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## ANXIETY OF SPEAKING ENGLISH IN CLASS AMONG INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN A MALAYSIAN UNIVERSITY

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### Abstract

*The study investigates the reasons international students' suffer anxiety and explore how they cope with their fear and anxiety when speaking English in class. The study also examines teachers' perspectives and reactions towards learners' anxiety and investigates the students' perspectives of teachers' reaction to their feelings of anxiety. Horwitz's et.al (1986) categorization of variables that lead to foreign and second language anxiety is used as the theoretical framework. Data collection involves observations and interviews of 8 international postgraduate students of a Malaysian university and data was analyzed through discourse analysis. Findings indicate that Nigerians generally are not anxious of speaking. Differently, Iranians and Algerians suffer more from anxiety as a result of fearing negative evaluation and communication apprehension. The conclusions point out that the lecturers' strategies and students' reactions to their strategies are not related to cultural backgrounds but to affective filters and learning skills common to all human beings.*

**Keywords:** anxiety, speaking English, coping strategies, international students

### INTRODUCTION

English is the major language of science and the professions and the official language of many international and professional organizations. Almost every second, a prospective international student who wants to engage himself in further studies has to learn and attain a certain level of English proficiency as English is the medium of instruction and assessment in class in almost every university worldwide. However, for many learners there is a genuine fear of performing in the second language, a phenomenon known as (foreign or second) language anxiety which can hinder performance and achievement. Due to the huge sums of money and energy invested on studying and researching abroad, classroom anxiety as an obvious factor that can hinder students' performance and achievement and decrease their willingness to participate in learning activities, is an issue deserving more investigation.

Although a growing body of research on major causes of anxiety in class has been conducted from the mid-1970s, there is a lack of investigation into cultural backgrounds as a possible factor that can contribute to anxiety when speaking in class and teachers' perspectives of students' anxiety is also another factor that few investigations have undertaken. The current study aims to seek the reasons for international students' anxiety and explore how they cope with their fear and anxiety of speaking English in class. Furthermore, this study examines teachers' perspectives and reactions towards learners' anxiety and investigates the students' perspectives of teachers' reactions to their feelings of anxiety.

The study is set out to answer the following research questions:

- 1) What factors make EFL/ESL international students in Malaysia anxious while speaking English in class?
- 2) How do international students cope with their anxiety of speaking English in class?
- 3) What are the lecturers' perspectives and reactions towards students' anxiety when speaking English in class?
- 4) What is the students' perspective of the lecturers' reaction to their anxiety of speaking English in class?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Early research on second language acquisition (SLA) emphasized cognitive variables like intelligence, language aptitude, learning styles, and so forth. After the research by Gardner and Lambert (1972), affective and emotional variables became important in the area of SLA (Chakrabati et al. 2012). Affective variables are "emotionally relevant characteristics of the individual that influence how he/she will respond to any situation" (Gardner and MacIntyre 1992). Most notably, after Krashen (1985) discussed affective filter hypothesis in the theory of SLA, there had been a lot of research done in this area. The affective filter hypothesis discusses variables that can work out as a filter that obstruct language acquisition. The affective variables which Krashen discusses are motivation, confidence and anxiety. Krashen insists that individuals learn second language only if they get comprehensible input and if their affective filters are low enough to let the input get in (Richards and Rodgers 2001). Affective factors are believed to play an important part in acquiring a second language. Comprehensible input might not be used by L2 learners if a "mental block" is in place, which inhibits them from getting the language. The affective filter works like a barrier to language acquisition when the learner is not motivated, not having confidence or thinking about failure, and the filter is low when the learner is not anxious or is trying to get involved in the language (Du 2009).

Horwitz et al. (1986) discussed foreign language anxiety as "a distinct complex of self-perception, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (p.31). According to Horwitz et al. (1986), no other area of study makes self-concept and self-expression so close to learning.

This topic makes anxiety in the area of foreign language learning distinctive from other academic areas. It might be possible that students suffering from general anxiety are experiencing Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), and it is not uncommon to find those who are good in general topics also having difficulties in learning a foreign language. Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) admitted that individuals who feel they are competent in their mother tongue can feel degraded when they are required to speak in their second language. In addition, individuals who learn a foreign language usually believe their self-perception will be under attack in their foreign language learning setting. Horwitz et.al (1986) reached a conclusion that FLA can be related to three variables: a) communication comprehension b) fear of negative evaluation and c) test anxiety. Students who suffer from communication comprehension usually do not feel easy communicating in the second or foreign language among other people, especially if they are needed to use their listening and speaking abilities. People who experience a high level of communication apprehension “withdraw from and seek to avoid communication when possible”. Introverted and reserved people tend to be quieter and less willing to communicate. Students who suffer from fear of negative evaluation do not accept their language errors as a usual part of the learning but consider them a threat to their face. So they decide to remain silent and do not get involved in the class activities. Students who suffer from test anxiety consider foreign language learning, especially oral production, a testing situation rather than a chance to improve their linguistic and communication abilities.

