Anxiety Effects on EFL Learners When Communicating Orally

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Abstract

This study aims to report three English foreign language (EFL) students'

experiences on how anxiety affected them when communicating orally in their classroom; a

review of the literature illustrated the perspectives from which foreign language anxiety

research has been conducted. Non participant observations and direct interviews served to

explore EFL students' self-perceptions and level of self-confidence toward anxiety

experienced from activities that involved speaking and the main source of this

phenomenon.

Key words: *oral communication, affective factors, anxiety, sources of anxiety*.

Introduction

Anxiety may influence EFL learners' oral communication. According to Horwitz et

al. (1986:126) anxiety is defined as a "distinct complex phenomenon of self-perception,

beliefs, feelings and behaviours related to classroom language learning arising from the

uniqueness of the language learning process." Suffering from anxiety when speaking is a

real life issue that some students may experience at different levels and triggered by several

performance anxieties such as: "communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation" (Horwitz& Young, 1991). This study was carried out with three students in an English foreign language program at a Colombian public university, in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the effects that anxiety had on students' self-perceptions and self-confidence towards oral communication in the classroom; likewise it also attempted to find the main source of this phenomenon. I adopted a descriptive case study in which Yin (2003) explained: "this type of case study is used to describe an intervention or phenomenon and the real-life context in which it occurred." This research was guided by two questions: the grand tour question, "How does anxiety affect EFL students when communicating orally?" and the sub question, "What is the main source of anxiety?"

Literature Review

In this section of the paper I present salient definitions with regards to the terms used in my study. I also summarize and describe the findings of several previous studies related to anxiety associated with oral performance.

Affective Factors

Learning a foreign language may entail a number of challenges for learners. Affective factors seem to be permanently involved in such a process. Thus, these factors can be considered positive and negative for second language acquisition. Positive factors can be listed such as: the student's positive attitude towards learning a new language, the

teacher's motivational attitude, proficiency in the student's first language and the student's

discovery and application of similarities between the first and the second language. On the

other hand negative affective factors are: poor attitude towards learning a new language,

lack of motivation and the negative influence of teachers (Alleyne, 2010). Likewise, Wang

(2005) suggests two types of affective factors, on the one hand individual factors including

anxiety, inhibition, extroversion-introversion, self-esteem and motivation, etc.; on the other

hand, rational factors comprising empathy, classroom transaction, cross-cultural processes,

and so on. Research studies have been conducted from several areas of interest in regard to

affective factors. Kimura (2000) conducted an investigation with sophomore female

students of two different classes majoring in English at a junior college, looking for

knowledge on the use of the affective factors of the successful learners and the less

successful ones in the oral communicative tasks (Task 1 was relatively easy and Task 2 was

an unfamiliar and difficult one for the learners). She focused on two main affective factors,

"anxiety" and "high self-esteem". Results showed that "facilitating anxiety" has a good

effect in successful learners as a more risk-taking attitude arose in them as they fought the

new difficult learning task.

Oral Communication Anxiety

I based this study on the specific definitions of anxiety that Horwitz et al. (1986)

identified as a type of anxiety which is associated with L2 formal context in learning

language skills, described as a "distinct complex phenomenon of self-perceptions, beliefs,

feelings and behaviours related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness

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of the language learning process" and which is different from other forms of anxiety distinguished by psychologists and educators (Foss &Reitzel, 1988).

