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Factors Generating Anxiety When Learning EFL Speaking Skills

Rizaldy Hanifa*

Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Bandung, INDONESIA

Abstract

The mastery of communication skills is undeniably considered the most important aspect in modern-day EFL contexts. Nevertheless, becoming communicatively competent is particularly difficult for foreign language learners as it is influenced by a number of factors including affective factors. Among the several affective factors which affect foreign language learning especially speaking, anxiety emerges to be the crucial one that has a devastating effect on the oral performances of students. This paper reviews the speaking anxiety phenomenon in the field of foreign language learning. The possible factors that cause speaking anxiety to come into play are described and discussed in accordance with the central themes appearing from an examination of relevant literature. The central themes are (1) cognitive factors covering topics, genre, interlocutors, and processing demands; (2) affective factors dealing with feelings towards the topic and/or the participants, and also self-consciousness; and (3) performance factors concerning mode, degree of collaboration, discourse control, planning and rehearsal time, time pressure and environmental conditions. Understanding the nature of this anxiety and the sources it springs from thoroughly should help both teachers and learners to gain more insights and find ways with which to deal with anxiety in EFL classrooms.

Keywords: Foreign language anxiety, speaking anxiety, anxiety-provoking factors.

1. INTRODUCTION

The mastery of speaking becomes the most important aspect in learning a foreign language compared with the other language skills. It is claimed that a large number of

* Corresponding author, email: rizaldy_eng@student.upi.edu

learners study a language, particularly English with the aim to develop proficiency in communicating, in it by speaking (Richards & Renandya (2002) as quoted in Griffiths, 2008). Thus, it is obvious that the main goal of learning a foreign language is to be able to speak it fluently. Nevertheless, becoming communicatively competent is particularly difficult for foreign language learners as it is influenced by a number of factors including affective factors.

Among the several affective factors which affect foreign language learning especially speaking, anxiety appears to be the crucial factor that has a debilitating effect on the oral performance of students. Horwitz et al. (1986) asserted that foreign language anxiety stands for the unease, worry, nervousness and apprehension experienced when learning or using a foreign language. They also add that learners may be good in learning other skills, but they may have a 'mental block' when they come to learn to speak the foreign language in public. Similarly, Tanveer (2007) emphasized that feelings of anxiety, apprehension and nervousness are commonly expressed by foreign language learners in learning to speak a foreign language in public. These feelings are deemed to be potentially negative and have a detrimental effect on their communications in their target language. Speaking anxiety inhibits students from speaking. Students who suffer from anxiety appear to encounter difficulties in concentrating and mastering the goals for education than other students which then results in poor performance and poor achievements (Brown, 2004; Gani et al., 2015; Yalçın & İnceçay, 2014).

Most EFL students likely experience anxiety in speaking and communicating in public in a foreign language. Therefore, it is necessary to better understand how to master foreign language anxiety (FLA) which can play an important role in mastering speaking competence, by taking a closer look at the nature and possible causes of it. This paper aims to provide insight into different factors generating FLA for EFL learners in learning speaking skills, which include cognitive, affective, and performance factors. It is expected that information gained from this study will give meaning and understanding to EFL teachers so that they can create and provide a positive learning environment that will contribute to reducing FLA and will encourage learners to become more competent when performing speaking.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Cognitive Factors

Cognitive factors can possibly trigger students' anxiety when speaking a foreign language. Such factors deal with certain areas which cover topic, genre, interlocutors, and processing demands. The first important thing that EFL learners should do before communicating with others is to be familiar with their topic. Basically, cognitive factors focus on students' background knowledge as it influences students' speaking performance. EFL students are highly likely to face problems in generating ideas if they are required to talk about unfamiliar topics. Tuan and Mai (2015) along with Kasbi and Shirvan (2017) identified lack of topical knowledge as the cause of high speaking anxiety that made students speak very little, or not at all, as they could not think of anything to say, and became unwilling to participate in the speaking classroom. Furthermore, the speaking topics should correspond to the cognitive level

of the students; otherwise, it could hamper the students' ability to speak well. Students are highly likely to be anxious when they get input which is above their capacity to respond (Mouhoubi-Messadh, 2017), which means that fear of incomprehension of the content can generate anxiety. In regard to this, Anandari (2015) stated that the major cause of anxiety experienced by EFL learners was inability to master the content comprehensively. Thus, as suggested by Al-Nouh et al. (2015), the students must be allowed to choose their own topics because familiar topics will provide greater comprehension for them and hence will lower their anxiety.

