Chapter 8

Anecdotes of Oral Performance among First Year English Language University Students

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INTRODUCTION

Anxiety in the Oral English Context

Learner anxiety gained significant attention as an affective variable in second language research since 1970s. Several studies indicate that "learners" affective domain does matter in the learning and teaching process" (Alico, 2015). There are different types and degrees of learner anxiety. This research focuses on the types of anxiety that generates in the face of oral performance when students are asked to perform in the target language (English). Speaking is one of the most challenging areas for language learners especially at the early stages of the language development. Many language learners experience language anxiety (Horwitz, 1986; Horwitz et al., 1986; Young, 1986; Liu, 2006). "Research in speech communication also suggests anxiety can affect an individual's performance" (Young, 1986, p. 440). Some learners exhibit their language learning challenges whereas some others keep quiet, show no response or may look negligent to the untrained eye. In this case, instructors may wrongly categorize these learners as uncaring and may give up on them. It is necessary to understand that anxiety is a complex concept. It can appear in a variety of ways and forms. "…research into the relationship of anxiety to foreign language learning has provided mixed and confusing results… suggesting that anxiety itself is neither a simple nor well-understood psychological construct" (Scovel, 1978, p.132). This dilemma is partially solved as researchers have now consensus that a little bit of anxiety is claimed to boost the learning energy which assists the learning process whereas higher levels of anxiety impedes the learning process.

Learners in different cultural contexts suffer from detrimental consequences of anxiety in language classrooms. Awan, Azher, Awan and Naz (2010) state that anxiety is a state of fear, panic and worry. Learner anxiety should be noticed by instructors and alleviating steps should be taken because unnoticed or ignored anxiety lowers learner performance. Young (1986) highlighted the effects of anxiety on second language oral production by noting that "…anxiety could materially affect an individual's avoidance behavior and the quality of language input" (p. 440) in language classroom. Also, Liu (2006) found in a Chinese educational context that one third of the Chinese students were anxious in an Oral Communication class. Also, Wu (2010) found in a U.S. secondary school context

that as many as one third of students expressed anxiety in a foreign language class. These studies as well as others indicate that foreign language anxiety is not experienced only in specific geographical locations pointing to the global significance of this topic.

Researchers agree that anxiety can be experienced by anyone who attempts to learn a new language. According to Clement, Gardner and Smythe (1997) high levels of anxiety can take one in a psychologically aroused position where the individual feels a constant state of apprehension and worry. Performance anxiety in L2 is a more common experience than previously acknowledged. Striving students sometimes cannot reach their best potential because of the interference of anxiety in their learning process. This research discusses the characteristics of anxious students as it appears in the oral and written expressions of 1st year 2nd semester university students who major in English Language Teaching. Instructor observations, instructor-learner interactions, and oral & written anecdotes of learners provide a closer understanding of the anxiety experience of language learners and consequences of anxiety in the learning process. Some practical applications are experimented in the language class. Results of the study imply pedagogical possibilities and further research for educators and researchers.

Position of English in the Turkish Educational Context

It is necessary to look at the place of English at schools in order to better understand the position of learners in the universities. According to Solak and Bayar (2015) Turkish education system valued teaching of English since the westernization efforts of Turkey and it progressively increased with the establishment of Republic of Turkey. Increasing globalization caused more interaction with other countries for technological and trade exchanges which led to increasing popularity of English teaching/learning (Doğançay-Aktuna, 1998). In 1997, 8 year compulsory education was introduced which lowered the foreign language learning age to 4th grade in elementary school. Previously there was almost no English class in elementary school curriculum. Teaching at a younger age is undertaken to take advantage of benefits associated with earlier language learning. New steps continued to be taken such as 4+4+4 educational endeavor in 2013, which included 12 year of compulsory education. 2nd grade becomes the starting age for learning English. Despite these efforts the learning of English did not improve as planned and English proficiency of learners were far from the desired level (Karahan, 2007). In comparison to other European countries Turkey is at a lower level in English proficiency. Researchers rationalize this lower performance to the over reliance on grammar-based teaching as opposed to communicatively-oriented teaching. Low English proficiency of learners are also partially due to a centralized test, TEOG (Test for Entrance to High School) which all secondary school students have to take before high school.