According to Young (1992), speaking is probably considered the most stressful skill among the four (listening, speaking, reading and writing) from the perspective of both FL teachers and learners. Hence, students involved in oral communication activities are generally prone to experience constant anxiety, especially in the classroom where the learners have little control of the communicative situation and their performance is constantly monitored by both their teacher and peers (Horwitz et al., 1986). Thus, a great deal of research has been conducted to explore the effects that anxiety has in FL students' oral production. In Colombia Fandiño (2010) conducted an action research with 17 beginner EFL students enrolled in a three-month EFL course where one of his aims was finding the obstacles and difficulties EFL learners would experience in learning activities. Findings showed that students felt more anxious when the task or exercise required a more spontaneous and authentic use of the foreign language. Students argued that speaking and pronunciation were aspects they felt more insecure and nervous about. Fandiño (2010) added: "this anxiety was characterized by avoidance, passiveness, and discomfort". Likewise Xianping (2004) carried out a study addressing issues of language anxiety and its effects on the oral performance in the classroom with eight students from a university of China. Results generally showed that anxiety may affect the quality of oral performance; the maturity of language may determine the levels of anxiety and that procrastination, fear of evaluation and over-concern of errors may be seen as three important criteria to recognize anxious and non-anxious students.

The Sources of Performance Anxiety

Horwitz& Young (1991) identified three performance anxieties. The first is: *communication apprehension*, which is a type of shyness that is felt when communicating with people and that manifests itself through anxiety, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. The next is *fear of negative evaluation* that stems from an individual's concern of being evaluated negatively, leading to the individual avoiding others' evaluations and evaluative situations. Finally *test anxiety* is defined as a type of performance anxiety that arises from fear of failure felt in academic evaluation environments. Likewise, Horwitz et al., (1986) highlighted that foreign languages require continual evaluation by the only fluent speaker in the class, the teacher. Therefore, students may also be "acutely sensitive to the evaluations, real or imagined of their peers" (Horwitz et al., 1986, p. 31). In short, people are prone to fear of negative evaluation which seems to be one of the strong sources crediting to anxiety in FL classrooms. Kitano (2001) conducted a study to investigate two potential sources of anxiety of college learners of Japanese in oral practice: 1) an individual student's fear of negative evaluation, and 2) his or her self-perceived speaking ability. 212 students in Japanese courses at two major universities participated in the study. It was found that an individual student's anxiety was higher if his or her fear of negative evaluation was stronger, and the strength of this tendency depended on the instructional level and the experience of going to Japan.

These previous studies helped to broaden the view on how anxiety affects FL learners. They also contributed to gain solid information about this phenomenon.

Research Methodology

This section shows the procedures I followed: choosing a research design, deciding on research population (participants and setting), designing instruments for data collection. These steps helped to collect and analyse data to answer my research questions.

This descriptive case study "is used to describe an intervention or phenomenon and the real-life context in which it occurred" Yin (2003). In other words, this design helped me to describe the three participants' experiences facing speaking anxiety.

The selection of participants was guided by the purpose of this study to collect data about self-perceptions and behavioural signs related to anxiety. I chose three under graduate participants, two male and one female from a group of 28 students from a foreign languages program in a public University; their names were changed to Josh, Tom and Anny. Their foreign language proficiency was B1 according to the Common European Framework. The participants were informed about the research problem, its objectives and also about the confidentiality of the information gathered from them. The participants voluntarily agreed to participate in the study.

Data was gathered from August to October 2011 through classroom observation, interviews and checklist. I did two classroom observations (see appendix 1), two interviews and a checklist.

Classroom observations were done in two different environments; one was a regular classroom on a public campus, equipped with chairs and a dry-erase board. It had big windows. The other setting was a foreign language lab which was equipped with cubicles

arranged in two rows side by side and every row had three cubicles for every three students, and it also had the main cubicles for the teacher and a white board on the front wall. During the first classroom observation, I played a non-participant role. The development of this class was the following: it started with the teacher giving general advice about working hard on homework, then the teacher implemented listening and speaking activities from the workbook "New English file 1". Also the teacher discussed common grammatical mistakes made by students. The class finished with the teacher's final advice of revising at home the contents tackled and students' homework for the next class.

The second classroom observation was carried out in the English Lab. The class began with the teacher handing out homework, and then students performed a role-play. Afterwards speaking mistakes with regard to pronunciation, grammar mistakes, over use of words, etc. were discussed. Finally the native speaker assistant carried out an activity where students had to read an article about famous athletes and then answer questions asked by the native in front of the class.