Familiarity with the genre is the next factor that should be taken into account. Thornbury (2005) suggested various dimensions for different speaking events in order to classify different speaking genres, namely transactional and interpersonal speaking, interactive and non-interactive speaking, and planned and unplanned speaking. Learners are expected to have a clear concept of those different speaking genres because each of them has its own characteristics and levels of difficulties. Anxiety is also influenced by the speaking genre. A number of studies reveal foreign language anxiety mostly arises when students are urged to do an oral production task publicly, like giving a presentation, due to lack of familiarity with that particular speaking genre (Anandari, 2015; Brooks & Wilson, 2015; Raja, 2017). This causes students to feel uncomfortable, shy, and worried while speaking in front of others which then influence the students' ability to control their body movements, facial expressions, and hand gestures.

Another cognitive factor that is considered to be the source of speaking anxiety is connected to interlocutors. Patel and Jain (2008) stated that one of the primary functions of language is communication. Communication is the interaction between two people or more to get or provide information needed. Therefore, the ideas being talked about should be clearly understandable and failure in communication has been reported to be anxiety-breeding by most EFL students (Anandari, 2015; Kayaoğlu & Sağlamel, 2013). Students worry too much that the audience will not comprehend their speech. Moreover, Raja (2017) found that the size of the audience also played a major role on students' performance. Audience size has a strong impact on a student's performance and level of nervousness as the student may feel it will be difficult to handle the audience interest, especially when there is a very big audience. Anxiety emerges as the students think their audience will feel bored with their performance. They start to think that their speaking is not interesting enough. In addition, interlocutors' behavior is claimed to contribute to generate speaking anxiety as well. Studies conducted by Mak (2011), Subasi (2010), Melouah (2013), and Sadeghi et al. (2013) highlight that interlocutors' reaction to the learners' errors and their manner of error correction have been found to be significantly influential in creating a stressful environment for foreign language learners. Being corrected while speaking can be a serious problem as it leads to loss of confidence.

The last source of anxiety related to cognitive factors goes to the demands and stresses of learning a foreign language. Learning to speak a foreign language involves complex mental processing. In order to communicate well, EFL learners must acquire knowledge and competence in certain language components, namely: grammar, vocabulary, comprehension, fluency and pronunciation (Brown, 2004). Students should know what they want to say. Moreover, they must be able to pronounce the words clearly. Then, they must know much relevant vocabulary and must be able to put it in a correct order. Once students, especially those who lack self-confidence and

low self-esteem, encounter linguistic difficulties, they tend to end up becoming anxious. As [Sadeghi et al. \(2013\)](#) and [Melouah \(2013\)](#) pointed out, less confident learners usually underestimate their linguistic knowledge and they are not sure of their own capabilities when speaking. Some linguists (e.g. [Kasbi & Shirvan, 2017](#); [Mukminin et al., 2015](#); [Rahman, 2017](#); [Sadeghi et al., 2013](#)) underline lack of a rich vocabulary and knowledge of grammar and collocation, particularly in the arrangement of words in a correct order are linguistic factors that can ruin confidence and cause the emergence of anxiety. This happens because the students are too concerned with the quality of their appearance and become worried about the consequences of failing in the course ([Alsowat, 2016](#)).

2.2 Affective Factors

Other sources of foreign language speaking anxiety are derived from affective factors. Unlike cognitive factors which refer to students' thinking processes, affective factors belong to the feelings and personality of the learners. This paper draws attention to two major concerns, feelings toward the topic and/or the interlocutors and self-consciousness. Every language learner needs to bear in mind that knowledge of the topic must be acquired if she wants to speak confidently. [Rai \(2010\)](#) asserted that the basic preparation that needs to be done before communicating to others is having a good understanding about the topic. [Kasbi and Shirvan \(2017\)](#), in their study, discovered that lack of topical knowledge which caused high speaking anxiety was actually influenced by the interest of the students. Lack of interest in certain topics discouraged them from seeking out more information about the topic. Consequently, the students became anxious when they were asked to speak for they had no idea what to talk about.

FLA in learning EFL speaking also appears as a result of feelings towards interlocutors. In the context of an EFL classroom, communication occurs mostly between the learners and their teacher. Therefore, the learners' relationship with their teacher significantly influences their anxiety. A study done by [Sadeghi et al. \(2013\)](#) reported that instructor's behavior like being bad-tempered or short-tempered or too serious placed a great deal of stress on their students. One finding that is relevant came from [Alsowat \(2016\)](#) and [Mouhoubi-Messadh \(2017\)](#) who found that one source of anxiety shared by students in the classroom was fear of failure to speak English to teachers as they worried over the teacher's negative reactions. This could lead the students to have a negative attitude towards their teacher. In addition to the teacher's behavior, peer judgment can be the other significant source of students' anxiety. Students usually suffer from FLA when they feel they could be viewed negatively in the eyes of others ([Melouah, 2013](#); [Mouhoubi-Messadh, 2017](#); [Mukminin et al., 2015](#); [Rahman, 2017](#)). Potentially destructive responses from others make students anxious and hesitant to speak; for example, fear of being laughed at or mocked, or judged as be superior by others once they try to communicate in English with their friends or teachers. These anxious students could view practicing speaking in public as a threat rather than a chance to improve their communication skills. For that reason, establishing a good relationship with their teacher and other classmates is important, in order to decrease students' anxiety, influence their judgement, and eventually develop their communicative competence ([Kasbi & Shirvan, 2017](#); [Muslem, 2015](#)).