Concerning self-concept and identity, Guiora (1983) argued that language learning can be extremely painful for some students because it threatens their face, sense of self and worldview. Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness strategy conceptualize face which refers to a person’s desire to be unimpeded (negative face) and to be approved of in certain respects (positive face). Some acts are intrinsically face-threatening. When an addresser commits a face-threatening act, he/she estimates the risk of face loss and the degree of efficiency of communication falls. A concept of face exists, doubtless, in every society and plays a part in inhibiting communication for large numbers of people whose control of a foreign language is imperfect. In many collectivist cultures, face is extraordinarily important as a constraint on behavior explicitly sanctioned by culture. For example, Chinese face emphasizes not the accommodation of individual “wants”, or “desires” but the harmony of individual conduct with the views and judgment of the community. As a public image, Chinese face depends upon, and is indeed determined by, the participation of others; it belongs to the individual or to the self only to the extent that the individual acts in full compliance with that face (Mao 1994).

Liu and Jackson (2008)’s study of the unwillingness to communicate and anxiety of Chinese learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) in English language classrooms revealed that (a) most of the students were willing to participate in interpersonal conversations, but many of them did not like to risk using/speaking English in class; (b) more than one third of the students felt anxious in their English language classrooms, and they feared being negatively evaluated and were apprehensive about public speaking and tests; (c) their unwillingness to communicate and their foreign language anxiety correlated significantly with each other and

with their self-rated English proficiency and access to English; and (d) many of the variables of interest were good predictors of the students' unwillingness to communicate and of their foreign language anxiety, which were also powerful predictors for each other. Individuals who are socially anxious are particularly concerned with humiliating or embarrassing themselves when under the scrutiny of others. Indeed, language anxiety may be part of a culture-based syndrome (Jones 2001). This is not to say that language anxiety is a mental illness; it is one set of culturally distinguished features that make up a 'syndrome'. As with many medical, psychological and social conditions, it has a continuum that extends from relatively mild and common to acute and rarer forms. In other words, an English language learner's ability to make effective situational appraisals can be hindered not only by linguistic differences but also by cultural differences. To conclude, general issues of self-efficacy and expectancy-value theory can be influenced by a fear of negative evaluation, test anxiety, communication apprehension, and identity factors. However, these influences on anxiety do not occur in a vacuum. English language anxiety can be described as a social anxiety, dependent upon interactions with others. Therefore, the implications of English language anxiety from a socio-constructivist perspective must be considered (Pappamihel 2002).

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

### **Setting and Participants**

The target class was a PhD class from the Faculty of Economy of a local Malaysian university that was held once a week every Thursday from 6pm to 9pm in semester 1 2012/2013. The class was seated traditionally due to the style of students' sitting in two columns and teacher standing on a one step upper platform. There were both traditional and modern facilities including two large whiteboards, an overhead projector, a large number of comfortable desks, two air conditioners and one digital clock above the whiteboards. The course was Advanced Micro-Economics Theory and the class had 20 students.

The research is a case study of one single class. The researchers select a case study design because they managed to obtain permission to only use and observe one class for the present research from the faculty administration. The case study design has benefits for research studies. Merriam (2009) pointed out that the case study results in a rich and holistic account of a phenomenon. It offers insights and illuminates meanings that expand its readers' experiences. These insights can be construed as tentative hypotheses that help structure future research; hence, case study plays an important role in advancing a field's knowledge base. Because of its strengths, case study is a particular appealing design for applied fields of study such as education, social work, administration, health and so on. An applied field's processes, problems and programs can be examined to bring about understanding that can affect and perhaps even improve practice. Case study has proven particularly useful for studying educational innovations, evaluating programs, and informing policy. English was a foreign or second language for the students of this study. The sample for this research comprised 8 students, three African Nigerians who were ESL learners, three Iranians and two Algerians who were EFL learners, all of whom were chosen purposefully. All the subjects were in the age range of 30-34. All were male except for an Iranian lady. The subjects' English level was

IELTS 5.5. In addition, their first language and cultural background is different from the lecturer's. The lecturer is a Malaysian-Chinese and speaks fluent English. Malaysian students were not included as respondents for this study as we wanted to consider the effect of a teacher with different cultural background from the students'.