I also conducted two one-on-one interviews (see appendix 2). The first interview adapted from the Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) designed by Horwitz et al. (1986) containing 10 open-ended questions that asked about the way learners feel when they are in oral communication situations such as speaking in front of other people or answering questions asked by the teacher. The second interview comprised three follow – up questions related to anxiety.

I used a checklist (see appendix 3) during the second classroom observation in order to register each participant's behaviour while performing oral communication activities.

Data was analysed by following the interpretive analysis model suggested by Hatch (2002). I also used MAXqda, software that helped me to organize and code data gathered from the classroom observations, interviews and checklist. First, I transcribed the data from the classroom observations, interviews and checklists; then I uploaded this data into the software to code and to reduce the data. After a careful analysis, I found recurring themes which were further categorized into three broad categories.

Findings

After the data analysis, three main themes emerged:

1. Anxiety effects on students' self-confidence

2. Anxiety and students' self-perceptions

3. Communication apprehension as the main source of anxiety.

Anxiety and students' self-perceptions

Participants had different perceptions on what an oral communication activity would entail. Hence, some of them expressed that when performing those activities involving speaking (e.g. oral presentations, role-plays, native speaker assistant conversational activities) in front of others, they were not able to avoid concerns of ''forgetting things'' caused by the fear of speaking in front of an audience. For example, I witnessed through the classroom observations the case of Anny who, in the middle of

performing a role-play with two more classmates, got a "mental block" (Ohata, 2005) that

forced her to remain quiet without speaking. This almost caused her not to finish the

activity. This was supported by what she had already expressed through the interview when

she argued: "I become embarrassed, very anxious, especially in oral presentations because

even when I feel prepared, I always may forget something". Another participant's

perception evidenced what they thought of their own English speaking skills and their

ability to express clearly what they meant to say; in other words, how good they were

conveying spoken language and making themselves understood (MacIntyre& Gardner,

1989); Thus, some of the participants expressed their concerns when they were called to

speak in the conversational activities with the native speaker without "knowing the words

required" or afraid of "not having good pronunciation", hence when not being able to

answer questions Josh expressed: " I start to feel intimidated I don't know what to do, I

start to look at my classmates gestures to find some help in them". Also they expressed that

even when their native speaker assistant was patient with them, they thought she would not

come to understand what they tried to say because of their flaws in the English language,

therefore and because of this, their levels of their anxiety increased during those activities.

Generally the participants showed negative perceptions toward activities involving

speaking that they sometimes handled by not being willing to participate in class to avoid

communicating orally with others.

Anxiety Effects on Students' Self-confidence

Participants reported three reasons that, according to them, determined their level of self-confidence in oral communication activities. The first was the teacher's attitude towards their speaking mistakes affected participants' self-confidence. For example, when the teacher began correcting them in the middle of their speech, they felt anxious. Anny said: "when I speak I feel worried and under pressure, especially from the teacher's attitude toward my mistakes." She added: "I accept everything she says even when I don't agree with her…I think one is the one who has everything to lose".

According to the participants, the way the teacher corrected their mistakes was the second reason that affected their level of self-confidence. For example Josh argued: "The teacher [uses] certain sarcasm when correcting to make fun of the situation". Generally, I found through classroom observations that participants tried to avoid becoming involved or ask the teacher questions. However, when taking part in any activity they were usually willing to listen to their teacher's corrections showing a certain level of anxiety that seemed to be well handled.

The third reason, the fear of speaking in front of the whole class, affected participants' self-confidence. For example, some of the participants were very anxious before and while performing role-plays. One might infer that it was caused by their peers' reactions towards them. Josh, for example, said he was not able to ignore his classmates' whispers and laughing" and he pointed out: "I feel so much embarrassment because of this; I think I would make more mistakes that I usually do".

