

**SPEAKING ANXIETY: A PILOT STUDY AMONG THE ESL
UNDERGRADUATES AT THE SOUTH EASTERN UNIVERSITY OF SRI
LANKA**

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Abstract:

Fear to speak in front of other students in the class or an audience is the most common fear faced by many second or foreign language learners in English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as a foreign Language (EFL) classes. The same scenario exists in Sri Lanka too where the ESL instructors constantly find it a problem to conduct speaking classes since students do not contribute to the classroom discourse or cooperate with them in speaking activities. It was believed that inadequate language proficiency was the problem for poor speaking ability but later studies revealed that anxiety is one of the hindering factors to prevent students from speaking in classes. The reasons for anxiety vary based on the context and setting. Hence, identifying the causes of speaking anxiety of ESL learners may help ESL teachers develop the communication skills of their students.

This study, which is a pilot study on speaking anxiety of ESL students, specifically investigates the speaking anxiety faced by students in the ESL undergraduate classes of the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka (SEUSL). Second year students of one of the faculties were used as the respondents for this study. A questionnaire survey was used, followed by focus group discussions with the students. It is revealed that more than 90% of the students experience a form of anxiety in the ESL classes. This anxiety is more pronounced during oral tests and in-class presentations. This paper elaborates the causes of anxiety and suggests measures to rectify the situation.

Key words: English as a Second Language (ESL); English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Speaking anxiety; Undergraduates; Sri Lanka

Introduction

Anxiety is one of the affective factors of second language acquisition (SLA) (Trang, Moni & Baldauf, 2012). Even though it does not directly influence the SLA it influences the motivation level of students. Anxiety could be facilitating or debilitating. The former motivates to work harder, whereas the latter demotivates the learner from the learning activity.

Speaking often causes anxiety among ESL learners because learners are forced to perform beyond their present level of competency. ESL Teachers or instructors should be able to identify the anxiety factors among their learners and help them cope with the anxiety in order to facilitate the learning of a second language (Khairi & Nurul Lina, 2010). Every learner has his or her own experience in anxiety especially in language learning. Teacher should help learners to cope with anxiety because it can prevent them to perform well in the second language.

As English language is the basic tool for communication in international and local contexts it is important to develop speaking skills. However developing speaking skills can be influenced by different factors. One of the major factors among them is anxiety. Different scholars and researchers define anxiety in various notions. Spielberger (1983) describes the term anxiety as the “subjective feeling of tension, nervousness and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system” (p. 15). Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope (1986) define second language anxiety as “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process” (ibid p. 128). They further explain speaking anxiety as:

“some learners may claim to have a mental block against anxiety when they come to speak a second or foreign language. It makes students have less confidence, stress, and nervousness that impede their learning process. The psychological factors should be identified early before deducing and controlling them to cope with the mental block” (Horwitz et al., p. 125).

MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) consider that anxiety can be “the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language context including speaking” (p.284). In the language learning process there are three types of anxiety (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991). One is trait anxiety. Trait anxiety is a personality trait refers to the stable predisposition to become anxious in any situations (Spielberger, 1983). A person who is trait anxious is likely to feel anxious in a variety of situations. Another type is state anxiety. State anxiety is an apprehension experienced at a particular moment in time. State anxiety is a temporary response to a particular stimulus (Spielberger, 1983). For example, a person may not ordinarily be anxious but he feels anxious when he is asked to address a public speech. State anxiety, on the other hand, is a temporary condition experienced at a particular moment. The third type of anxiety is situation specific anxiety. This is also known as a situational anxiety. MacIntyre & Gardner (1991) define situational anxiety as this is experienced in a well-defined situation. This reflects a trait that recurs in specific situations (Spielberger, Anton and Bedell, 1976). The studies on language learning anxiety have indicated that language learning can be considered as situation specific anxiety by MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) as well as by Horwitz (2001, cited in Woodrow, 2006). This situation specific anxiety occurs during a learning situation, such as classroom talk and disappears when the activity is over (Woodrow, 2006).