TEOG test score determines which high school students can attend. In this test, all school subject areas are equally tested. The courses students are tested for are English, Turkish, Mathematics, Science, Religion, and History. English teachers try to prepare their students to the exam by focusing on grammar. Little or no attention

is given to English oral proficiency, because the test does not evaluate oral proficiency. With the latest regulations TEOG test format has changed and now English, History and Religion has fewer questions than Mathematics, Science and Turkish. English has less priority and students prefer to study other subjects which are more influential in their overall score. Theoretically, it is no longer compulsory to enter this exam but if the student does not take the test, s/he automatically have lesser quality school options to choose from. Those who aim better quality schools have to take the test to compete with their peers. Thus, teachers cover a series of topics geared towards the test as dictated by the curriculum which leaves little room for creativity. Students finish high school with limited or no communicational skills in the English classes. Learners come to university with inadequate English skills. Understandably learners in universities feel different levels of anxiety in an Oral Communication class when they are called upon participation.

Anxiety: Types of Anxiety in the English Educational Context

Anxiety is a complex concept. There are different types and levels of anxieties which affect the learning process and performance in a variety of ways. Horwitz (1986) identifies three types of anxieties in the educational context which are (I) Communication Apprehension, (II) Test Anxiety, and (III) Fear of Negative Evaluation. Communication Apprehension occurs when the learner is called upon to communicate in the target language. Test Anxiety occurs when the learner needs to take a test and fear of failure causes anxiety. Fear of Negative Evaluation occurs when one is called to perform in front of a teacher, learners or other audience and the learner feels agitatio for the possibility of negative evaluation from others.

These three anxieties are relevant for this research, because an Oral Communications class involves aspects of these three anxieties. Nature of the Oral Communication class includes several incidents of performing in front of a class. Some students express high levels of anxiety at the idea of public speaking. Several students report experiencing communication apprehension. Oral Communication exam situation can include a complex array of anxieties for some students. Not only they experience communication apprehension because of the challenges of L2 communication, but also they feel the fear the possibility of failing in a test situation. In addition to these, several students fear peer judgment and negative evaluation from others.

We might not always see the signs of anxiety and can oversee the revelations of anxiety in students. Some learners have obvious anxious characteristics like shaking hands, change of voice whereas some learners keep silent, look unresponsive or careless. Instructors may wrongly label these students as unmotivated or uninterested. The concept of anxiety should be studied more closely in order to better understand the experience of anxiety born by learners. This is a classroom-based case-study aiming to better understand the characteristics of anxious students. Learning more about the experience of anxiety, anxious behavior and its consequences in the learning act, we will be able to offer some classroom strategies to better serve our anxiety-laden learners.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Questions

The research questions of the study are:

a) What are the characteristics of anxious students participating in the Oral Communications course of first year ELT (English Language Teaching) students?

b) How does anxiety affect EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners in oral performance context?

c) What are some of the pedagogical steps that could be utilized in the classroom to alleviate anxiety in speaking situations and achieve full capacity of learning?

Research Aim: Previous research already acknowledged the relationship between anxiety and performance. Several researchers agree that a little bit anxiety boost the learning capacity of the learner whereas high levels of anxiety obstruct learning. This classroom based research provides a closer look into anxiety in an actual classroom atmosphere and its impact on learning. The findings in the study can guide educators with pedagogical endeavors to reduce anxiety, increase motivation and accomplish full-capacity learning.

Participants: The course consisted of 60 students majoring in ELT (English Language Teaching) in the 2nd semestre of the1st year of university education. Ages of the students ranged between 18-28 with the exception of one student who was in her 40s. The course held three-hours long gathering once a week. The class was a heterogeneous group of learners with lower intermediate, higher intermediate as well as native and native-like speakers, even though they were all supposed to be above intermediate-level of proficiency. 34 of the students are categorized as somewhat anxious learners, who are the focus of the study. Teacher observations, teacher-learner interactions, and oral & written anecdotes of these 34 learners categorized as anxious are studied. 5 of the 34 students are assigned as highly anxious learners. These learners received the most attention in face-to-face interactions with the teacher.

Data Collection: This case study utilized qualitative data collection techniques because a detailed description of the classroom data is valued in explaining the phenomenon of the anxiety and anxiety-laden learning experience. These techniques are as the following:

(i) direct observation (in group discussions & individual and/or group performances),

(ii) one-to-one teacher-student interactions (in class & office hours), and

(iii) writing assignments (on a number of diverse topics, including reflective journaling of their language experiences).

