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ENGLISH LANGUAGE SPEAKING ANXIETY AMONG COMMUNITY COLLEGE LEARNERS: HOW CAN IT BE OVERCOME?

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Abstract

Language anxiety is a common phenomenon that most of the language learners have gone through. The level of anxiety varies from person to person. Learners usually become anxious when they are not the native speakers of a particular language, but are required to learn or use the language. Learners demonstrate poor speaking performance because they are not competent with the target language. This study aims to investigate the factors affecting speaking anxiety among the learners, the common factors of anxiety and to observe strategies employed by learners to overcome their fear of speaking the English language. Interviews were conducted with the selected respondents in the Community Colleges in Sabah and Community Colleges in Kedah. The data obtained were

transcribed and analyzed using discourse approach. The findings indicated that lack of vocabulary and fear of negative evaluation was the major factors of anxiety in speaking English language. Most learners employed an imitation strategy to practice speaking in English and to reduce the fear of speaking the English language. This study suggests that English teachers are the crucial main motivators to alleviate speaking anxiety and utilizing them in pedagogical context.

Keywords

Anxiety, Language Anxiety, Speaking Anxiety

1. Introduction

There is no doubt that majority second language learners experience different degrees of anxiety when they are asked to express themselves in front of the class or other people (Yahya, 2013). Language anxiety is a common phenomenon that most language learners have experienced; such level of anxiety varies from person to person. Learners usually become anxious when they are not native speakers of a particular language but are required to learn or use the said language.

Today, English is considered as the world's most dominant language and is recognized as the world's lingua franca (Ansari, 2015). While English is considered as a second language in Malaysia and all Malaysians are required to learn it in schools at least eleven years a large majority still feel anxious when they are required to use this language especially for speaking purposes at tertiary level.

2. Research Background

English is the language of international communication and it is widely used in Malaysia. It is anticipated that with the growing trend of globalization, this country will face stiffer competition from other foreign countries (Lian and Mardziah, 2014). Malaysian students thus need to be well equipped with a solid education foundation and in training to remain competitive including the ability to communicate effectively in English. As the most important second language in Malaysia, English is extensively used in education system from primary up to tertiary level.

It is also widely used in various fields' professions such as medical, engineering, legal and business. Therefore, it is very crucial for Malaysian students to be proficient in English so that they can use the language efficiently for academic purposes and later in professional settings.

Students who are proficient in English will have better chances to be employed by multinational companies after they have graduated as most employers consider both excellent

academic achievement as well as proficiency in second languages such as English and Mandarin, to name a few. Companies nowadays do not only select the best graduates who can deliver technical skills but also those that possess soft skills. These soft skills include the ability to communicate in English effectively. In fact, even job interviews are now conducted in English. Thus, confidence in speaking is very important to graduates because this shows that they are suited for the job. In a nutshell, English becomes students' second most important language that will help them to excel in their study and to prepare them for the competitive job market.

3. Problem Statement

The Community College learners are required to use English extensively for academic purposes; most academic materials are written in English and some subjects are taught in English. Moreover, the use of English as a medium of instruction in class requires students to be proficient in the second language. Despite having learned English for 11 years in schools, students are still unable to use the language effectively.

From the researchers' observation, most students have problem in speaking English language either during English class or outside the class. It can be more stressful when they are expected to speak in English before fluency is achieved. Krashen, who was interviewed by Young (1992) stated that speaking can cause high anxiety level and the reason for this is that teachers often expect beginners to perform beyond their acquire competence. In early stages, teachers force learners to break the silent period before they are ready and they have to use certain aspects of language that they have not yet acquired subconsciously. As a result, learners will show poor speaking performance because they are not competent in using the target language.

A student who believes that one must never say anything in English until it can be said correctly will probably avoid speaking most of the time. Indeed, some learners prefer to keep quiet during English lessons because they are reluctant to speak in English. Anxious learners tend to think about negative responses from other people and the situation becomes worse if they cannot control their anxiety. In order to overcome this problem, teachers should make learning context less stressful for students and use suitable teaching methods that can help learners to minimize their anxiety in second language classroom.