Within the scope of this study, researchers focus on the speaking anxiety in ESL classes. This is also known as communication apprehension. The communication apprehension or speaking anxiety refers to uneasiness of the students while they are learning second or foreign language. They feel uncomfortable with the speaking activities including speaking tests and oral presentations in the classroom. This problem can be seen in Sri Lanka too. Because of this speaking anxiety many students do not like to go to English classes or sit at the back of the classroom when they attend the classes. Most of the time the language instructors do not realize the constraints arising from anxiety in classrooms and this may lead to misunderstanding and unsuccessful teaching and learning experience. Hence it's very important to find out the factors that cause speaking anxiety in ESL classrooms within the Sri Lankan

context. Though many research studies centering on the notion of language anxiety as well as the speaking anxiety are conducted, within Sri Lankan context presumably this study would be the pioneer.

This research study focuses on the following research questions.

1. What factors cause speaking anxiety among undergraduates in ESL classes?
2. Which strategies can be used to successfully cope with speaking anxiety in ESL classes?

Statement of the problem

Speaking English is one of the main skills of ESL teaching/learning. Hence, speaking anxiety is a very common problem to the learners. Most of the learners face anxiety in learning second or foreign language, especially in speaking classes. Worde (1998) claims that more than half of the foreign language learners encounter some degree of anxiety. Anxiety is very common problem at the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka too. Based on students' reactions in speaking English in classes it can be inferred that majority of the students feel anxious and worried to speak. Anxiety can be a hindering factor that prevents learner from participating in successful communication. Moreover, students who feel anxious manifest their reaction in several ways such as avoiding eye contact, sitting at the back of the classroom, looking very tired and so on. If an instructor calls a student to give an answer for a question he/she feels very uncomfortable and remains silent. Hence it's very important to find out the factors of speaking anxiety among ESL learners at SEUSL. This research investigates the factors that cause speaking anxiety and identifies effective ways to cope with it.

Literature review

Different researchers have investigated the issues of learning anxiety from different points of views. Many researchers have found the factors which cause anxiety in Asian and Southeast Asian contexts. They identified several reasons which cause speaking anxiety in ESL as well EFL (English as a Foreign Language) contexts. The common

belief from the previous research on speaking anxiety is that anxiety is the most dominant factor that influences students' speaking ability in classrooms.

Horwitz (1986) is the pioneer who identified the causes of language anxiety in 1986. He prepared the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) listing out the factors to measure anxiety in common. Moreover, the researchers who examined the factors that cause speaking anxiety used the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) in order to find out the factors and sources of foreign language learning anxiety as well as speaking anxiety. The FLCAS containing 33 statements aims to measure the communication apprehension or speaking anxiety of students including test anxiety, etc. Each item found in the FLCAS is rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 5 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree). Later, many researchers adopted FLCAS to find out the level of anxiety in their studies.

In 1990, Young (1990) conducted a research to examine the sources of speaking anxiety. The researcher developed questionnaires related with foreign language speaking anxiety and conducted the research with 135 university students and 109 high school learners. He found out that speaking foreign language was not the problem for the learners but mainly speaking in front of the students and teachers was the problem. Kitano (2001) conducted a research to investigate sources of speaking anxiety for college level students. He conducted the research with 212 students who learnt Japanese in America. They answered the items in the scale prepared by Horwitz (1986). The results showed that participants' self-perception affected the anxiety level. He found that students with low self-perceived ability in speaking skill experienced more anxiety compared to those who had higher self-perceived speaking ability. The researcher also found that fear of negative evaluation by the instructors of the students causes high level of speaking anxiety among the learners.

Many studies have been conducted in EFL learning contexts. The results of the studies revealed various factors which greatly affect the performance of students in speaking English as a foreign language. Naghadeh et al. (2014) conducted a study with Iranian English major students at Payame Noor University. The results exposed that there was

an inverse relationship between learners' speaking ability and their speaking anxiety. The researcher noted that when the students were at the lower level of speaking ability, higher level of speaking anxiety was faced by the students.