The teacher's attitude toward participants' speaking mistakes, the teacher's manner of correcting their mistakes and fear of speaking in front of others were the three strongest

reasons that participants reported to be the ones to cause the anxiety affecting their self-confidence. Their constant concern about the grade was really only a minor concern that influenced the quality of their performance during oral communication activities. For example, Josh expressed: "I generally feel good but when making presentations in front of my classmates and the teacher I don't feel entirely self-confident because I am thinking about the grade, one feels under pressure". Nevertheless this did not seem to influence directly the level of anxiety of the participants in this study.

Generally it seemed some of participants' levels of anxiety caused by the fear of communicating orally were moderate.

Communication Apprehension as the Main Source of Anxiety

I found that communication apprehension (Horwitz et al., 1986) was what made participants suffer the most anxiety while performing oral communication activities. It was shown through the most common symptoms I observed while being in class. For example, some of the participants showed: 1) avoidance of participation, forgetting vocabulary and grammar rules, and remaining silent. Some examples of these situations include:

- During a conversational activity led by the native speaker assistant consisting in answering her questions about a sports article, some participants were not willing to become involved during the whole activity.

- When performing the role-play, Tom seemed to forget some grammatical structures that he was supposed to have learned by then. During the interview Tom expressed: "I feel very confident with myself I am not shy in those moments. I really like to speak faster because I would like to be best in my class. But when doing role-plays I prefer speak slowly, in that way my peers can understand what I am saying." However whilst performing the role-play he seemed to be suffering from a certain level of anxiety as he forgot not only some grammar rules, but the script itself.

- Sometimes, some participants did not ask the teacher for clarification even when certain aspects were not well understood. They preferred to ask a classmate. It seemed they preferred not to hold a conversation with the teacher because it would involve a more complex interaction they were not willing to make.

Conclusions

Findings have generally shown that anxiety affected participants' oral communication in several ways. For example when being in front of others; they were concerned about "forgetting things" due to the fear of speaking in front an audience, and not being able to convey a clear message. Likewise anxiety seemed to determine the level of participants' self-confidence in two specific aspects, the teacher's attitude toward participants' speaking mistakes and the teacher's manner of correcting their mistakes, in other words the feelings of being judged.

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Appendix 1

"Classroom observation form"

CLASSROOM OBSERVATION FORM

Date: _____Semester_____ Observation Nro: ____

Observer: _____Duration:_____

Number of students present:

_____

Objective: _____

Focus: _____

Brief description of the setting:

_____

_____

_____

_____

Time Description

Reflections:_____

_____

Appendix 2

INTERVIEW #1

1. How do you feel when you speak in English?

2. How do you feel when you make mistakes in the English Class?

3. What do you do when you don't understand what the teacher is saying?

4. How do you feel when you speak with your native speaker assistant?

5. How do you handle your teacher's corrections?

6. When you are confused about a certain topic in the class, how do you get to understand it?

7. How do you feel being in the class with people who speak English better than you do?

8. How do feel speaking in English in front of other students?

9. What do you do when the English class has moved so quickly that you have got left behind?

10. What do you do if a classmate laughs at you when you speak in English?

INTERVIEW #2

1. What do you describe anxiety?

2. Do you acknowledge anxiety in the EFL classroom?

3. Have you ever experienced anxiety in your foreign Language learning process?

Appendix 3

CHECKLIST

OBSERVED BEHAVIOR: student's behaviors toward English class that can be

identified as signs of Anxiety.

TASK: check whether or not the students presented the following:

	Yes	No
1. Got worried when made a mistake	____	____
2. Trembled when being called	____	____
3. Frightened for not to understand what the teacher Was saying	____	____
4. Got afraid when the teacher corrected him/her	____	____
5. Got nervous when speaking in front of the class	____	____
6. Felt insecure to volunteer to answer teacher's Questions	____	____
7. Got embarrassed when a classmate laughed at him/her when speaking in English.	____	____
8. Started to panic when the teacher asked something He/she didn't know.	____	____
9. Forgot things he was already taught when The teacher asked him.	____	____