

Telling ELT Tales out of School

A novice teacher's action research on EFL learners' speaking anxiety

Mihri Koçak^{a*}

^a*Anadolu University, School of Foreign Languages, Eskişehir, Turkey*

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to share the findings of an action research which aims at helping students to overcome anxiety problem they suffer while speaking in speaking-listening course. The first step was identification of the problem and for this purpose an open-ended questionnaire was given to all of the students in that class. Following this, interviews were conducted with eight students, six of whom were highly anxious and two of them were not anxious according to their answers to the questionnaire. After identifying the causes of their anxiety most of which were related with fear of failure as a result of poor performance, an action plan was developed and implemented. In this presentation, both this action research process and its role in the researcher's professional development will be shared.

© 2010 Published by Elsevier Ltd.



Keywords: Language anxiety; speaking English; action research; coping with anxiety

1. Introduction

Second language anxiety has a negative effect on the oral performance of speakers of English as a second language. Many studies have been conducted to find out the major causes of anxiety while speaking. Most research in this area focuses on classroom based anxiety. This research considers second language anxiety as a problem occurring in class during speaking course and the aim to conduct an action research on this issue is to find out why some learners become anxious when they have to speak English and to find solutions to be able to help learners to overcome this problem.

The participants are selected according to their high anxiety level, all from the same class studying at School of Foreign Languages at Anadolu University and they have known each other for five months, so does the teacher. These students spend twenty-eight hours a week together and it can easily be said that they are used to each other. As the conductor of this action research, the author spends eight hours a week with them to teach Speaking-

* Tel.: + 90-222-3213549 / 6163

E-mail address: mihrik@anadolu.edu.tr

Listening integrated course. All of the learners' mother tongue is Turkish, they come from different cities and their departments are also different, their English level is lower-intermediate. Among the participants who have responded to the questions both in the open-ended questionnaire and oral interview, there are two students who have been studying at prep school for two years but one of them have stated that she does not suffer from second language anxiety. The number of students who filled in the questionnaire is twenty; eight of these students were also interviewed. Among these eight participants, six of them are the anxious learners and two of them are not and this area of focus derived from the weekly reflective journal kept as course requirement in which the course teacher reflects about events occurring in her classroom and receives regular feedback from her advisor.

The aim of this study was to find out the reasons of anxiety that students suffer from during speaking course and try to find possible solutions that may help these kinds of learners to overcome speaking anxiety. This area of focus statement is intentionally chosen by the researcher – as their speaking course teacher- to help the students to overcome anxiety while speaking in English and improve themselves on this issue. The research questions are as follows: (1) Why do Turkish university students who study at School of Foreign Languages at Anadolu University become anxious while speaking English?, (2) What can a teacher do to help her students to overcome their anxiety problem while speaking English?

2. Review of Related Literature

In the past two decades there has been a great deal of research into second or foreign language anxiety. These researches report that anxiety has a negative effect on the language learning process. There is evidence that language learning anxiety differs from other forms of anxiety. Early research into language learning anxiety used measures of test anxiety from educational research. However, these studies produced inconsistent results (Scovel, 1978; Young, 1991). Further, MacIntyre and Gardner's research indicates that language learning anxiety is too stammering and fidgeting. Worry refers to cognitive reactions, such as self-deprecating thoughts or task irrelevant thoughts (Zeidner, 1998; Naveh-Benjamin, 1991). Worry is seen as the more debilitating of two because it occupies cognitive capacity that otherwise would be devoted to the task in hand, for example, speaking a foreign language (Tobias, 1985).

Two models of anxiety emerged from Tobias' research: an interference model of anxiety and an interference retrieval model. An interference retrieval model relates to anxiety as inhibiting the recall of previously learned material at the output stage, whereas a skills deficit model relates to problems at the input and processing stages of learning, as a result of poor study habits, or a lack of knowledge. Recent research in language learning has provided some support for this theory (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1994; Onwuegbuzic, Bailey and Daley, 2000).

Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) made a valuable contribution to theorizing and measurement in language learning anxiety. They considered anxiety as comprising three components: communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. Horwitz and colleagues viewed the construct of foreign language anxiety as more than a sum of its parts and define foreign language anxiety as a distinct complex of self perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviors related to classroom learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process (Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope, 1986; Horwitz, 1986). Emerging from this research was the thirty-three item Foreign Language Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). This scale has been used in a large number of research projects (Horwitz, 2001). The scale has been found to be reliable and valid (Aida, 1994; Cheng, Horwitz and Sehallert, 1999).

Most language learning anxiety research has focused on a one dimensional domain anxiety. This conceptualization reflects the anxiety that occurs in classroom settings (Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope, 1986; Aida, 1994; Phillips, 1992). The orientation of this conceptualization rests with the linguistic setting of the students learning the language. A lot of research into language learning anxiety is based on the target language that takes place in the classroom. Other research focuses on learning English in a non-English speaking country. It is possible that classroom communication could be considered more anxiety provoking than many communicative events faced in everyday life by students not living in a second language environment.

3. Data Collection and Data Sources

The present study aims to shed light on second language speaking anxiety experienced by English learners studying at prep school of Anadolu University in Turkey. Qualitative data collection techniques were used as research methods for this study. Data were collected using an open-ended questionnaire developed for this purpose and also by oral interviews. The relationship between second language anxiety and speaking performance was examined and the major causes of anxiety were investigated.

Participants are all from the same class. Their English level is lower-intermediate and their mother tongue is Turkish. They have been studying at School of Foreign Languages at Anadolu University for two semesters, except for two of them, they have been studying at the English Preparatory School for four semesters. Participants who answered the questionnaire are twenty students and the number of the ones who had oral interview is eight. Moreover, they are classified into two according to their suffering from anxiety or not. Six students were detected to suffer from anxiety while speaking English according to the answers provided by students to the questionnaire. Eight students were interviewed; six of them are the anxious ones and two of them have stated that they feel very comfortable while speaking English. The reason why these two students were interviewed is to find out what they do to feel comfortable and maybe the things they apply can be beneficial for the anxious ones.

The following questions were used in the questionnaire:

- 1- I become/do not become anxious when I have to speak English because.....
- 2- I like/do not like speaking English because.....
- 3- I feel.....when I speak English in front of a crowded audience
- 4- What can be useful to make me speak English voluntarily is.....
- 5- What I need to be able to speak English in a better way is.....

The questions used in the oral interview were as follows:

- 1- How do you feel when have to speak English? Do you feel anxious or excited? Why/not?
- 2- What can be the factors affecting oral performance? Have you eve thought about what makes you feel anxious? What makes you feel excited that much?
- 3- Do you participate in speaking course voluntarily? How often? If you do not, why?
- 4- What can be done to overcome anxiety problem? What do you think can be done? What can your teacher do to help you speak English without being anxious

4. Data Analysis and Interpretation

According to the data gathered from the questionnaire, six of the participants suffer from anxiety while speaking English and all of them have stated this during the oral interviews. Data are categorized according to answers provided to the questions in the open-ended questionnaire.

Question 1: The participants were asked whether they become anxious while speaking English, or not and %60 of the participants have stated that they do not; whereas, the rest, which accounts for %40 have said that they suffer from anxiety while speaking English.

After detecting which students become anxious, the researcher focused on the reasons of their anxiety by the help of both the first question in the questionnaire and oral interviews. The reasons are arranged according to their frequency among six participants who are anxious and some reasons occurred more than once.

Reason 1: Lack of word knowledge > 6 participants (all of them) > %30

Reason 2: Lack of gramer and syntax knowledge > 5 participants > %25

Reason 3: Fear of Failure > 2 participants > %10

Reason 4: Lack of practice opportunity > 2 participants > %10

Reason 5: Not being able to speak English despite having enough knowledge to speak >1 participant >%5

Reason 6: Not wanting to make me wait while listening > 1 participant > %5

Question 2: By asking this question, the purpose was to find out if students like speaking English, or not with their own reasons. According to the result; 16 of 20 participants like speaking English which makes %80 and the rest, 4 participants, %20 of the participants have stated that they dislike speaking English.