Every learner has his or her own anxiety especially in language learning. Teacher should help learners to cope with anxiety because this can hinder them from performing well in the second language. In this study, the researchers aim to determine students' perceptions towards the feeling

of anxiety that they experienced while learning a second language and to investigate student's anxiety levels caused by speaking English as a second language. In addition, this study also seeks to identify the type of activities that may cause high anxiety level in speaking.

4. Research Purpose

The purpose of this research is to study how Community College learners can alleviate English language speaking anxiety with minimal intervention from the teacher.

5. Research Objectives

This research is guided by the following objectives:

1. To study the sources of anxiety among English as second language learners;
2. To gather common anxiety faced by the learners;
3. To study the strategies that they can utilize to overcome the fear of speaking English

6. Research Questions

The researchers have chosen to follow this line of investigation with three particular questions:

1. What are the sources of anxiety among English as second language learners?
2. What is the common anxiety faced by the learners?
3. What strategies are employed by the learners to overcome the fear in speaking English?

7. Significance of the Research

The number of researches on language speaking anxiety issues are increasing and this issue is frequently discussed because of its effects on learners' performance in second language learning and achievement (Yahya, M., 2013). This research will be of considerable significance among English language teachers, educators and students of English as a second language due the potential negative impacts of language speaking anxiety on learner's language domain performance, attitudes and perceptions of language teaching in general (Mohammad Shaukat Ansari, 2015).

The findings of the current research will also shed some light on the English language speaking anxiety associated with the learners in Community Colleges in Sabah and Community Colleges in Kedah in order to assist English language instructors to be more aware of the common sources of anxiety which lead to speaking anxiety among learners. The findings will also help

English language instructors to identify the right strategies to cope with this problem. Furthermore, the findings could enable English language instructors to develop approaches and practices for working with Community College learners. Finally, English language instructors can help learners to apply effective strategies to overcome their fear in speaking English.

8. Literature Review

8.1 Language Anxiety

Hashemi and Abbasi (2013) stated that when anxiety is related to learners' second or foreign language learning process, this is known as second/foreign language anxiety. Young (1991) added that language anxiety involves a complex, multifaceted reality which may affect the learners in terms of their culture, previous language learning process, learners' characters, and classroom environment. Horwitz et al. (1986) expanded the definition saying that language anxiety refers to 'a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours which are connected to learners' language learning system. Horwitz (2001) added a psychological dimension to language anxiety stating that it is a factor that creates a negative effect on learners' psychology. MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) added 'the feeling of tension and apprehension' appear when learners use a language. It can thus be said that language anxiety is a complicated psychological negative feeling, attitude and belief that may aroused in learners based on different issues when they learn or use a language.

8.2 Factors Associating with Foreign Language Anxiety

Speaking in foreign language is considered to be the most common anxiety-inducing factor

(Zhang & Zhong, 2012). Factors responsible for foreign language speaking anxiety are as follow:

8.2.1 Lack of Competence in Foreign Language Linguistic Items

MacIntyre (1999) stated that sometimes grammar of the target language becomes responsible for creating anxiety; when learners face problems understanding grammar they become anxious. Kayaoğlu and Sağlamel (2013) also added that if the learners have lack of grammatical knowledge of the target language and do not use it regularly they face trouble in speaking which may make them anxious. Kayaoğlu and Sağlamel also indicated that creates anxiety in language learners. Participants in their study stated that when they cannot pronounce a word correctly or do not have knowledge about the pronunciation of any particular word; they mispronounce it which makes them uncomfortable and thereby anxious. Hashemi and Abbasi (2013) also added that learners' first language pronunciation sometimes interrupts their second /foreign language

pronunciation which is also a source of language anxiety producing factor to some learners.

Kayaoğlu and Sağlamel found that among all difficulties related to linguistic items that a language learner may face, vocabulary is the most prominent one because lack of vocabulary in the target language leads to anxiety. When learners cannot use suitable word in the target language due to lack of knowledge or cannot remember the word, they become anxious. As such, when learners face difficulties in understanding and using the linguistics components of second language or lacking knowledge about these items, they may feel anxious.