RESULTS

The results of the study indicated that 5 of the students were experiencing extreme anxiety to the extent that they stopped their oral performance a number of times in front of the class. Their anxiety was due to (i) the fear of negative judgment

from their peers and (ii) lagging behind their peers (being much worse in proficiency than their peers) and not being as good as they should have been. The findings resemble previous studies undertaken such as Tsiplakides and Keramida (2009), and Alico (2015). In this research there were 34 students who expressed feelings of anxiety when called upon performing in front of the class. 5 of these 34 students were extremely anxious. The writings of these students indicated that approximately half of the students expressed that their performance were negatively influenced because of their anxiety. About one third of the learners who are categorized as anxious expressed that they did not always feel comfortable to speak only occasionally in class discussions. Several anxious students preferred to speak occasionally in the class sessions. Student writings and face-to-face conversations revealed that silent posture of learners is not because they did not like English or they were lazy. Their narratives indicated that they thought their oral English proficiency was not good and they feared that their peers can evaluate them negatively because of their English.

One student expressed:

"I like English. I want to be an English teacher in the future. But I don't want to speak in the lesson, my English is not very good. They will laugh to me".

Another student's writing had similar concerns:

"I dont like speaking in class because some students are too good. They are native speakers. I cannot speak like them. I feel bad".

It is possible to see that learners are concerned about what their peers think about them, their level of English. These quotes indicate that they have social image concerns. Several students expressed similar concerns of being ridiculed by higher performing students. Students were more at ease when they were speaking with the class instructor on one-on-one during office hours:

"I feel Ok now...speaking with you…, but in class I am not Ok. I want to speak…but I cannot speak. I think on my head a lot… but when I speak …I cannot say everything…"

Some students were overly concerned about creating grammatically perfect sentences that stopped them from speaking:

"I don't like speaking, because I make stupid mistakes…like tenses. I sometimes use past tense, but it should be simple present tense, I know it. I make many mistakes if I speak in the lesson"

This quotation indicates that learners overthink before they speak, because they want to create error-free speech. This also hints at the concern for being assigned a bad social image by others in the class.

"I dislike when you say speak to us a lot, because I feel bad. They speak so good…like native. I cannot speak like them. My heart beats very fast. I cannot do it…"

We can feel above speaker's low self-esteem because of the fear of losing face. She was mostly silent in class. Interestingly, both face-to-face interaction with the instructor and writings revealed that they overvalued their peers' English and undervalued their own English proficiency.

"I feel good when I speak with you. But I feel excited too much in the class".

Some students avoided eye-contact which shows unwillingness to participate. Interestingly most of the students welcomed instructors' invitation to the office hours, and did not express great levels of anxiety while speaking to the instructor.

I become nervous a lot, but... I do not show it. ...I pretend that I am not nervous... it helps me to speak"

As the above quote indicates there are also some successful attempts tried by students to control their anxiety. This particular student was able to overcome her anxiety by pretending.

"My heart beats faster when I participate. But I say to myself, you have to speak. If you don't participate, your English will not be good. So, I force me and I encourage me. But I feel very nervous always".

Student in the above quote directs her anxiety into participation by reminding herself her goals of becoming a good English teacher.

DISCUSSIONS

Implementing Pedagogical Alterations in the Classroom

After noticing that around half of the class feels some level of speech anxiety, some classroom alterations are implemented to help these students reduce their burden. These classroom measures are taken in response to student revelations in writings as well as face-to-face interactions with the instructor.

Classroom Applications and Syllabus Alterations

Since several students expressed a strong fear of mistakes, the instructor reiterated many times that mistakes help the learning process. Students are encouraged to participate without the fear of making mistakes. Teacher explained that all participation in the classroom is valued regardless of the level of accuracy or fluency. It is included in the syllabus that no one is permitted to laugh at others because of mistakes, fluency or accent issues etc. Concept of respect is highlighted in the syllabus, as well as equality of all learners.

Increased Teacher-Student Interaction in Office Hours

Teacher utilized extra office hours to give extra support to students who need it. Teacher invited students and, especially more anxious learners in hopes of providing emotional support, enabling more opportunities of speaking or allowing discussions about the course. Almost all students appreciated the attention given to them in the office hours. However, a few students never visited during the office hours.

Incorporating more Group Work, and Creating Group Presentations

Realizing that many students feel anxiety in the face of oral performances, a change is made in the syllabus and more group activities are added to the course. Instead of coming in front of the class individually, students are asked to practice speaking with their peers. Later, students are asked to come in front of the class as a group of two. This helped reduce much of the anxiety. Yet, one disadvantage was switching of students to Turkish in group activities.