Osboe et al. (2007) conducted a research study at a university in Japan to investigate the speaking anxiety among Japanese learners. As an outcome of their research it was revealed that the anxiety had highly affected students' confidence and the learners who were asked to perform in front of the class felt less confident. But when they were placed in small discussion groups or in pairs they had high confidence to speak English.

Influence on gender differences on speaking anxiety was also looked into. Sadeghi, Mohammadi and Sedaghatgoftar (2013) conducted a study with 38 male and 38 female Iranian learners of English using FLCAS scale. The results revealed that the female students were more anxious than male students. Fear of making mistakes, preparedness, linguistic difficulties, socio-cultural factors, instructor-learner relationship and self-perception were identified as the major factors of speaking anxiety among those Chinese learners. Similarly Mahmoodzadeh (2012) conducted a research study with Iranian English learners to investigate foreign language speaking anxiety. The study identified that the female students were more susceptible and had higher levels of speaking anxiety than the male students. In contrast, Tianjian's study brought different results. In 2010, a study on speaking anxiety was conducted by Tianjian (2010) in Chinese context. He examined the relationship between speaking anxiety and the variables of trait anxiety, gender and proficiency. He found that though there was not an important connection between speaking anxiety and gender, there was statistically important negative connection between proficiency and speaking anxiety.

Aydin (1999) investigated the sources of anxiety for EFL learners in speaking and writing skills in Turkish context. Thirty-six intermediate level learners were asked to complete FLCAS and their levels of anxiety were determined. The results indicated the factors that affected the speaking anxiety. They were learner-related factors as well as teacher related factors. The former are self-assessment of ability, self-comparison

to others, negative self-assessment, high personal expectation and learner beliefs. The latter are the teacher related factors such as reaction of teachers towards students' errors and the students.

Another research study was conducted by Ibrahim and Mohammed (2015) at Ahfad Women University in Sudan. They investigated the sources of English language speaking anxiety from the university students' perspective. Sixty students were selected from the university and asked to complete the Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety Scale (FLSAS) to measure the foreign language speaking anxiety levels of students. The results revealed that the students attributed the speaking anxiety to personal reasons such as fear of communication, language proficiency, low-self-esteem, lack of confidence, error correction and the teaching procedures.

Vitasari, Nubli, Othman & Awag (2010) conducted a vast research at University of Malaysia Pahang in 2010. 770 students were selected to identify study anxiety sources among university students. The study identified five sources of anxiety such as exam anxiety, class presentations anxiety, mathematic anxiety, language anxiety and social anxiety.

Recently Zhiping and Paramasivam (2013) conducted a research to investigate anxiety of speaking English in class among international students in Malaysian university. The sample for this research comprised 8 students including 3 African Nigerians who were ESL learners, 3 Iranians and 2 Algerians who learned English as a foreign language. The results showed that there were several reasons behind their speaking anxiety such as fear of being in public and shyness, fear of negative evaluation, and fear of speaking inaccurately. Moreover, they identified students' strategies for coping with anxiety such as keeping silent, avoiding eye contact, being with friends and expressive reactions.

The foregoing review indicates several reasons for speaking anxiety found among ESL/EFL students. It also suggests that despite the fact that speaking anxiety has been widely researched in different contexts, the studies are more leaned towards EFL contexts. Sri Lanka where English is used as a second language. Hence, the research

studies have not been undertaken to the knowledge of the researchers. Speaking anxiety, being considered a potential constraint that prevents successful communication in the classroom, a study in this area is felt important.

Methodology

A mixed method research is adopted in this study to investigate factors that cause anxiety in speaking English among ESL learners in the SEUSL. A questionnaire survey was used, followed by in-depth discussions. Students were met in four separate groups for focus group discussions. 50 students were selected as samples from one of the faculties of the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka. The name of the faculty is not revealed as agreed with the students. The participants were selected from two groups which are already in place for English classes. Thus, the sampling was convenient sampling. The factors of speaking anxiety in English language are measured by the students' responses to the questionnaire and from student discussions.

Findings

Respondents' details

The respondents are second year undergraduate students of a faculty of the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka. Their age ranges from 22 to 25. Fifty students participated in the study, of them 35 are female students.