8.2.2 Fear of being Inferior

Fear of making mistake is also a source that creates language anxiety in some learners. When second language learners believe that making errors can make them look funny or inferior to others they become anxious (Kayaoğlu&Sağlamel, 2013,). Similarly Gregerson (2003) reported that sometimes language learners feel anxious because of the ‘fear of being laughed at’ by their peers. According to Hashemi and Abbasi (2013), learners who believe that they will lose their ‘positive self-image or self- identity’ if they say something wrong in the target language, feel great anxiety while speaking. Also, learners who are very much concerned about their self-image become nervous when they are asked to speak in the target language because they believe that making any mistake may affect their images that others form about them (Tseng, 2012). It can thus be said that learners may become anxious when their errors or mistakes lead them to an inferior position in front of others.

8.2.3 Fear of Performance in Test Situation

Anxiety during tests is a common feature that most anxious second language learners have; learners become anxious when they measure the risk of failing in test (Kayaoğlu&Sağlamel, 2013). According to Tanveer (2007), some foreign language learners have a tendency to memorise their presentation speech and try to remember every word that they have prepared before. When they get stuck or face problem in remembering they become highly anxious.

8.2.4 Competitive Attitudes in Language Class

In Kayaoğlu and Sağlamel’s (2013) study, participants reported that competitive classroom environment sometimes create learners’ anxiety. In such environment, learners try to do better than their peers and when they fail to do so they become anxious. Zhang and Zhong (2012) also supported this by adding that anxious learners usually have a tendency to compare their own language proficiency level with their peers. Anxious students usually have a perception that their

peers are more proficient in the target language than them (Zhang & Zhong, 2012, 28). As such, competitive nature in classroom is an important factor of foreign language anxiety.

8.2.5 Fear of Interaction with Proficient Speaker

According to Tseng (2012), learners may become anxious when they are asked to communicate with someone who has higher target language competence than them. Hashemi and Abbasi (2013) added that while communicating with language teacher, foreign language learners sometimes become nervous as their teacher's proficiency level in target language is higher than theirs. The authors also reflected on unequal foreign language competence between teacher and students being perceived as an 'unequal status' between them and considered this as one of the most common sources of language anxiety.

8.2.6 Fear of being Prominent

Tseng (2012) mentioned that speaking activities like 'short talk or presentation' in target language are also source of learners' anxiety. Some learners become anxious in speaking activities because they believe that if they speak in class they will be targeted. Language learners are afraid of giving presentations as they have to speak in the target language in front of their peers (Zhang & Zhong, 2012). To sum up, it can be said that learners' fear of being prominent in front of others is responsible for creating foreign language anxiety.

8.3 Social Factors

Hashemi and Abbasi (2013) found that certain social factors are responsible for making learners anxious; second language learners sometimes face difficulties in improving their communicative competence because they do not get enough exposure to use the language in their own country. Tseng (2012) mentioned that when parental pressure on learners to do well in foreign language courses it makes them anxious as well; learners feel anxious when their parents want them to be proficient in the target language. Some learners also feel uncomfortable and anxious while talking to speakers of opposite gender although this 'gender related communication apprehension' may not appear in all as it depends on learners' personal perception (Tseng, 2012). To recap, social factors like gender, family pressure for getting good grades and lack of exposure to use the target language are responsible for creating language anxiety.

8.3.1 Teacher Persuaded Language Anxiety

According to Kayaoğlu and Sağlamel (2013), learners' language anxiety sometimes derives from the nature of their teacher. When language teachers follow strict ways to correct errors and do

not create positive classroom environment for the learners, they may become anxious. Zhang and Zhong (2012) pointed out that learners are not afraid because of their mistakes are being corrected - they are afraid of the ways language teachers use to correct their mistakes. When students make errors while speaking, some teachers tend to interrupt them and instantly correct them before the students get the chance to correct their errors themselves. Teachers' interruption while learners speak in front of the class is responsible for causing loss of self-confidence and creating language anxiety. As such, it can be said that learners' foreign language anxiety can stem from teachers' attitude, teaching style, their role and their decision in relation to classroom management.

