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Sources of Second Language Speaking Anxiety: An Investigation into the Lecturers' Perspective

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Abstract

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'Anxiety' experienced in speaking English as a second language has been a topic of much interest in the field of language learning as it is debilitating and it creates an impact on the achievement of the language learners in an adverse manner. This nervousness or anxiety seems to be inducing when the students are asked to speak in the second language in the class. Presumably, speaking has become a complete fallout in acquiring the language. Thus, it was of paramount importance to embark in a research on this circumstance with the aim of investigating the perspectives of the lecturers in order to integrate students into an English speaking environment with greater ease and to increase the students' enjoyment when learning and communicating in English. To accomplish the objectives of this study, a total of 40 academics from the Faculty of Social Sciences & Languages, Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka were selected. The data gathered were analyzed through a mixed approach which consisted of both qualitative and quantitative data analyzing methods using descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages. A total of 40 academics participated in the study. The majority of the participants were females (92.5%), aged between 31- 40 years (52.5%) with 3-5 years of working experience (47.5%). The responses revealed some intriguing findings and three categories of possible sources for second language speaking anxiety were explored as psychological, methodological and social. It was distinct through the lecturers' perspectives, that psychological causes of speaking fears could stem from the lack of self-confidence, low esteem, fear of failing the subject, fear of negative evaluation, the need to be perfect & accurate and previous negative experiences. It was also apparent that the instructional methods employed in the classroom such as anxiety-ridden classrooms, monotonous teaching style, competition within the classroom, boring topics and activities evaluations and grades as well as social causes such as public embarrassment, negative judgement from teachers and students, unhealthy relationship with peers and isolation will contribute to second language speaking anxiety. Hence, this study can be taken as a reference for the lecturers in determining the possible sources of second language speaking anxiety. Thereby, to decide on the effective strategies that can be employed in order to alleviate the speaking anxiety of the students. The findings also pave the path for the lecturers to realize their own reactions that can possibly enhance or lessen the speaking anxiety of the students.

Keywords: English as a Second Language (ESL), Lecturer perspective, Speaking anxiety

Introduction

When scrutinizing the situation of the English speaking proficiency in the Faculty of Social Sciences and Languages, Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka, it was noticed that there was a substantial number of undergraduates who demonstrated worse performances in speaking the Second Language. Most of the undergraduates exhibited nervousness. They were not eager to respond voluntarily and were not confident enough to initiate conversations in the class room in English. Besides, although the syllabus and teaching methods of the subject have periodically been changed, the students' performance especially the speaking has been drastically deteriorating. It was significant that this matter has adverse effects on students, especially when presenting in front of the class. They seemed to lose confidence during oral assignments and some of the symptoms such as 'minds going blank', 'freezing when spoken to', 'hoping to avoid being called on in class', absence in English lectures could be noticed.

In order to bridge this aforementioned gap and to diminish the anxiety of students in speaking English, the necessity of determining the underlying causes of speaking anxiety were highlighted. Prior research conducted on the subject suggest that the teacher must give them ample opportunity for purposeful communication through meaningful strategies in order to diminish speaking anxiety. Therefore, lately there has been a switch towards the communicative approach and student-centered learning in education where the teachers furnished themselves with innovative pedagogic skills and practices, deviating from traditional methods of teaching. Although group work, pair work and mingling activities are constantly deployed to achieve the Intended Learning Outcome (ILO), the phenomenon of speaking anxiety still continued to affect the ESL learners in an unfavourable manner, especially during their oral assignments.

Besides, by probing the lecturers' perspectives, it was also expected to accentuate the role of teacher in the ESL context which is much more than executing lesson plans. In that way, teachers can be a constant positive motivation for the students, particularly for those who are unwilling to speak and are anxious in the classroom. Engaging in the teaching-learning process actively with the maintenance of a good rapport with the lecturer and fellow students in furthering knowledge, producing a self-assured, fluent undergraduate with a good command in English were considered significant to facilitate this focus. Thus, it was of paramount importance to embark a research on this circumstance with the aim of investigating the perspectives of the lecturers in order to integrate students into an English speaking environment with greater ease and to increase the students' enjoyment when learning and communicating in English.

Methodology

To accomplish the objectives of this study, a total of 40 academics from selected departments who were conducting lectures for the first-year undergraduates of the Faculty of Social Sciences and Languages, Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka were chosen. The study took place in the academic year of 2017/2018.

In terms of the data collection, both primary and secondary data collection methods were employed. A questionnaire was utilized as the primary source of data collection consisting of closed ended questions and open-ended questions. All the participants were asked to answer all the items in the questionnaire and were provided with a sufficient amount of time to complete them. With regard to the format of the questionnaire, it is noteworthy that every question was constructed to scout the sources of speaking anxiety of students from the lecturers' stand points. The questionnaire consisted of two parts; first part of the questionnaire was focused on gathering demographic data whereas the second part was concerning the sources of Second Language Speaking anxiety.