Gender: 50 participants

Female students - 35 (70%)

Male students - 15 (30%)

Preference to learn English

Sixty-six percent of the students like to learn English subject and the reasons for preference was found to be the following:

Table 1: Reasons for liking the English subject

English is an easy language

Learning English helps getting jobs easily
Students are eager to learn English
English is an International language
English is an important language
Learning English helps to improve life

On the other hand, 34% of the students did not like learning English and they also stated different reasons for their dislike. They find it difficult to understand English and their language proficiency is also limited. As a result, they lack interest to study English.

When the students were asked whether they liked to learn English during their school days only around one-third of the students stated that they had liked. Their preference arises from the reasons that they were interested to study English and they found the text books were simple and easy to follow. Some of them stated that English was their favourite subject and they had felt the importance of learning English at schools too.

Conversely those majority of the students who disliked learning English at schools came out with different reasons such as they did not have a good teacher for the subject, they lacked basic language proficiency, and felt that the subject was difficult for them. Moreover, they were not interested to study English nor were they motivated to learn English.

Students' speaking ability

Thirty three students of the fifty reported that they have average speaking ability when they were asked to assess themselves of their speaking ability. None of the students claimed to have excellent, while 15 students assessed themselves as poor and very poor.

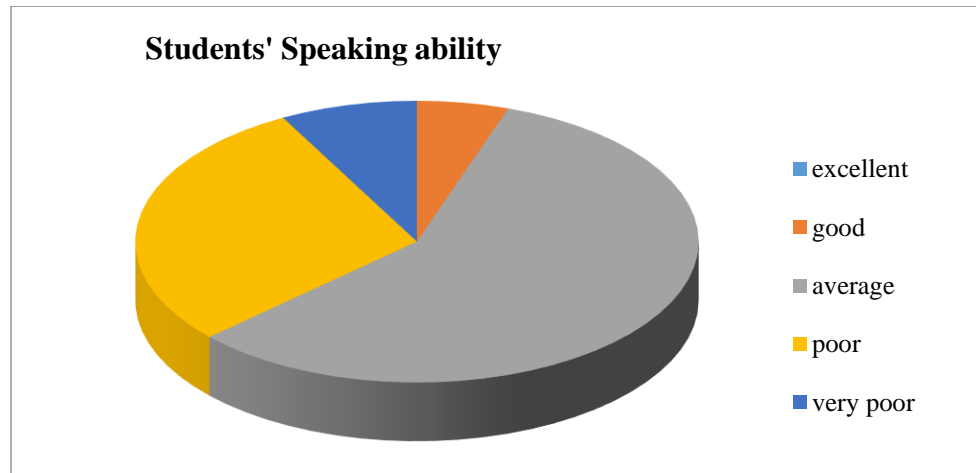


Figure 1: Self-assessment of students' speaking ability

Students' experience in speaking anxiety in ESL classes

Nearly 95% of the students stated that they have experienced anxiety in English classes. Anxiety is a kind of excitement or fear they feel when they were asked any questions or asked to make a speech or presentation. The situations when they felt anxiety is given in the order they mostly felt anxiety to least felt:

1. Oral test time
2. Oral presentation time
3. When instructor asks questions suddenly
4. When they describe a picture

Despite their expressions of anxiety in oral presentations, students felt that they like the oral presentations mostly, followed by conversation with colleagues and picture description. Storytelling and role plays are the least favourable activities in the class. They also stated that they like group discussions in the classrooms.

Reasons for anxiety

As reasons for anxiety, students mentioned that due to their lower language proficiency they fear or feel shy to speak in the class. It is because of the fear of being laughed at in the class or their colleagues may mock at them. Students also feel that they fear a negative evaluation from the instructors who may think students have poor language proficiency. Subsequently, students do not want to exhibit their language proficiency to the instructors. In addition, many of the students mentioned that when their names are called out they feel nervous, panic and shy too. As a result, they keep quiet or hesitant to talk. Further details on reasons for anxiety is given under discussion.

