



RESEARCH PAPER

Exploring the Causes of Language Anxiety in English Speaking Classrooms: A Qualitative Case Study

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ABSTRACT

This research, with implications for language learning, aims to explore the Causes of language anxiety among English-speaking students at Shah Abdul Latif University, Khairpur Mirs, Sindh, Pakistan. This study used a qualitative method and was based on a case study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a sample of 15 students. According to the study's findings, the primary elements associated with the high degree of anxiety among English language learners in a particular environment include communicative apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, test anxiety, fear of forgetting vocabulary, and fear of the opposite gender. Furthermore, according to the study, students who report having higher levels of anxiety related to foreign language anxiety have a poor opinion of themselves and their capacity to communicate in English in front of others, such as their teachers and classmates.

KEYWORDS Foreign Language Anxiety, Second Language, Language Learning and Use, Learner Experiences

Introduction

Following Given that English is the language most frequently taught as a second or foreign language in many nations worldwide, its significance in today's culture cannot be downplayed. As a result, it offers students a variety of chances that will help them advance both personally and professionally. According to Harmer (as cited by Aydin, 2008), there are a number of reasons to learn English as a foreign language, including faculty curricula, the desire to advance in one's career, living in a target neighborhood either permanently or temporarily, participating in exclusive cultures, and other specific goals. At the conclusion of the learning process, learners are usually expected to be qualified in a number of target language domains, including conversation, grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and language skills. The majority of students who speak English as a second language are thought to experience anxiety. Anxiety related to language acquisition is common among foreign language learners (Lileikiene & Danilevicene, 2016). According to Horwitz (2001), anxiety has been linked to poor language learning; individuals who are apprehensive about learning a foreign language frequently suffer academically and have greater learning challenges. Anxiety is a phrase used to characterize a range of negative emotions, such as worry, fear, and unease (Zhiping & Paramasivam, 2013; Lashari & Umrani, 2023). According to Toubot and Seng (2018) there are numerous ways that public speaking anxiety manifests itself, including elevated blood pressure, shaking hands, weakness, uneasiness, forgetting prepared material, and avoiding eye contact with the audience. Three main reasons of anxiety in foreign language classrooms are identified by Horwitz's Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) identifies three primary causes of foreign language classroom anxiety: (1) fear of speaking in front of a group; (2) a negative

self-evaluation of performance; and (3) fear of failing a language-related exam. Speaking English as a second language at Shah Abdul Latif University in Khairpur often causes foreign language anxiety despite proficiency in the language being a key to success in the modern world. As a former pupil and university instructor, I observed that the majority of ESL students experienced anxiety when speaking and frequently forgot grammar, vocabulary, and other skills. Mantilla & Guevara (2018) claim that anxiety leads to several issues with oral output; when learners are under stress when speaking a foreign language, they are more likely to lose vocabulary or fundamental grammar principles. Additionally, they can be worried that they won't be able to express themselves well or that speaking a foreign language will make them uncomfortable (Lashari et al., 2023). The primary goal of this study is to understand learners' opinions on whether they experience language anxiety in the classroom about the research problem.

Literature Review

The most fundamental and efficient form of human communication is speaking. Students strive to improve their communication skills in various ways, giving it their all. Speaking is the most crucial skill in any language, as it is essential for effective communication, according to a study by Zaremba (2006). Speaking dominates the other macro-abilities of reading, writing, and listening (Lashari, Umrani & Buriro, 2021; Lashari & Umrani, 2023). Since the British arrived in the 16th century, English has been used across the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent. Before the split, our national heroes made every effort to persuade Muslims to study English. Because they believed that English was the world's future. English has been used as a second language by individuals ever since. English has become a communication language due to the increasing demand for international contact. According to Mehmoodzadeh (2012) "the ever-increasing need for a good communication skill in the English language has created a huge worldwide demand for achieving a good demand of English among non-native speakers" (p. 466).