The arousal of anxiety in foreign language learning is considerably influenced by individuals' consciousness as well. Some learners experience intense feelings of apprehension, tension, and even fear, when they know they are going to be evaluated, particularly for an oral performance. Horwitz et al. (1986) and Young (1990) affirmed that test anxiety can make individuals have unpleasant emotions. A large number of students are reported to feel fearful during a language test (see Al-Nouh et al., 2015; Alsowat, 2016; Kayaoğlu & Sağlamel, 2013). Testing seems to be stressful for some students in that the grades obtained are believed to be representative of the overall knowledge of the learners. In this regard, Sadeghi et al. (2013) and Yalçın and İnceçay (2014), found that anxiety commonly comes out as the fear of failing in their performance. This becomes more serious as students like to compare themselves with other students (Aydoğan et al., 2013; Gkonou, 2011). Therefore, students need to be made aware of the criteria used for assessing their performances in order to help them prepare well and to decrease their anxiety about tests.

2.3 Performance Factors

The remaining sources which leads students to be burdened with FLA about speaking are performance factors. These factors entail some particular circumstances. According to Horwitz et al. (1986), one factor that supports FLA in the classroom is communication apprehension. People with communication apprehension typically have trouble to speak with others and it is safe to say that students who are highly anxious may experience great fear in every EFL communication. However, the degree of anxiety will vary depending on the speaking mode. A number of studies had verified that doing extensive speaking like performing a presentation in public can be more difficult and is likely to generate more anxiety than having a conversation. Singh (2012) observed that students with average performance had communication fright as the major hurdle in their way to success owing to the fact that they could not handle the fear of speaking before a group. Other scholars (e.g. Anandari, 2015; Rahman, 2017; Raja, 2017) have also found that speaking anxiety mostly emerged when they had to speak in public. As a consequence, many students tended to feel uncomfortable, shy, frustrated, helpless, and embarrassed when speaking in front of others.

The second circumstance involves the degree of collaboration. Performing a speaking task on your own is generally harder than doing it with colleagues because in the former case you cannot count on peer support. As students believe the task is going to be more difficult to deal with, their anxiety will increase substantially. This means that having to perform individually makes students more anxious as they might not gain much input as well as feedback that would help them in improving their performance. A study done by Kasbi and Shirvan (2017) found that the mistakes made by students would also facilitate their language development if the students received appropriate feedback from others. Furthermore, Ellis (2012) claimed that language production will be less threatening if students are able to work in groups where they are under less pressure to individually produce the language spontaneously.

Another issue worth commenting on is the students' apprehensiveness resulting from discourse control. It is true that the current learning paradigm emphasizes more on fostering learners' autonomy (see Benson, 2007; Lengkanawati, 2017; Renandya & Widodo, 2016). The growing emphasis on students' autonomy has changed the center of gravity from the teacher-centered approach into a student-centered approach.

Nonetheless, this transformation is not fully implemented and in some cases it is quite burdensome (Kayaoğlu & Sağlamel, 2013). For that reason, some EFL classrooms still accentuate teachers' authority. It should be stressed that being subject to someone's control is difficult. Students can possibly become frightened about not being able to control what is happening in oral communication activities.

The next source of foreign language speaking anxiety lies in planning and rehearsal time. Doing rehearsals helps students to improve both their fluency and the accuracy of their speaking. In terms of fluency, practice can lead them to speak naturally and smoothly. When it comes to accuracy, learners' pronunciation, intonation, and grammar will be improved. Hence, having adequate preparation is undeniably essential. Mak (2011), Sadeghi et al. (2013), and Tuan and Mai (2015) noted ill-preparedness as an anxiety-provoking factor. Students' performances are highly likely to be unsuccessful if they have to give oral productions without preparation. Moreover, Brooks and Wilson (2015) detected the cause that made learners did not want to speak was the lack of opportunities to practice. In view of that, the students would not get to experience the positive impact that practicing can have on their language ability. It is important to underline that the more experience of speaking EFL that students have, the less apprehensive they will be when speaking in that language.

Furthermore, time pressure is also categorized to affect students' speaking anxiety. Time is an important matter that every speaker should pay more attention to, especially in extensive speaking. According to Rai (2010), the length of time taken by a communication event influences the quality of the communication. In this case, talking too much can be tiring and boring; while too short may be inadequate. Therefore, a good speaker is expected to have the ability to manage the time. Anxiety arises if students find there is a degree of urgency since it increases the difficulty for them. The study by Tuan and Mai (2015) found performance condition including time pressure can be the factor that affects one's speaking performance. In other words, time limitation can cause the students to perform less than optimally.