Reasons of like for speaking English:

- 2- Feeling cool and happy while speaking a foreign language > 4 participants > %25
- 3- Beneficial for future job opportunities > 2 participants > %12.5
- 4- Liking English language > 2 participants > %12.5

Reasons of dislike for speaking English:

- 1- Fear of failure and afraid of not being able to pass prep school > 2 participants > %50
- 2- Being ashamed of speaking English in front of a crowd > 1 participant > %25
- 3- Feeling anxious while speaking English > 1 participant > %25

Question 3: 20 participants have told how they feel when they have to speak English in front of crowd.

- 1- I feel so comfortable that I feel no fear or anxiety > 8 participants > %40
- 2- I feel happy and cool > 3 participants > %15
- 3- I feel nothing > 3 participants > %15
- 4- I feel like a foreigner > 2 participants > %10
- 5- I feel anxious and become ashamed because I am afraid of making mistakes > 2 participants > %10
- 6- I become anxious because I dislike speaking in any language > 1 participant > %5
- 7- My cheeks become red and I start trembling when I realize that people are looking at me > 1 participant > %5

Question 4: The purpose in asking this question was to find out what the researcher could do to help them participate in the lesson more. Answers are various:

- A > I think I participate enough > 6 participants > %30
- B > I would participate more if there were no grading system in prep school > 6 participants > %30
- C > I would participate more if prep school education were not obligatory > 2 participants > %10
- D > I would speak English more if I had a chance to talk to my teacher face-to-face without anyone > 2 participants > %10
- E > If there were only games and free chat in English rather than course topics, I would like to speak more during the lesson > 2 participants > %10
- F > I want the management to change our coursebook since it is boring > 1 participant > %5
- G > I think it would be useful for us if speaking and listening were not integrated since 8 hours is not enough > 1 participant > %5

Question 5: This question was asked since the researcher wanted to know what was necessary for students to speak English in a better way and their answers were not very different from each other, which was not surprising.

- Idea 1 > Much more practice > 8 participants > %40
- Idea 2 > Much more word knowledge > 6 participants > %30
- Idea 3 > An opportunity to be in an English speaking community > 4 participants > %20
- Idea 4 > Overcoming my anxiety by myself > 2 participants > %10

After examining the answers of the questionnaire, the answers provided to the questionnaire were compared with the ones of the oral interview for data triangulation. The answers were the same in both of them, so were the reasons of the answers and ideas of learners. After examining the reasons of anxiety while speaking English, possible solutions to overcome this problem were sought by taking students' ideas and suggestions into consideration.

5. Action Plan

Based on the inferences obtained from the research, the following activities were planned:

More practice: Participants stated that they suffered from anxiety because they did not have enough opportunity to practise; therefore, the researcher decided to focus more on speaking activities after completing the requirements of the syllabus. As they had two weeks, i.e. 16 hours for speaking, the researcher tried to do whatever the students wanted. For example, on Monday after the classes were over, the researcher met the students out of the class; they sat on the grass and chatted in English. At the first time, 12 students came but when they met on Wednesday, the number of the participants was 18, which made the researcher really happy. They talked about their hometowns, the foods they like and even their boy/girlfriend. They wanted the researcher to teach some informal patterns, too. They were able to do this activity for only five times because of lack of time, but the researcher realized that they really

liked it. As in class activities, rather than wanting them to speak in front of the whole class, the researcher preferred to reduce the number of audience and she arranged pairs and groups according to how they liked, then she gave them some topics to discuss and some situations which were suitable for role play. Besides, she wrote some informal patterns, idioms and reduced forms of some words such as *wanna* and *ain't* and emphasized that they may use them while talking to a foreigner. It was interesting that many students noted them down. What the most beneficial activity for them was that the researcher sat next to every student one by one and started chatting on social issues. Why the researcher thinks this was the most beneficial activity is that because even the most anxious student felt comfortable while they were chatting and they expressed this both after their chat and in the second oral interview. These were the things the researcher could apply to her course to overcome anxiety because students' other suggestions were a kind of fiction; for example, they wanted prep school not to be obligatory, they wanted the course book to be changed, they wished to have an opportunity to be in an English speaking community and they wanted the grading system to be abolished.