### **Data collection**

Data collection for the study involved observations and interviews of the respondents. There were 5 sessions of observation that took place over the semester 1, 2012-2013 (specifically on November 1st, 8th, 22nd, 29th and December 20th). The observations involved whole class sessions of three hours each. The first session is attached in Appendix 1. The semi-structured interviews were conducted either before or after class or during class breaks. Each interview took between 10 to 15 minutes and all were audiotaped. All the interviewees filled in a consent form agreeing to participate in the study. Due to ethical reasons, pseudonyms were used for respondents such as Iranian 1, 2, 3, Nigerian 1, 2, 3, and Algerian 1, 2. The interview data is analysed through discourse analysis and Nigerian 2's data is shown in Appendix 3 as an example. The interview questions are attached in Appendix 2.

### **Data analysis**

Data was analysed using discourse analysis as the approach. Horowitz's et al (1986) categorization of the 3 variables that lead to second and foreign language anxiety (communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety) was used as a guide for data analysis. The strategies used by students for coping with anxiety were determined using information culled from the literature mainly from Prins (1986), Bailey et al (1999) and Gregersen (2003) (see Findings below) .

## **FINDINGS**

### **Reasons for anxiety among international students**

The observations and interviews revealed that most Nigerian students did not feel anxiety when speaking in class while Iranian and Algerian students showed symptoms of anxiety. The reasons for their anxiety are as follows:

#### **Fear of being in public and shyness**

According to Horwitz et al (1986) general personality traits such as quietness, shyness, and reticence are some reasons for communication anxiety. The degree of shyness varies greatly from individual to individual. When we ask about participants' feelings while speaking English in class, Iranian 2, 3 and Algerian 1 note shyness as a reason for their anxiety. Iranian 2 says "I am typically a shy guy, I don't like to start communication much" while Algerian 1 notes that "When I present I am a shy guy I feel somehow afraid ... it is because I'm afraid of facing the public." Iranian 3 says "I had more anxiety last term because I had presentation, so I had lots of anxiety to work more and to present in public."

#### **Fear of negative evaluation**

The interviewees voiced fear of negative evaluation by teachers and peers as another in-class concern as an important source of anxiety. They feared humiliation of being corrected in public especially if accompanied by disparaging remarks by the lecturer. They were also overly concerned with other people's opinions and had apprehension about other people's evaluation. For instance Iranian 1 noted "There is wrong belief that if you don't know English you lose your prestige. Sometimes I am afraid to ask question because they laugh at me" while Iranian 3 stated that "Usually I don't speak English among Iranians. Because when I first came to Malaysia my English was not good and they used to mock me for that, so I usually don't speak English with them."

### **Fear of speaking inaccurately**

One of the concerns as a source of anxiety shared by Iranian and Algerian students in classroom is their bad feeling of speaking the language inaccurately with mistakes and not being able to find exact words. Their dislike for speaking inaccurately is not so much because of fear of negative evaluation by teacher and classmates but more because they feel satisfied making correct sentences with different structures that need a repertoire of vocabulary and grammar. Since they feel they do not possess this they prefer not to talk as making mistakes disappoints them. The Algerians note "When you are a beginner in a language you are a bit afraid when you commit mistakes and you have problem with the pronunciation and also you don't know so much about the vocabulary" (Algerian 1). In addition when he is asked about forgetting vocabulary and grammar, he states that: "Sometimes it happens to me because I am not a native speaker and it makes me feel frustrated and disappointed". The Iranians say that "I don't like speak too much. Most of the time it is difficult to find appropriate word" (Iranian 1).

### **Students' strategies for coping with anxiety**

#### **Keeping silent**

According to Prins (1986) and Bailey et al. (1999), one of the most common coping strategies for adolescents is avoidance. As a result of anxiety, learners often choose to remain silent and are unwilling to participate in speech communication in class. Iranian 3 in her interview says that she does not speak voluntarily. Algerian 2 states: "if my background in the discussed knowledge is not very rich I just keep quiet and listen because the more you listen the more you learn."

#### **Avoiding eye contact**

Avoiding making eye contact with the teacher is a typical non-verbal reaction of anxious students (Gregersen 2003). Sometimes when the lecturer asks questions, students do not look at him/her. Instead they look down and pretend to busy themselves with writing or checking their bags.

#### **Being with friends**

It is an obvious thing in this class that students with the same nationality were sitting next to each other (e. g, Iranian students are always sitting in the second row in the left side next to each other and the Chinese were in front). It was also observed they do not talk English among themselves during class. This observation was supported by Iranian 2 when the interviewer asked him why he always sits in the same place, and he answers it is more comfortable and feeling free to sit next to his friends”.