How often students feel nervous/ anxious in the speaking class

Students reported that they feel anxiety only ‘sometimes’. Out of the five scale from always to never, around 55% of the students selected ‘sometimes’ and only 25% opted for ‘always’. This is in contradiction to the expectation that majority would select always. Only 2% of the students selected rarely/never.

How often students participate in the classroom speaking activities

Despite several opportunities available in the classroom to participate in different speaking activities students reported the following as the frequency of their participation in classroom activities. Majority of the students mentioned ‘sometimes’.

Table 2: Students’ participation in classroom activities

Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
8%	16%	68%	5%	3%

Students’ reaction when their names are called out by the instructor

The respondents were asked to mark only one option that describes their state well. Hence, the majority had selected nervousness, followed by shyness and hesitation. No one has opted for anger but they felt panic and freeze-up too.

Table 3: Students’ reactions when their names are called

Reaction	No. of students
Nervousness	23
Shyness	11
Hesitation	06
Panic	05
Freeze up	05
Anger	00

How do the students behave when they feel anxiety?

The students were asked how they reacted when they felt anxiety. They had multiple options to select from and were free to select more than one option. Their preferences were given in the order of priority below.

Table 4: students' behaviour during anxiety

Behaviour	% of students who reported
1. Feeling nervous	89
2. Accelerated heartbeat and heart pounding	84
3. Feeling uneasy	76
4. Maintaining less eye contact with instructor	66
5. Remaining silent	68
6. Panic	34
7. Smiling and nodding head	29
8. Freeze up	26
9. Feel tension	24
10. Seeking friends for help	21
11. Worrying about the difficult situation in front of the students	16
12. Not showing interest in the activity	13
13. Feel fear	11
14. Loss of concentration in the study	8
15. Feeling headache	5
16. Biting the nails	5
17. Feel shyness	3
18. Take in deep breath	3
19. Anger	3

Most of the students felt nervous and accelerated heartbeat. Also they felt uneasy and started to avoid eye contact with the instructors. None of them got anger.

Strategies to overcome speaking anxiety in the classroom

Students were asked how they overcome anxiety in the classroom. They suggested several strategies. Of them important ones are avoiding eye contacts, making prayers, and sitting at the back of the classroom. Some other interesting strategies are pretending as busy with taking notes, smiling and keeping quiet and start flipping through the book.

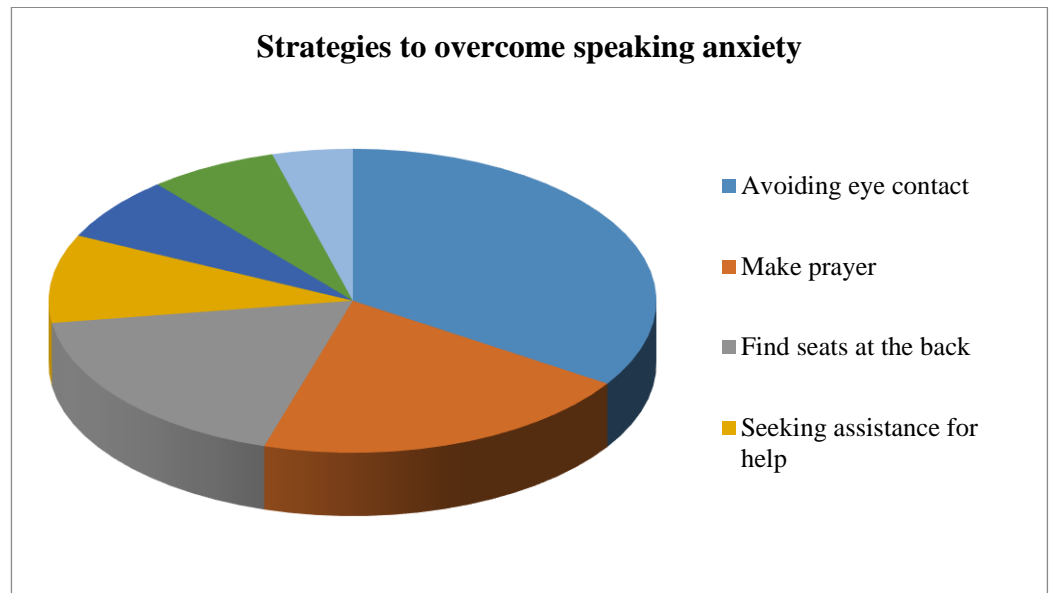


Figure 2: Strategies to overcome speaking anxiety

Students were also asked about other kinds of possible strategies that can be practised in the classroom to reduce anxiety. They are given in the table below.