Speaking Anxiety among Language Learners

Students in Pakistan have found it challenging to study in teacher-centered classes, as teachers have total control over the classroom, and students' opinions are rarely considered (Awan et al., 2010; Lashari & Umrani, 2023). This provides the students with limited opportunities to practice speaking. When asked to talk in English, many students found it difficult and experienced anxiety. In a 2009 study, Öztürk interviewed 383 Turkish students and found that they were extremely nervous when speaking English in front of others. Ahmed et al. (2017) conducted a survey study on Baluchistan University students and discovered that the inter-language meaning system was the leading cause of the student's anxiety.

Salehi and Marefat (2014) investigated how students' performance was affected by test anxiety and foreign language proficiency. The findings demonstrated a statistically significant negative association between test anxiety and language. Therefore, to improve student performance, teachers were advised to address classroom anxiety. Waseem and Jibeen (2013) investigated the connection between Pakistani students' anxiety and motivation for learning English at COMSATS. It was demonstrated that when there was a requirement for advancement and financial gain for the students, there was a higher degree of motivation.

According to Horwitz (2001), language anxiety has a "psychological dimension" and "has a negative impact on the psychology of learners" (p. 114). For instance, a shy and timid student who is afraid to speak in front of others can experience anxiety when

requested to give a brief speech in front of the class. Because their nervousness hinders their performance, anxious students are less likely to pass vocal tasks (Yan & Horwitz, 2008). Conversely, easygoing students who are not burdened by speaking English would likely perform better, as they are not hindered by language anxiety (Woodrow, 2006). Anxiety element that has been found to have a crippling impact on students' performance in the classroom is anxiety. "Shallow breathing and/or hyper-ventilation, an intense rush of adrenaline and other stress hormones, pounding heartbeats, heart palpitations, sweating, shaking limbs and trembling body and muscle tension, a dry mouth, headaches, nausea, diarrhea, and/or vomiting" are among the physical symptoms that can result from excessive anxiety. Additionally, he stated that "anxiety is defined as a state of intense agitation, foreboding, tension, and dread, occurring from a real or perceived threat of impending danger" (Mayer, 2008). According to Naz, Channa, Kurd, and Shaikh (2020) reveal that undergraduate students at Shah Abdul Latif University Khairpur experience significant anxiety when learning to speak English in classrooms. Test anxiety, low self-confidence, communication anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and fear of a negative evaluation are important contributing causes. Using a mixed-method approach, the study combined classroom observations, questionnaire data from 150 students, and interviews with 15 students. The results demonstrate the urgent need to address language anxiety in order to help students become more proficient English speakers.

Anxiety is a threatening mental state that manifests as tension and fear (Ozturk & Gurbuz, 2014). They will suffer if they cannot master classroom discussions, which can impact both national and international employment opportunities (Hassania & Rajab, 2012). Numerous studies have shown that language anxiety affects students' success and achievement. Previous research has shown that anxiety has a range of effects on students' performance. Ewald (2007) asserts that students who experience anxiety when speaking are more likely to experience fear of failing. They are quite worried about any errors they might make when communicating. Overall, this makes them feel more anxious. Mobarak (2020) investigated the causes of anxiety among Bangladeshi students. The study's conclusions revealed that communication anxiety, fear of fellow students' opinions, and fear of the oral exam were the primary reasons for students' anxiety when speaking.

In the study by Kalsoom et al. (2021), Anxiety provocation is widespread in foreign language learning settings, and speaking is one of the most common skills that exacerbates it. To encourage pupils to practice speaking, the researcher recommended that they be made aware of the importance of speaking skills. Speaking fluently can lead to better learning results and increased self-confidence. According to McCroskey (2015), a fear of peer pressure is linked to a lack of trust and confidence in one's abilities, as well as apprehension about engaging in contact or conversation. There are numerous ways to examine how shyness and insecurity impact language use.