Interviews were used as another instrument of the data collection process. A semi structured interviews were administered to all the lecturers in the sample of interest who were conducting lectures for first year undergraduates at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Languages in order to prospect the profiles of an effective teacher and to unfold their perceptions towards Second Language speaking anxiety. In the light of the responses of the interviewee, additional questions were asked for the clarification of any misinterpretations of the questions that may have arisen during the interview. With regard to the format of the semi-structured interview, all questions were constructed in comprehensive language to best reflect the participants' experience on speaking anxiety and to paint the actual picture related to the speaking anxiety. The interviews were vital to get responses related to the lecturers' standpoint and to follow up the avenue of interest that cropped up during the interview sessions. It was expected to traverse the first-hand experiences of lecturers with regard to the reluctance of students in speaking the target language and to determine the ways of striving against this reluctance. Thus, it was intended to range over the knowledge of the academic staff in confronting the learner anxiety in speaking.

With regard to the method of data analysis, both quantitative and qualitative data analyzing methods were utilized. Initially, the responses retrieved for the close-ended questions in the questionnaire were analyzed quantitatively with regard to the fulfillment of the objectives of the research and the open-ended questions were analyzed in a qualitative manner. Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages. Interesting findings were depicted using appropriate tables and graphs. SPSS version 25 was used as the data analyzing tool.

Results

A total of 40 academics participated in the study. The majority of participants were females (92.5%, n=37), aged between 31-40

years (52.5%, n=21) with 3-5 years of working experience (47.5%, n=19). 7.5% (n=3) of the total population was males with over 3 years of experience. Majority of the participants (55%,n=22) who engaged in the study held the position of Lecturer (Probationary). 22.5% (n=9) of Senior Lecturers were also involved in the study. The participants were selected from four departments in the Faculty of Social Sciences & Languages, Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka. Majority of them (32.5%, n=13) were representatives from the Department of English Language Teaching as it was expected to scout the profiles of an effective language teacher. The rest of the participants represented the departments of Languages, Sociology and Political Science. It was significant that, 32.5%, (n=13) of the total sample engaged in teaching English, whereas 20% (n=8) were teaching translation studies. The percentage of lecturers who were teaching German language was 5% (n=2) whereas, 22.5% (n=9) were teaching Sociology and 20% (n=8) were engaging in teaching Political science. Yet, all the participants were conducting lectures in the English medium. (Table 01)

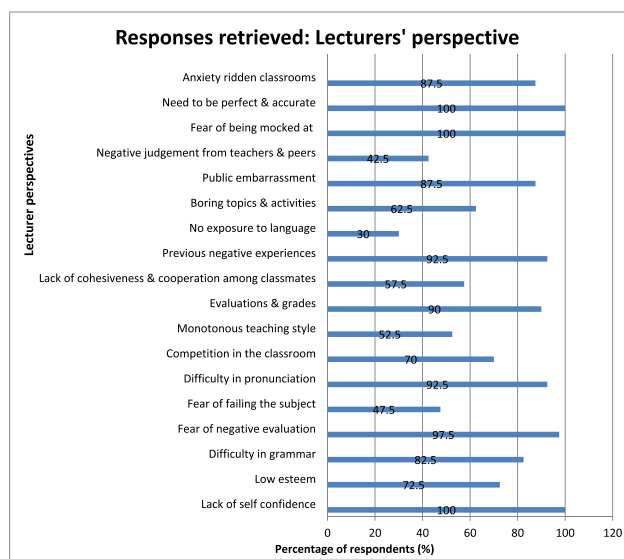
Table 01: Sociodemographic information of the participants

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Female	37	92.5
Male	03	7.5
Age		
20-30	12	30
31-40	21	52.5
41-50	07	17.5
Designation		
Instructor	03	7.5
Assistant Lecturer	06	15
Lecturer (Probationary)	22	55
Senior Lecturer	09	22.5
Department		
English Language Teaching	13	32.5
Languages	10	25
Sociology	09	22.5
Political Science	08	20
Areas of teaching		
English	13	32.5
Translation studies	08	20
German	02	5
Sociology	09	22.5
Political Science	08	20
Years of experience		
1-3	14	35
4-6	19	47.5
More than 7	07	17.5

Results

In order to be well defined and comprehensible, the data accumulated with the use of questionnaire and the semi-structured interview were presented accordingly using a bar graph (Figure 01), pinpointing the lecturers' perspectives on speaking anxiety.