### **Expressive reactions**

We speculate that smiling to mask one’s true feelings is a characteristic of non-verbal communication and that accordingly such behavior would be an expected response to intense classroom anxiety. The most common expressive reactions cited are smiling or laughing. Nigerian 2 laughed many times during the 10-minute interview, and in class, especially when he made errors in choosing a word in class.

### **The lecturer’s reaction and strategies to reduce students’ anxiety**

#### **Not calling student’s name**

The lecturer prefers to ask questions to the whole class instead of asking a specific student and expects students to volunteer their reply. The lecturer does not put students on the spot in calling out their names to provide a reply. When he receives no answer after waiting for 2 seconds, he continues to talk without getting disappointed or angry.

#### **Making jokes and stories**

In order to break the ice the lecturer starts the lesson with a joke and it helps to warm up the students and grab their attention. The lecturer says “laughing at my jokes is also one part of your class performance”. Furthermore, the lecturer gives a lot of examples and supports his ideas with real world situations and stories. These strategies are approved by most of the students in their interviews.

#### **Appreciating students’ answers**

The lecturer provides indirect, rather than direct correction and encourages students to speak. He commends students even if they do not give a correct answer. For example, he says “Ok”, “He is good at numbers,” “That’s a possible perspective”, or “You are moving in the right direction”. This observation is supported by Algerian 1: “Even if your answers are not correct, the teacher does not correct you instantly. He appreciates answers, never looks down the answer”. Direct, on the spot correction in speaking activities, can undermine students’ confidence, and discourages learners who are anxious about “sounding silly” to experiment with new language (Lightbown and Spada, 1999).

#### **Showing positive gestures**

Nonverbal type of immediacy behavior such as eye contact and positive gestures can reduce anxiety and impact positively on motivation to learn (Christophel 1990; Frymier 1993). The lecturer keeps pleasant and establishes eye contact with students who are trying to answer a

question. The gestures of the lecturer help students to understand both his language and the lesson. Supporting evidence are stated by Nigerian 1: "It is good he uses his body language, the body language he uses and what he wants to communicate." "He makes fun and provides an intimate atmosphere in class via his body language for example once the mobile of one student rings he starts to dance with the music of the ringtone". (Algerian 1)

### **Students' perspective towards the lecturer's reaction to their anxiety**

All the international students, Iranian, Algerian and Nigerian, had good feelings and perceptions of their lecturer. They said "He is very good at it. He is very calm and patient and dedicates time to the students" (Iranian 3) while Algerian 2 said "This class is somehow vibrant. The lecturer is very friendly I mean he makes the learning fun and that's my point. So I do not feel anxious and I enjoy attending the class". Nigerian 2 said "treating us to jokes that make people feel relax in class, make people laugh, so that brings our senses back to what we are going to do".

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The results revealed that Nigerians in general do not display anxiety when speaking. They are not shy, not afraid of being in public, and not anxious of speaking inaccurately. This is probably because English is their second language and their main language for instruction in college. They generally have a high proficiency in English and this could be a reason that decreases their anxiety. In addition, they are of higher proficiency level than their Iranian and Algerian classmates. However they did display expressive reactions when they made errors during the class sessions. Different from the Nigerians, Iranians and Algerians students 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 class observed 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 Iranian students' cause for 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 other within a cultural group. In short, culture did not emerge as a discriminating variable that differentiates students' reasons for anxiety when speaking and their strategies for coping with the anxiety. The lecturer of this class has been a very successful teacher in considering students' affective filters and has tried to help students via verbal and nonverbal strategies to overcome them and feel comfortable in class. From the results it could be said that all the students with various proficiency levels and cultural backgrounds appreciate the lecturer and his strategies. Therefore, it points out that the teacher's strategies and students' reactions to his strategies are not related to their cultural background but to their affective filters and learning skills common to all human beings. The findings of this study has significance for lecturers about the causes of anxiety faced by students and gives them possible ways for mitigating anxiety while improving students' oral



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

### **Biodata**

Diao Zhiping is a PhD student of applied comparative linguistics at the Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM). She obtained her master of arts in linguistics at Hebei University, China. Her research has been in the field of language, culture, communication and Chinese studies. Shamala Paramasivam is an associate professor at the Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM). She specialises in language use in intercultural communication, English for Specific Purposes, and Teaching English as a Second/Foreign language. Her research interests lie in discourse, communication and culture in educational and professional settings.

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