Study on vocabulary, grammar and syntax: A common reason for anxiety of the students was lack of vocabulary, grammar and syntax knowledge as they had stated both in the questionnaire and oral interview. To be able to help them on this matter, the researcher gave correlative and subordinating conjunctions and all kinds of adverbial clauses. The reason for wanting students to learn these topics was that because the researcher believes these topics are really crucial for English language syntax. If they knew how to combine complex and compound sentence, they would be able to produce longer and more meaningful sentences, therefore they could speak fluently. The researcher gave them some exercise and they checked them together in class. They also asked the points which they started to study grammar from test books to pass the Proficiency Exam. It was observed that they had less difficulty than before with questions. In their point of view, studying on these is not only beneficial for their grammar but also for the improvement of their speaking ability. The researcher also advised them to use these structures while speaking and when she talked to them, she stressed these to make them realize their usage in speech.

To increase their vocabulary knowledge, the researcher gave them some vocabulary tests. They practised them together in class, they noted down the ones that they had not known before and she taught students some common collocations they may use during speech such as *spend money* and *make a change*. Learners tried to create their own sentences by using these new collocations and the ones they had known before, by this way, they could remember them in a better way. The researcher checked to what extent they recall the words or collocations and consistently reminded them to use the new vocabulary.

After all these applications, in the last day of school the researcher talked to all of the students and recorded eight oral interviews with the same students; six anxious students and again two comfortable ones. The same students were chosen to interview in order to see any possible changes. Oral interviews were conducted in Turkish to help participants to feel more comfortable while talking. Two students who do not suffer from anxiety have stated that they have liked the activities done in the last two weeks and these activities helped them to speak in a more fluent way. Moreover, they really liked the chats they had on the grass.

When the six anxious learners were asked how they feel while speaking English and if the activities conducted in the last two weeks worked or helped them reduce their anxiety level or not, they all stated that they feel more comfortable while speaking English, especially with the researcher and their idea was that this would help them in their final speaking exam since they would try to use the words, collocations, grammatical patterns in speech and pretend as if they were talking to their teacher during the exam and with a foreigner in the future.

6. Conclusion

After conducting this action research, it was realized that in every class a teacher may face some problems but through a systematic research, s/he can find out the reasons of the problem and working on those, s/he can overcome the problem if enough patience is given. The researcher has done her best not only to help the students to improve themselves by overcoming their problem, which was 'anxiety' while speaking English and become a more fluent and accurate speaker who has self-confidence, but also to improve herself as a novice teacher and her teaching. Teaching is a kind of profession which requires pursuing professional development consistently to be a beneficial teacher for learners. Teachers should always be patient to observe themselves and their students and if they detect a

problem, they should work on it systematically to find out its possible reasons and solutions to overcome it, which is not that difficult.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my teacher, advisor and director Ass. Prof. Dr. Aysel Bahçe for not only teaching me the importance of action research and pursuing professional development, but also guiding a novice teacher voluntarily as an experienced teacher in the process of both conducting and editing this study by her regular feedback and invaluable advice.

References

- Gardner, R. C., and P. D. MacIntyre (1993). A student's contribution to second language learning. Part II: Affective variables. *Language Teaching*, 26: 1-11..
- Gardner, R.C., P. Smythe. R. Clement and L. Gliskman (1976). Second language learning: A social psychological perspective. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 32, 198-213.
- Holmes-Smith, P. (2000). Introduction to structural equation modeling using AMOS 4.0. and LISREL. Paper presented at the ACSPRI 2000 summer program, Elsternwick.
- Horwitz, E. K. (1991). Preliminary evidence for the reliability and validity of a foreign language anxiety scale. In E. K. Horwitz and D. J. Young (Eds.). *Language anxiety: From theory and research to classroom implications*. New York: Prentice Hall.
- Horwitz, E. K., M. E. Horwitz and J. Cope (1986). Foreign language classroom anxiety. *Modern Language Journal*, 70, 125-32.
- MacIntyre, P. D. (1999). Language anxiety: A review of the research for language teacher. In D. J. Young (Ed.). *Affect in foreign language and second language learning: A practical guide to creating a low-anxiety classroom atmosphere*. Boston: McGraw-Hill College.
- MacIntyre, P. D.. and R. C. Gardner (1989). Anxiety and language learning: Towards a theoretical clarification. *Language Learning*, 39, 251-75.