The last group of factors which have a big effect on foreign language anxiety are environmental conditions. In an academic context, environmental conditions typically focus more on the culture of learning. Culture can have a big effect on learning processes, especially, learning a foreign language. In this theme, the culture of learning concentrates on pedagogical practice. The way that a teacher provides the language inputs to the learners will influence how they perceive the concepts of learning and eventually will have an impact on students' anxiety. Mukminin et al. (2015) in their study reported that the language learning environment which focused on a teacher-centered style of teaching influenced the students' ability to speak. This can account for various concerns like students' unwillingness to participate and having no courage to initiate communication, since their teachers were too dominant in the classroom. Students also tend to be anxious if they are taught with unfamiliar methods of teaching (Alsowat, 2016). Hence, particular teaching methods must be selected carefully.

Another part of learning culture consists of pedagogical objectives. Every educational institution has its own teaching objectives. Anxious students are commonly found in the institutions that do not promote oral communications. Kasbi and Shirvan (2017), who conducted a study on EFL learners in Iran, discovered that their aim of learning English was to pass the university entrance exam, which then made the students more concerned with the written tests instead of with improving

their speaking ability. Another study by Mestan (2017), that identified the sources of anxiety of Turkish students, pointed out that most of the public schools where students learn English did not promote oral communication but focused on the exams held by the schools. Such situations cause large numbers of students to become anxious at the time of speaking since they are not given opportunities to learn to speak in public, competently, in their education system.

Another instructional policy that can cause EFL students to struggle with anxiety when having to speak in public is any prohibition of using their L1. This means that students are required to communicate entirely using their target language. This obviously will create a great burden for these students specifically those who are in the initial steps of learning. This issue has been proven by Mak (2011) and Kasbi and Shirvan (2017). Additionally, it is important to note that some education systems can create a competitive atmosphere which is not necessarily beneficial in an EFL setting. Competition in education is considered to be one of the sources which can generate anxiety (Kasbi & Shirvan, 2017; Kayaoğlu & Sağlamel, 2013). As judgement by other learners is deemed to be very important in a competitive system, targeting of better results becomes the students' desired goal. However, once students fall behind their peers, they can feel in pain, fearful, upset, helpless and even ashamed. These possibilities indicate the need for the students to have a highly suitable environment, with lots of encouragement and support so that they will be able to learn and to develop their language ability to the fullest.

3. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Having students who experience considerable levels of anxiety when asked to speak in public in the classroom has been regarded as more likely to occur in an EFL context. It is an unavoidable problem in the EFL teaching-learning processes. It is not only a hindrance for learners in learning and producing communication in a foreign language, but also a barrier in teaching that teachers must deal with. There are different causes that generate foreign language anxiety (FLA) and its consequences are detrimental to students' learning and to their oral productions. This article has attempted to explore a range of issues deemed critical to better understand the sources of speaking anxiety which highlight cognitive, affective, and performance factors. Cognitive factors involve familiarity with the topic, the speaking genres, the interlocutors, and the process demands. While, affective factors come to grips with learners' feelings and attitudes toward the topic and/or the interlocutors. Affective factors also address the self-consciousness of the students like being put on the spot or knowing that they are being evaluated. Mode, degree of collaboration, discourse control, planning, rehearsals and having time for rehearsal, time pressure to speak and environmental conditions are performance factor concerns. Therefore, it becomes apparent that foreign language speaking anxiety is a complex phenomenon.

The present paper is expected to give meaning and understanding to teachers so that they can create and provide a learning environment that contributes to make their learners become less anxious when speaking in public by reflecting on the causes of FLA. This article also calls much attention to the importance of continued research into how FLA influences language learning and how to deal with it. The present study may inspire other researchers to conduct further studies on language anxiety,

particularly its sources. Aside from that, other teachers/researchers can also study strategies used by both students and teachers regarding FLA which occur in their classrooms as they might work on the problems of FLA differently. These issues surely will have significant implication for pedagogical improvement, especially in the area of foreign language learning.

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THE AUTHOR

Rizaldy Hanifa was born in Banda Aceh, Indonesia, in 1991. He completed his Bachelor's degree at the Study Program of English Education, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education at Syiah Kuala University in 2014. He has been teaching English for about three years and doing some researches on this field. He is an awardee of Indonesia Endowment Fund for Education (LPDP) Scholarship and he is currently continuing his study at Indonesia University of Education for a Master degree. He is taking the English Education Program. His research interests are in EFL methodology, language assessment, and language acquisition.