when speaking English is to focus more on the content of students’ speaking in English rather than focussing on the form.

Effect of Anxiety on Motivation

Anxiety can affect students’ motivation and ability in speaking English in the classroom. Students who have low motivation may have low proficiency and as a result be more anxious in language classes (Yamashiro & McLaughlin, 2001 in Robinson et al., 2001). In line with Yamashiro and McLaughlin, (ibid), Liu and Cheng (2014) conducted research on EFL university students to determine the relationship between the affective factors faced by students in the classroom, such as anxiety factors and motivation factors. They found that there was a very close relationship between the factors of anxiety and motivation in the EFL students. Students with high motivation in English have low anxiety. However, if the students’ anxiety is high and excessive, then the students will not be motivated to learn English. This finding reveals that high anxiety will decrease motivation. Motivation can only be high if the students’ anxiety is low.

Lozanov (1975) has said that to motivate students, (new) teaching techniques are not needed, the most important point is how the teacher frees the students from anxiety, embarrassment and high blood pressure. Lozanov (ibid) has claimed that putting students in a comfortable, relaxed, and fun place can increase students’ motivation to learn. Finocchiaro (1974) has also stated that in order to increase students’ motivation in learning; students should be free from anxiety. Finocchiaro (ibid) gives examples of liberation from anxiety, such as students do not need to be ashamed and anxious if they are not ready to do the work or if they make mistakes and errors in production or if they are not able to respond to the teacher’s questions promptly and directly. Students may not be able to liberate their own anxiety without the help of their teachers. Teachers are expected to help to ease students’ speaking anxiety with the aim of helping them to be successful in speaking English. Students need self-confidence and a sense of security when they find a challenge in speaking; students need comfortable classroom conditions where the teacher does not become a judge of the students’ mistakes and errors in practicing English orally. The teacher should act as the students’ mentor and guider who

is ready to help the students in the problems they face in speaking (Thornbury, 2005). Kreshan (1982, p. 32) has writren that “the effective language teacher is someone who can provide input and help to make it comprehensible in a low anxiety situation”.

Anxiety Effect on Filter

Besides affecting the students’ motivation to speak English, anxiety also has an exceedingly close relationship with a filter. A filter is a barrier and a lock for the students to get adequate input. A filter is also a barrier between students and their fruitfulness. A high filter will mean the input does not reach the part of the brain that processes language which is often called the LAD (Language Acquisition Device), even though the student understands the message well (Kreshan, 1982). A high filter will have a direct impact on the input obtained by the students. When motivation is lacking, anxiety is high, and self-esteem is low, the filter will go up so that the input will not become intake, (Schumann, 1978a in Gingras, 1978a, and Shumanns, 1978b). This means that the anxiety factor greatly affects the input (knowledge) gained by the students. The higher the anxiety faced by the students, the lower the input they will obtain.

Furthermore, in the production of English especially in speaking skills, high anxiety can trigger a high filter. This high filter will then impact on the students’ self-esteem. Students can become anxious when asked to answer questions or speak in front of the classroom using English. This then causes them to worry if their self-esteem will fall due to ridicule from their peers. Students can also feel anxious if they asked to speak and there could be mistakes in their vocabulary that could cause some other students to make fun of them. Here, the role of the filter hinders and prevents the students from speaking. These aspects cause students who are not motivated to avoid speaking in front of the class, and this also means that no input from experience is received by these students. High anxiety can trigger the filter to become still higher. A high filter means that any input cannot be absorbed completely by the students. Thus the consolidation of information into knowledge will be hampered. A high filter will make the knowledge gain premature. Premature knowledge will result in premature competence. The premature competence cannot be made into good performance. It is not strong enough to be displayed in students’ performances in speaking English.