8.3.2 Role of Learners' Background Knowledge

Kayaoğlu and Sağlamel (2013) conducted a research on language anxiety on university students in Turkey and found that the participants' previous English language learning process is not effective to learn the language properly. Tseng (2012) also found that learners who have not learnt English for communicative purposes in their previous learning feel anxious when their foreign language teacher uses communicative approach at university level because learners have to speak in the target language when taught using communicative approaches. Kayaoğlu and Sağlamel' s (2013) study also pointed out that one needs to have a background knowledge about a subject or it would be difficult for one to talk about the subject in the required target language; such situation is responsible for creating anxiety among language learners. It can thus be said that learners' previous knowledge about the target language and the way they practice it can be responsible for creating language anxiety.

8.3.3 Learners' High Ambition

According to Zhang and Zhong (2012), learners' 'unrealistic high standard' is the main reason for creating language anxiety; meanwhile, the use of tapes or videos featuring native speakers' communication in speaking classes is sometimes responsible for making learners anxious. Using such materials can cause high anxiety among language learners as students fail to achieve expected mastery of the target language as exhibited by native speakers due to lack of required language competence. Simply put, learners' high ambition to achieve native-like competence is an important factor towards creating language anxiety.

9. Research Methodology

9.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the overall methodology employed in this research. This research utilizes qualitative method design with interview to obtain the required data. The interview will be conducted in two phases, namely individual interview and focus group interview at Community Colleges in Sabah and Community Colleges in Kedah. Data obtained from the interviews will be analysed based on discourse analysis approach.

9.2 Research Design

The research utilizes qualitative method permission obtained only allows observation of a language class in Community Colleges in Sabah and Kedah. Qualitative method design has several benefits for research studies - it offers insights and illuminates meanings that expand its readers' experiences. These insights can be construed as future research. Hence, qualitative method plays an important role in advancing a field's knowledge base. Because of its strengths, qualitative method is a particular appealing design for applied fields of study such as education, social work, administration, health et cetera. The processes, problems and programs of an applied field can be examined to bring about understanding that can affect and perhaps even improve practices. Qualitative method has also proven to be particularly useful for studying educational innovations, evaluating programs, and informing policy.

9.3 Population and Sampling

This research will be conducted at Community Colleges in Sabah and Kedah. These Community Colleges are one of the established TVET learning institutions in Malaysia governed by the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia. This research will be conducted at these institution as due to easy access to the intended respondents. The Community Colleges in Sabah and Kedah had been established since 2001 and currently there are 95 Community Colleges in Malaysia.

The sample for this research will consist of learners from each Community College in Sabah and Kedah. 10 respondents will be selected for the individual interviews from each Community College. The respondents are selected based on their English language SPM (Malaysian Certificate of Education) - only those who obtained grade B able to speak in English during the oral presentation test in the classroom will be selected as respondents. 5 volunteer respondents will also be involved in focus group interviews.

9.4 Research Instruments

a. Individual Interviews

Respondents will be interviewed individually in two weeks' time; from 10 to 20 minutes. All interviews are conducted in Malay language and tape-recorded.

b. Focus Group Interviews

Fifteen respondents from the three certificate programmes will participate in focus group discussion which last for about twenty minutes on voluntary basis.

9.5 Data Collection

The individual and focus group interviews shall be used as the data. Semi-structured interviews are conducted before class, after class or during class break. The interviews are conducted in the respondents' native language (Malay), in order to overcome incapability of self-expression in the target language (Subasi, 2010). Each interview takes between 10 to 15 minutes and will be audio-taped. The respondents are required to report their reasons of feeling anxious in oral practices to determine the possible sources leading to anxiety in speaking English language. They are also asked to specify strategies that they employ to overcome fear of speaking English. All interviewees are required to fill in a consent form each agreeing to participate in the research. The interview data is analysed through discourse analysis.