According to Ellis (2015), a lack of language awareness might cause a learner's anxiety level to increase. Furthermore, several factors contribute to students' increased anxiety, including dull assignments, a lack of teamwork, inefficient teaching strategies, a very demanding and regimented classroom setting, problems with time management, and irrelevant teaching materials. (Norrihan and Zia, 2015). Furthermore, K & Alamelu, (2020) investigated the causes and effects of anxiety. The findings identified the internal and external causes of anxiety. Language, grammar, peers, and pronunciation were examples of external variables; stage dread, insecurity, and shyness were examples of internal factors.

Abbasi et al. (2019) investigated the variables influencing the speech of undergraduate students at Sindh Madressatul Islam University in Karachi. He identified

the main obstacles and difficulties, and determining how to overcome them was one of the key findings of the analysis aimed at enhancing the pupils' speaking abilities. It was discovered that when speaking a second language, students experienced uneasiness and nervousness. It was also recommended that pupils make it a practice to speak English in front of their peers. Teachers' ought to create an environment where people talk to English daily. Additionally, pupils should expand their vocabulary in their speech and watch English news channels for a while, while also reading extensively. Sari (2017) researched the uneasiness that many students experience when attempting to communicate in English in a lecture hall. As a result of their fear, some students are unable to speak in front of others. Four anxiety variables contribute to students' hesitancy and nervousness when speaking English in a lecture hall: communication anticipation factor, anxiety before tests, fear of performing poorly on evaluations, and anxiety regarding English classes. According to Dundar (2013), the list of activities should include mime, simulation, readers' theater, frozen picture construction, scriptwriting, and skits. Drama techniques offer a wide range of training options, as evidenced by the various foci and objectives of these activities for enhancing students' communication skills.

Material and Methods

To comprehend the experiences of EFL learners regarding the various factors that create foreign language anxiety, we employed a qualitative case study approach in this study. The primary focus of our study remained on the participants' experiences with the FLA phenomenon in a specific context (Shah Abdul Latif University, Khairpur) and a natural environment (the language classroom). Because we believe that social reality is not something static and external, we decided to approach this case study qualitatively. Instead, we consider it to be unique, dynamic, and flexible for every person (Burton & Bartlett, 2009; Duff, 2008; Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 2009; Silverman, 2010). "Qualitative case studies share with other forms of qualitative research the search for meaning and understanding, the research as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, an inductive investigation strategy, and the end product being richly descriptive," Merriam (2009; 39). By using this method, we were able to hear the participants' accounts and gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon in question (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Regarding the study's scope, we restricted it to the three departments of Shah Abdul Latif University Khairpur Mirs, Business, Political Science, and Media Studies from which EFL students were invited to participate.

Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in the participants' first language (Sindhi) to gather the data. The participants were expected to feel more at ease, less nervous, and more comfortable discussing their experiences with EFL anxiety in their first language (L1) compared to their second language (L2). They had to speak in English in front of the interviewer, who was also their language teacher, which made it very difficult. The decision to conduct interviews in L1 was consistent with the findings of Gass and Mackey (2000), who found that interviewees who are foreign language learners may provide insufficient responses in L2 due to a perceived fear of making mistakes in the target language. Because the interview's subject matter was participants' anxiety related to foreign languages, this posed a special risk in this instance. Furthermore, analyzing language proficiency in terms of grammatical accuracy and/or linguistic traits was not the main goal of the interviews. Instead, the primary goal was to comprehend the participants' own experiences, perspectives, and narratives of fear related to foreign languages. The full-length interviews did not have to be conducted in English. Additionally, the participants were informed that there were no right or wrong responses because their language

proficiency was not being evaluated. This allowed the interviewees to answer questions as naturally as possible (Friedman, 2012).

Participants

Purposive sampling was used to choose the interview subjects for this small-scale qualitative investigation. The primary author of this research observed that students from three departments exhibited a significant degree of worry; hence, this approach was chosen. These students, who were, on average, nineteen years old, were in their second semester of a second-year undergraduate program. Only eight female and seven male students volunteered to engage in the semi-structured interviews, which were used to gather qualitative data from 15 students across the three departments.