Teacher Strategies of Error Correction and Progress Follow-up

Instructor adopted indirect strategies of error correction to reduce student anxiety. Instructor took note of the incorrect language uses or grammar mistakes

when individuals or groups were performing in front of the class. The instructor went through these mistakes only at the end of the class aiming to camouflage who uttered the mistakes. This indirect correction style saves student(s) from losing face, which is particularly important for shy or anxious students. Also it gave the message that fluency is valued over accuracy. Also, student grades are never shared publicly, so students had privacy about their grades and progress.

Evaluation of the Pedagogical Alterations: Positives and Negatives

Students showed more willingness to come in front of the class when asked to speak as a group. This shows that group activities were a useful strategy in lowering the anxiety especially for anxious students who would rather avoid speaking before an audience. Group performance allowed sharing of the responsibility and reduced the load of work for each individual. Also, appearing as two people in front of the class allowed fewer staring eyes on one person at a time thereby lessening the anxiety of the individual. There were some shortcomings associated with the small group activities/ group presentations: One person occasionally spoke more than the other individual. Some students received less time to speak either by choice or because of the dominance of their partner. Another unwanted consequence of the group activities was switching to mother tongue (Turkish). Also, few students disliked the idea of groupwork. They preferred doing oral performances alone. Still considering the number of people experiencing anxiety, it is worthwhile to include the option of group work as an alternative to individual performance. This way students will have the two options to choose from: individually speaking or speaking as a group.

Indirect strategies of error correction welcomed by learners. This enabled learners to not lose face in front of other learners. Student correction was delayed until after all oral performances are over. Mistakes and their corrections are mentioned at the end of the course, after all presentations were done. Not correcting instantaneously prevents the interruption of fluency. Also, having finished the presentation task, students would be able to give full attention to the teacher while she is going over mistakes. Another advantage of delaying mistakes is nobody relates teacher corrections to a particular student(s). This is particularly important for shy or anxious students. All students welcomed this intervention and no objections came from any of the students.

Students appreciated that their grades are not revealed in class (though few students were too curious and wanted to know others' grades, too). Almost everybody appreciated the privacy about their grades, and welcomed the idea of visiting the instructor's office for receiving individual feedback. However, some students never stopped to receive feedback on their oral development. Even though most students appreciated individual attention they are receiving, others chose not to take advantage of this opportunity. This shows that it is challenging to attract all students in new classroom interventions. Yet, still most of the invited students visited the instructor. Of course, new strategies need to be developed to increase the participation of all students.

Instructor made sure that she treated all students equally and provided informal cues of support for everybody. So, all presenters and performers received ample eye

contact and nodding regardless of the student grade or performance quality. Students were also pleased by the inclusion of concepts: 'respect' and 'not laughing at mistakes' of others in the syllabus. Before this implementation there was one instance of laughing at someone during a presentation because the performer was too shaky. The instructor warned the person about her behaviour. Classroom intentionally tried to be a more supportive learning ground, where everyone promised to be respectful and supportive of each other. Inviting for participation also helped increase general participation in the classroom. Students are reminded frequently that participation is vital for oral improvement.

CONCLUSIONS

Students' performance of speech improved by the end of the second semester in comparison to the previous semester. Pedagogical implementations were directly and indirectly influential in the improvement of speaking skills. Both grades and fluency rates of students showed some progress. Because, it is the second semester of the 1st year, and this means students had experienced a number of opportunities for presentation and speaking in front of the class. Going from the motto, 'practice makes perfect', it can be thought that these ample opportunities to practice fluency and accuracy skills enabled learners to develop these skills. In addition to the improvement observed in the speech of learners, we saw a drop in the anxiety of learners because of group work/group performance. Some steps are taken to make classroom more supportive and this created a more respectful learning community, which encouraged student participation. Also, teacher's reminder of the importance of participation encouraged learners to take more risks and speak more. Another strategy that assisted language learning was not correcting students on the spot as they made mistakes. This allowed for uninterrupted speech as well as full attention of students. Anxiety is a prevalent condition in language classrooms, especially in Oral Communication classes, which calls for attention from educators. Only with careful planning of the educator, we can improve the learning conditions and help our learners actualize their learning to the full capacity. The above classroom interventions are by no means unique or an end in itself. Similar steps could be tried in other contexts to better address learner needs. As this research shows no pedagogical step is perfect or all inclusive on its own, but a step towards a better teaching practice and full actualization of learning.

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