9.6 Data Analysis

Qualitative data are gathered from semi-structured interview conducted with 45 individual interviews and 15 respondents participating in focus group interviews to obtain a comprehensive data and wide understanding about their sources of speaking anxiety, their commonalities in sources of anxiety and strategies to overcome fear of speaking English. Audio recordings from the individual and focus group interviews of both learners and teachers will be transcribed. After the interviews are transcribed, the data are analysed using discourse analysis (Diao&Sharmala, 2013). The general and vital points, themes and patterns will be established from the data. The themes are cross-checked and coded by the researcher to ensure inter-reliability.

10. Result and Discussion

The results revealed that the Community College learners in Community Colleges in Sabah and Kedah are generally experiencing anxiety when speaking in the English language. They are shy, afraid of being in public, anxious of speaking inaccurately and lack of self-confidence while speaking in English language. This is because English is not their second language and their main language for

instruction in college. They generally have a common source of anxiety which are; lack of vocabulary knowledge in English, afraid of mispronouncing English words, unable to understand English words, afraid of making wrong sentences in English, afraid of being laughed by peers, seldom use English language in conversation and worry about making errors in using grammar while speaking in English language. Basically, learners have demonstrated low proficiency in English and this could be a reason that increases their anxiety. Besides that, they did display expressive reactions when they made errors during the class sessions.

Finding from the study also revealed that these learners suffer from anxiety mainly in relation to communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation. They share similar reasons for anxiety such as fear of being in public, shyness, and inaccuracy when speaking. They have common coping strategies as well, such as keeping silent and avoiding eye contact. From the observation, it cannot be concluded that cultural background provides students with different reasons for anxiety when speaking and different strategies for overcoming them.

It was also found that all the learners' cause of anxiety and coping strategies are not exactly similar. It could be indicated that it is possible to find differences in causes of anxiety and coping strategies from one person to another within a particular group. The learners reported that they employed certain strategies of ways in their own preference to overcome the fear of speaking the English language such as, listen to English songs more often, read the subtitle in English movies, practice to speak English with own self, read English books, magazines and newspapers and ask their friends.

Besides that, the findings showed that learners did seek help from their English language lecturer to translate their ideas from Malay to English despite their friends. This is because, learners feel comfortable and a little braver with confidence to ask their lecturer the meaning of the words and sentences in English. One common strategies reported by the learners is, the use of dictionary frequently during English language lessons and while outside of the classroom. The learners will refer the dictionary when they encounter unfamiliar words in English and try to understand it. They mostly practice such strategies while at home and socialising in social networks, as they refer much on activities on Facebook, Wechat and Instagram. It is revealed that, most of the learners encountered unfamiliar words in English while enjoying the social media.

The findings of this study have significance for lecturers about the causes of anxiety faced by the learners and give them possible ways for mitigating anxiety while improving learners' oral

proficiency. The findings also can help lecturers to identify some of their own reactions that can possibly increase or decrease learners' anxiety of speaking in class. In addition, this study provides learners with possible anxiety provoking factors and gives them insight for reducing their own anxiety.

11. Conclusion

Research in the area of language anxiety is very important. It has been proven that productions suffers when learners are nervous, lack of self-confidence and lack of vocabulary knowledge, meaning that they are less effective communicators or speakers of the target language. Hence, this leads to lowering learners' morale. To sum up, learners at suffer from speaking anxiety in English due to various factors. The results of this study revealed that learners' lack of competence in English language, their competitive attitudes, inadequate background knowledge, the role of language teachers, learners' high ambition, social factors like lack of exposure to use the language, uneasiness to communicate with someone from opposite sex and parents' pressure are responsible for their anxiety of speaking English. Moreover, the study results also showed that learners' fear of being laughed at or a feeling of inferiority while speaking with more proficient speakers, test performance anxiety and fear of being prominent are also responsible for their English language speaking anxiety. The study also revealed how learners' English speaking anxiety affects them. All participants of the study believed that learners' personal, academic and social contexts are badly affected due to their English language speaking anxiety. Finally, the study suggested some effective ways to reduce learners' anxiety of speaking English based on language teachers' and students' opinions. The results showed that language learners can help themselves to alleviate their speaking anxiety by making friends with classmates, sharing the feeling of anxiety and practicing English language with them. Teachers can also help learners with their friendly, facilitative and positive attitude and use different activities in class to alleviate learners' English speaking anxiety.

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