Ethical Considerations

The nature and goal of the study were explained to the prospective participants. We also told them that their involvement was completely voluntary and would not affect their grades or their relationship with the researcher or any of their other teachers. Additionally, we assured the participants that their privacy would be protected. After they read and signed the informed consent form, the interviews were audio recorded.

Results and Discussion

This section contains the in-depth examination of our results based on both the themes that surfaced from the data and the a priori themes. We integrated the two topics (i.e., fear of negative assessment and test anxiety) from the four a priori themes communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety because we got similar answers to these. Following the a priori themes above, we also discovered two emergent themes: fear of the opposite gender and anxiety of forgetting terminology.

Communication Apprehension

According to the literature review above, the results indicate that EFL learners may experience communicative anxiety for several reasons, including a limited vocabulary, difficulty pronouncing words correctly, and concerns about adhering to numerous grammatical rules. Some students reported being proficient in writing and listening but not in speaking. According to the students, there are no language lab facilities. As a result, individuals may perceive themselves as weaker than others (Toth, 2012). When compared to the male respondent (M), the female respondent (F) in the interviews expressed a low opinion of her ability to speak English.

- F9 *In foreign language class the most disturbing thing is that it disturbs me that I always hesitate while speaking and classmates stated laughing at me, it hurts me severely*
- M12 *Mostly two things disturb me in our foreign language class, when I talk in English with teacher or other students or in class participation, I have face trouble in conveying my message properly, second when teacher gave lecture and I thought now this is clear, but when teacher asks about that I again feel nervous as I didn't understand anything.*
- F15 *The most disturbing thing that disturbs me is that I always do mistakes in because of lack of vocabulary.*
- M6 *Yes, I feel worried when I find myself in stressful situation and I feel completely lose and can't seek solution easily.*

Test Anxiety

According to the literature study above, test anxiety is a possibility for EFL learners. The results of the data analysis showed that respondents were afraid of test anxiety, failing the test, receiving a lower score, feeling anxious before the test, and students not wanting to participate. According to Robinson et al. (2013), students who experience significant levels of anxiety are unable to concentrate on the test because of distracting thoughts that have nothing to do with the test. They might thereby fail the test.

F3 *Yes test makes me always anxious, because I think about my score/grade.*

F11 *Test makes me confused, in case I'm not well prepared or anything is given which is not taught.*

M13 *Yes sometimes especially when I feel I am not prepared well, uhm mother when teacher took test surprisingly*

Fear of Negative Evaluation

According to the research review above, EFL learners may experience anxiety related to negative evaluation, even if they wish to participate. This anxiety has a detrimental effect on their communication skills, as they become apprehensive when speaking and forget what to say. According to one respondent, the teacher's cross-examination and voluntary questioning make him quite nervous.

Psychological Barriers in EFL Classroom

EFL students may have psychological barriers in EFL classrooms, as the research review above indicated. According to students' comments, learning is challenging for EFL students who feel shy around their peers because they are often laughed at. Respondents are heavily influenced by their peers. Due to their inability to articulate their emotions, some pupils expressed that they are occasionally anxious, irritated, and dissatisfied. Respondents are nervous, insecure, uncertain about their skills, afraid of student ridicule, and struggling to understand English-language lectures. Many students claimed that, although they are confident, they struggle to perform well when speaking in front of the class. Some respondents stated that they find it extremely difficult to handle stressful situations, and one respondent said that they leave the classroom when they are in a stressful position and are unable to find a solution. Anxiety is a mental state where a person is uncertain of their skills or goals. It is a significant problem that university language instructors face, requiring more investigation and careful consideration (Liu et al., 2021). A learner may experience test anxiety due to a variety of factors, including psychological factors. Practical physiology is one of the psychological components. According to Pace-Schott et al. (2019), a person's assessment of their physiological state includes factors such as tenseness in the body, stiffness in the muscles, a rapid heartbeat, anxiety, or even trembling hands and voice. Our hands and voices may shake or tremble as a result of a fast heartbeat because the release of adrenaline from our brain causes our heart rate to increase, which in turn causes dry lips, perspiration, and shaky hands or voice. One sign that someone has anxiety is trembling or shaking. In particular, the fear of speaking.