Table 3: Possible strategies to reduce anxiety

Strategies	% of students reported
Develop positive thinking and self-confidence	68
Discuss the questions with peers	63
Speak or practice English speaking with familiar topics	47
Share the problems in with instructors in speaking English	50
Having friendly and supportive classroom environment	40
Participate more in speaking activities in classroom	5

DISCUSSION

What factors do cause English language speaking anxiety among ESL learners in learning?

The findings from Focus Group Discussions reveal several factors that cause speaking anxiety in classrooms. Factors like fear of speaking English in classes, fear of making mistakes, test anxiety, and fear of being negatively evaluated by instructor. Majority

of the students agreed that they get nervous when they speak. Hence the communication apprehension is known as the primary factor that causes speaking anxiety among ESL undergraduates. 90% of the students agreed that they could feel their heart pounding when they were going to be called on in English classes. This statement reveals that most of the students do not like to come forward to speak because of this communication fear.

In addition the majority of the students feel test anxiety in their speaking tests. Test anxiety is known as one of the major factors in speaking anxiety. Forty-five of the fifty students interviewed stated that that they feel panic in English speaking tests more than the other tests. The reasons for this situation they have mentioned were lack of vocabulary and fear of making grammar errors while speaking.

Lack of confidence also contributes for anxiety. Students compare themselves with others. This affects their speaking confidence. Most of the students reported agreed that they are afraid that the other students would laugh at them when they speak in English. They always feel that other students speak English better than they do.

Another factor that causes anxiety is fear of making mistakes in front of all. Students feel fear to speak English in front of the instructor as well as students. They are afraid that others will laugh at them if they make errors or mistakes in front of them. Lack of preparation of the students causes speaking anxiety. Many agreed that they start to panic when they have to speak without preparations in classroom.

Resentment towards English classes is also a factor for developing anxiety among the learners. Some students do not like English classes as the same way they like other subjects. Because of this reason the students do not like to go to English classes. When they are compelled to attend the classes and get involved in speaking activities, they tend to feel anxious in the classes.

Which strategies/ solutions can be used to successfully cope with speaking anxiety?

Students adopted different strategies to overcome speaking anxiety in ESL classes. Forty students out of the fifty mentioned that an effective way to reduce speaking

anxiety was to develop positive thinking and self- confidence. In addition, the students stated that sharing the problems in speaking with the instructor or peers is an effective way to control anxiety. Practicing speaking activities with familiar topics, participating more in speaking activities in classroom are some other measures adopted by students.

Moreover, the students mentioned some strategies to overcome this speaking anxiety such as avoiding eye contact with the instructor, finding seats at the back, pretend as an innocent student to instructor, make prayers, starting to write when the instructor is ready to ask questions, smiling and nodding head when the instructor asks questions, looking ahead in the book and start flipping through book, remaining silent, and seeking help from friends.

CONCLUSION

This study identifies factors that cause anxiety and how students behave in the classroom when they feel anxiety. Based on the present study majority of the students who took part in the study experienced a form of anxiety or nervousness especially in English classes. Even though some of the students are capable of speaking English the factor of anxiety prevents them from expressing their speaking ability in the classroom.

Speaking English is very important in English language learning. Based on the performances of the students at the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka students lack speaking skill compared to other activities in the classroom. This study attempts to suggest measures to reduce their speaking anxiety in the classroom. As this has been a pilot study it focused on students from a particular faculty who speak the same language. The scope of the present study is limited and would warrant further in-depth studies in future.

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