Krashen (1982, p. 32) has made an illustration of the filter and the language competence to be acquired as can be seen in Figure 1 below:

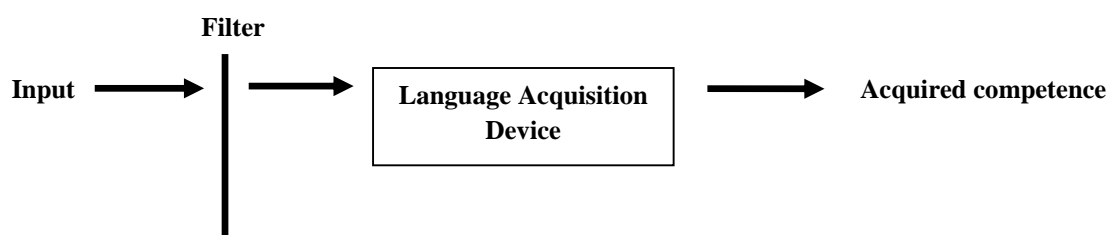


Figure 1. Operation of the affective filter from Krashen (1982, p. 32)

Here, input has been disturbed and blocked by a filter and so the process of acquiring or learning the language is blocked too. All these reasons also block the students’ competence and performance in speaking English. In language learning, input is language which a student hears or receives from which he or she can learn (Richards, Platt & Weber, 1985). When anxiety factors do not affect students excessively, input can be maximized. Sufficient input will then result in good output. Good output can be reflected

with maximum performance by students speaking in front of the class See figure 2 below from Krashen (1982, p. 16) on the processing of good output.

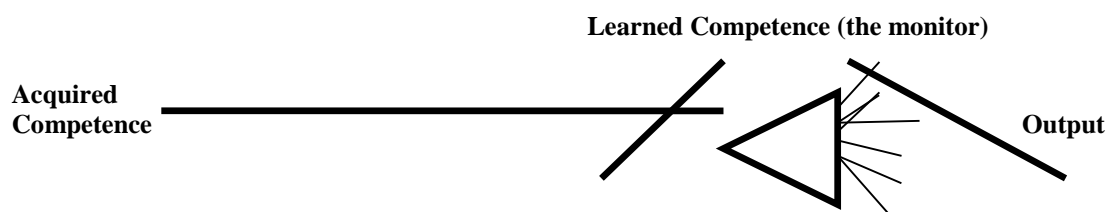


Figure 2. Acquisition and learning in second language production

Output or language production results from language acquisition. Good input will result in good output. It is only by getting comprehensible input that the good improvement of language acquisition can be produced with good results (Krashen, 1982). Nice output can only be produced when the anxiety factors facing students are kept low.

The Factors of Anxiety

Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) have proposed three factors that influence the performance anxieties of students, viz: communications apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of a negative evaluation/acceptance. They believe that anxiety in learning EFL is closely related to other academic and social aspects. Na (2007) has also added anxiety about English classes as one more anxiety factor.

As the first anxiety factor, communication apprehension is a type of shyness characterized by fear of or anxiety about communicating with people (Horwitz, et al. *ibid*). This anxiety very often plagues EFL students in English classes. Students feel embarrassed to talk to the teacher, and/or their peers in English. These students feel like someone is observing them watching out for them to make mistakes in their grammar, this causes the students to be anxious when asked to speak English. Students feel that their English language is not as good as the ability of their peers.

Meanwhile, test anxiety refers to a type of performance anxiety stemming from a fear of failure (Gordon & Sarason, 1955, as cited by Horwitz et al., 1986). This factor usually occurs when students face an English language test, especially an oral test. Students feel pressured and uncomfortable in this situation. Even students who have prepared themselves perfectly for an oral English test can make errors in the test. They seem to lose their ability during the test. Students make untypical errors and apparently do not know what they have to do on the test. According to Yamashiro and McLaughlin (2001, p. 114) in Robinson et al. (2001), “test anxiety is a form of anxiety that is like a motivating factor to study harder and perform better”. But on the contrary, Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) reveal that frequently students who definitely knew the answer before the test experience forgetfulness because of their nervousness that causes them to lose memory power so that they give wrong answers in a test.

Then, fear of negative evaluation is defined as apprehension about the evaluations of others, avoidance of evaluative situations, and the expectation that others will evaluate one negatively (Watson & Friend, 1969, as cited in Horwitz, et al., 1986). This factor causes students to feel anxious to show their abilities directly in English, because students feel that their classmates will give negative comments on their performance. Students also feel anxious when their teacher gives them correction which make their self-esteem fall in front of their peers. Particularly, in giving feedback to students, the teacher is not

justified to give just negative feedback that can marginalize one or more students. The teacher's feedback on students' responses has to contain an element of positive reinforcement that can motivate the students, even when students' responses are wrong. Teachers should respond to students' correct answers with praise so that students get reinforcement for what they have learnt (Rivers, 1986).