Figure 01: Responses retrieved: Lecturers' perspective



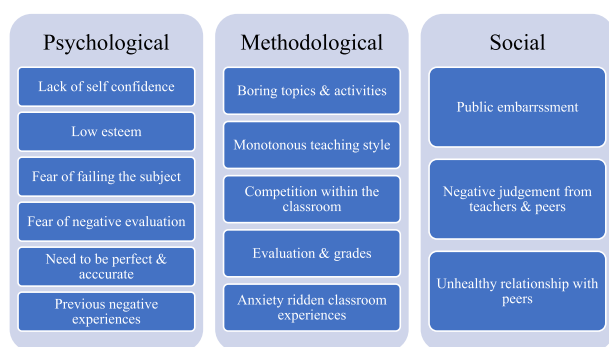
The responses revealed some compelling findings and 100% (n=40) of the total sample have pinpointed lack of confidence as one of the fundamental causes for speaking anxiety. All the participants (100%, n=40) have also presumed that some of the anxious students are hesitant to make errors because they are overly concerned with accuracy and consider speaking with an excellent accent as important. Poor pronunciation and improper use of grammar too were reported to have a remarkable share in the data analysis. It was also noteworthy that, 87% (n=34) of the total respondents have revealed that, having proper grammatical knowledge (82.5%, n=33) and poor pronunciation (70%,n=28) lead to anxiety provoking situations. Hence, the data presentation provides evidence that the low linguistic aptness creates a route to speaking anxiety. In consequence, 87.5% (n=35) of the total sample strongly insists the importance of an anxiety- free classroom which is not formal and

restricted whereas (92.5%, n=37) have stated that previous negative experiences of the students will result in speaking anxiety. Out of the total respondents, 78% (n=31) were of the view that, lack of cohesiveness and cooperation among classmates have brought about the disadvantages to the teaching-learning process (57.5%, n=23). As a consequence, (70%,n=28) have strongly agreed with the fact that competition in the classroom will result in the students' reluctance to speak the second language. Interestingly, only a minority (30%, n=12) of the participants were of the view that, not having enough exposure to the second language will lead to anxiety. However, 70% (n=28) disagreed with this view. Moreover, the lecturers were of the perspective that evaluation and grades too have a significant effect on the speaking anxiety (90%, n=36). Moreover, 87.5% (n=35) admitted that the students feel ashamed if the teacher corrects the mistakes of the students on the spot in front of their peers in the classroom. In the same vein, majority of the participants declared that, the students did not like them to be deprecated by the lecturer. Thus, public embarrassment has been traced as another root cause for the second language speaking anxiety. Besides, a compelling finding was unveiled in the data analysis with regard to the role of teacher in the ESL classroom. Notably, 52.5% (n=21) have honestly claimed that, monotonous teaching style in a traditional classroom and boring topics & activities (62.5%, n=25) will cause anxiety. Hence, in the light of these findings, some of the potential causes underlying the students' hesitation and repression to speak the second language are brought forward as anxiety breeding situations.

In the wake of responses retrieved from the lecturers, three categories of possible sources for second language speaking anxiety were detected as psychological, methodological and social, which can be displayed within three categories as shown in the following diagram (Figure 02). According to the diagram, psychological causes of speaking fears may stem from the lack of self-confidence, low esteem, feeling of worry, fear of failing the subject, the fear of

negative evaluation, the need to be perfect & accurate and previous negative experiences. Besides, it also denotes that the instructional methods used in the classroom such as anxiety-ridden classrooms, monotonous teaching style, promoting competition within the classroom, boring topics and activities and evaluations and grades will result in language anxiety. Finally, it was also apparent that social causes such as public embarrassment, negative judgement from teachers and students, unhealthy relationship with peers and isolation will contribute to language anxiety to a greater extent.

Figure 02: Categories of possible sources of speaking anxiety



Discussion

Several factors can bring about second language speaking anxiety in the classroom. The impact of these factors will result in the reluctance of learners to speak the target language. Thus, the teachers are expected to help their students reduce such unfavorable feelings by identifying the root causes of speaking anxiety. The results of this study provided three categories of possible sources of second language speaking anxiety namely, Psychological, methodological and social. Among them, fear of negative evaluation was found to be the most significant one. A similar study was conducted by Oki and Ustaci (2013) which was focused on Turkish EFL learners. The findings of their study showed that the students preferred not to be corrected by their teachers when they made a mistake while speaking because they believed the corrections made by their teacher were a source of anxiety.

This situation can be attributed to the Sri Lankan context as most of the students are highly distressed over the negative evaluations of the teacher as well as their peers. They are overly concerned with how they might be judged or perceived by others and they struggle to present a positive self- image to the others by withdrawing themselves from situations in which they might be evaluated. As a result, this leads to a heightened level of second language speaking anxiety. Krashen (1982) supports this view by claiming that language anxiety experienced by someone makes a direct impact on perceiving his/ her image and that their anxiety level ultimately affects the learners' achievement.