(F9) *Whenever I hear my classmates speak English fluently, I start doubting myself. I feel like I'm not good enough and that I will never reach their level, which makes me lose confidence.*

(F15) *Even though I prepare before class and understand the topic, I feel extremely nervous when the teacher asks me to speak. My heart starts beating fast, and I just go blank. I can't speak even simple sentences properly in front of others.*

(M13) *I struggle to understand what the teacher is saying when they speak only in English. This makes me feel lost and left out, and I get frustrated because I can't follow the lesson properly.*

(M12) *I feel under pressure when I know my classmates are better than me. It makes me hesitate to speak because I think they might silently judge or compare my answers with theirs*

Discussion

The results above show that, of all the factors that lead to foreign language anxiety, the worry of forgetting vocabulary was the one that caused the most amount of anxiety, as reported by almost all participants. However, many negative views were spoken about test anxiety, public speaking, and the fear of a low grade, and innumerable psychiatric explanations were found. Most of the students refused to talk in English in front of the class when the teacher asked them to. Nonetheless, some students voluntarily speak English when the teacher requests it (Sanjata et al., 2022). For various reasons, many students may be reluctant to use English in class. The researchers, therefore, intend to examine how students perceive the factors that influence their speaking skills. According to the study's findings, students' perceptions of themselves and their proficiency in English were negative. Speaking in English in front of other students in the classroom evoked fear in almost all participants. According to more recent research, anxious language learners frequently feel frustrated by their incapacity to communicate effectively and believe their peers are more proficient English speakers (Liu & Jackson, 2011; Horwitz, 2017). This aligns with some of the participants' experiences. These results are also consistent with studies by Tóth (2010) and Pawlak et al. (2020), who found that public speaking assignments and oral presentations were among the most anxiety-inducing activities in language classes. Of making mistakes, which prevented them from using English in class. According to current research, language anxiety frequently results from a fear of making mistakes and receiving a poor grade from peers. This can significantly reduce learners' willingness to participate (Şener, 2015; Teimouri, Goetze, & Plonsky, 2019). The study's subjects described comparable emotions. According to one of the speakers in an interview, several felt embarrassed about speaking poorly, which reflected the widespread anxiety about coming across as uneasy, unintelligent, or inept in front of peers or others (Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014, p. 580). In addition to anxiety related to foreign languages, other participants claimed that their anxiety was crippled by their perceptions of the teacher's expectations. According to F2, she felt that she could never talk in front of her teacher since she would be displeased if she used any inappropriate language.

Conclusion

The major causes of elevated anxiety levels among English language learners were found to be communication apprehension, fear of public speaking, fear of negative evaluation, and fear of forgetting vocabulary. According to the literature study, other researchers have already looked into some of the same factors in their respective contexts. However, this study discovered a few additional characteristics, such as EFL learners' "fear of forgetting vocabulary." The study's conclusions are predicated on some facets of anxiety related to learning a foreign language. First of all, the majority of EFL students are nervous when speaking English because they have unfavorable opinions about speaking the language. Second, speaking English in front of people of the opposite gender makes the

majority of pupils anxious. It can be inferred from these results that language instructors ought to be aware of and attentive to the learners' emotional, cognitive, and physical conditions. According to Shoshani & Eldor (2016) and Derakhshan et al. (2022), educators who actively attend to their students' emotional and academic needs by demonstrating empathy, refraining from severe punishment, and being perceptive of their needs help create a supportive, stimulating, and encouraging learning environment. Since some students are really eager to share what they know about a certain subject but are unable to do so due to worry, the teacher should be aware of each student's unique requirements. Rather than criticizing the students, teachers ought to provide them supportive remarks. It is best to use an interactive teaching approach so that all students can engage in the foreign language classroom.

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