Specifically for the fourth factor, the anxiety about English classes factor that was created by Na (2007) when investigating EFL students in China. This factor was associated with anxiety faced by students when they should be in English classes or English lessons. This anxiety was reserved only for the English classroom or the English lesson. The students felt more depressed if they were in English classes than if they were in other classrooms or lessons. Krashen (1982, p. 31) has written that "low anxiety appears to be conducive to second language acquisition, whether measured as personal or classroom anxiety".

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The participants of this research were 65 second grade, year 11, students at SMA Negeri 5 Banda Aceh. They were selected by purposive sampling by the researcher which determined the number of participants in the study. The researcher took three classes from the second grade, especially science classes that were taught by the same teacher to make it easier for her to collect the data. The researcher used the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) questionnaire developed and modified from Horwitz et al. (1986) and Yahya (2013) as her instrument for obtaining the data. In analyzing the data, the researcher used coding and averages in percentages.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The data obtained from the questionnaires revealed that communication apprehension was the factor causing the highest level of anxiety amongst students when speaking English in the classrooms with 71% from sixty five students experiencing it when speaking English in the classroom. The second, third and fourth positions were occupied by the fear of negative evaluation with 53%, test anxiety with 48%, and the anxiety about English classes with 39%.

The researcher's research findings were in line with the results from research findings conducted by previous researchers, such as Thaher (2005), Amogne and Yigzaw (2013), and Zakaria and Hassan (2015) which revealed that communication apprehension was the anxiety factor that most often appeared and caused students to not want to speak English in the front of the classroom. Communication apprehension led students to have difficulty with speaking fluently and correctly. Disturbances that appeared as starting to panic when asked to speak English without any preparation, shy to speak in front of classmates and anxiety when asked to express opinions in English. These students also felt nervous when speaking English which led to forgetfulness of things that they already knew before, and reluctance to speak in English even when they knew with certainty that what they would present was correct. These students also felt strange internal disruptions such as trembling and feeling their heart pounding when they knew that the teacher would ask them to speak English in the front of the classroom. All these disturbances were caused by the communication apprehension factor that made the students feel insecure or not confident to speak English. Communication apprehension leads students to be anxious when

speaking English in groups especially in public, and anxious when listening or studying English messages orally (Horwitz et al., *ibid*).

Besides disturbing the students in speaking English, communication apprehension also made the process of mastering English speaking skills more difficult for these students. This was because the communication apprehension factor hindered the students when they wanted to speak English, they felt anxious to speak English to anyone. Anxiety when having to speak English can cause difficulties that impede some students when learning English (Thaher, 2005). Moreover, people who have a high communication apprehension factor tend to show strange behavior while talking English. People with high communication apprehension factor use more non-verbal communication than verbal communications that may cause them to have a negative image with an interlocutor (McCroskey, 1976). That is why students with high communication apprehension prefer to avoid talking with others in English because they feel marginalized when speaking English.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Conclusions

This research was focused on the investigation of anxiety phenomena when speaking or having to speak English in the classroom that are suffered by many students, and which make them reluctant to speak English in front of others because of the anxiety they experience while doing so. There are four anxiety factors in speaking which cause students to be reluctant and anxious to speak English in the classroom, namely communication apprehension factor, test anxiety factor, fear of negative evaluation factor, and finally the anxiety about English classes factor. Based on the results using the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) questionnaire, second grade students at SMA Negeri 5 Banda Aceh experienced the highest anxiety from the communication apprehension factor. Data from the questionnaire showed that 71% of the students experienced anxiety in communication apprehension followed by fear of negative evaluation 53%, test anxiety 48% and anxiety about English classes 39%.

Suggestions

The researcher has some suggestions for educators, especially English teachers as a result of this study. English teachers are expected to be able to understand the character of each of their students in their classroom, especially because the anxiety level of each student will be different one from another. The English teachers should be able to position themselves as the protectors of their students in the classroom. English teachers should be able to create a comfortable teaching-learning process for their students, rather than making the teaching-learning process become frightening and threatening to their students' self-esteem. Moreover, even when the responses of students to the teacher's questions in English are wrong and have some errors their teachers must not get angry with them. Teachers are expected to be able to positively appreciate answers and responses from every student when they are speaking English in the classroom. Right or wrong is not really a significant problem, because errors are a big part of the students' learning process. By providing positive feedback, teachers can successfully reduce the anxiety faced by students when speaking English.

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