In addition, it was apparent that the students' unwillingness to speak was not because they did not realize the value of learning English or laziness but because they believe that they are not good speakers of the second language. This can also be referred as sense of low esteem and the need to be perfect. In agreement with the findings from this study, a similar study was conducted by Liu (2006) in China, where the students' low level of language proficiency in terms of vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar caused them to have a high level of anxiety and low self confidence in their performance. So that the students were recommended to work hard both inside and outside the classroom in order to achieve their targets and to mitigate their anxiety in speaking. Therefore, in eliminating the sense of low esteem and lack of self-confidence, the teacher is expected to make students realize that the errors are a part of learning process and in order to learn the language, mistakes are unavoidable.

The study further denotes that the main sources of speaking anxiety are associated with certain teacher related factors and instructional practices such as boring topics and monotonous teaching style. That is, certain facets related to the teacher, heightened the inhibition of students to speak the target language. Indeed, effective teaching focuses more on the student during classroom activities. However, the reason for this may be

because in Sri Lanka, most of the teachers are used to typical methods of instruction such as chalk and board method and the reluctance and incapability of some teachers to integrate technology into teaching. Apart from that, Coa (2011) identifies certain interesting factors related to instructors with regard to speaking anxiety. He states that the unfriendly behaviour and unsympathetic treatment of teachers may cause the learners to be anxious. He further explains that the inappropriate style of teaching and an unhealthy classroom atmosphere will result in anxiety. Therefore, this study could shed light on the necessity of choosing appropriate instructional methods in minimizing the speaking anxiety of students. The students emphasized the necessity of using certain activities that will move them away from the monotonous teaching style and which will help them to cope up with their anxiety in speaking the target language. Thus, it was of paramount importance and the responsibility of the lecturer to design some interesting interactive speaking activities which will stimulate their interest in the subject and which will reduce their speaking anxiety in the classroom and to make teaching-learning enjoyable.

Interestingly, Young (1991) in his study explores about six possible sources of language anxiety stemming from three facets: the learner, the teacher and the pedagogical practices. That is, learner beliefs about how the language is learnt, teacher beliefs about how he/she teaches language, teacher-learner interactions, processes that are being followed in the class room and language evaluations are all possible causes of language anxiety. He further states that all these are correlated with one another. A similar view related to learner beliefs was expressed by Tanveer (2007). It was claimed that inner qualities of a particular learner can be resulted in anxious situations. Therefore, beliefs, opinions and weak language proficiency may lead to a higher degree of anxiety along with some other external factors such as social and cultural backgrounds

However, in scrutinizing the situation of the Sri

Lankan context, learning a second language is considered as a challenge due to the influential role played by the mother tongue. Therefore, when learning a second language, the learner usually thinks about the target language in terms of the first language without realizing the fact that a language should be learnt in second language. Besides, speaking anxiety may prevent students from mastering the language. Hence igniting an enthusiasm to learn English should be prioritized within the ESL classroom. According to Alderman (2004), creating a learning community that provides the environment for “optimal motivation” can help reduce speaking anxiety. Hence, making fun of a wrong answer should not be encouraged and a norm of “mistake tolerance” should be ratified within the classroom. Moreover, students should be encouraged to ask for assistance without running the risk of embarrassment. On the part of teachers, as far as grouping practices were concerned, groups should be formed from mixed ability students where the students are given equally academically challenging tasks so that there is no differential treatment with respect to their language performance.

Conclusion

The research findings denoted that the main sources of speaking anxiety are associated with certain psychological, methodological and social facets. When observing the outcomes of the questionnaire and the semi-structured interview, it was apparent that all the participants involved in the study have stressed upon the inability of most of the students to express effectively in oral assignments and classroom presentations owing to the anxiety in speaking the target language. Furthermore, they have understood that the students' lack of ability and confidence to communicate in English have brought about disadvantages into the teaching-learning process. In the lecturers' perspective, anxiety in speaking English as a Second Language is a hindrance to obtain sufficient marks in the speaking assignments. For a lecture to be stimulating and attractive for both the lecturer and students,

there should be a good rapport maintained between them. Thus, all the lecturers insisted on the importance of participation of all students', asking for further clarification, seeking advice, stating difficulties. So as to enable them to strike up a conversation in the class confidently.

Due to the aforementioned facts brought forward, this study can be taken as a reference for the lecturers in identifying the possible sources of second language speaking anxiety and thereby to decide on the effective strategies that can be employed in order to alleviate the speaking

anxiety of the students. Besides, the study unveils the fact that the delivery of the English language in the form of traditional classrooms is not always the best alternative, yet there are vital aspects to be concerned in minimizing their anxiety in speaking English and integrating them into an English speaking environment with a greater ease. The findings also pave the path for the lecturers to realize their own reactions that can possibly enhance or lessen the speaking anxiety of the students.

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