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Exploring Speaking Anxiety Among Port Dickson Polytechnic Students

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Abstract

Second language anxiety has a debilitating effect on the oral performance of speakers of English as a second language. This article describes a research project concerning the conceptualization of second language speaking anxiety, the relationship between anxiety and second language performance, and the major reported causes of second language anxiety. The study's purpose was to examine how a teacher can encourage students to communicate orally but also to learn why the phenomenon is not dealt with more in learning institutions. The study is mainly based on literature but also contains a questionnaire. It is found that speaking anxiety inhibits students from speaking which has a negative effect on their oral skills. The study also shows that speaking anxiety is not a prioritized problem in schools, a reason can be that speaking anxiety is not seen as a problem concerning language teaching since it can be considered as a social difficulty. Nevertheless, since oral proficiency is a big part of the English course in the Polytechnic syllabus, speaking anxious students have a harder time mastering the goals for education than other students. In order to encourage speaking in a classroom it is important to strive for a pleasant atmosphere where every student can feel relaxed and motivated to communicate orally.

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1. Introduction

“Education shall be adapted to each pupil's preconditions and needs. Account shall also be taken of the varying circumstances, needs and knowledge of pupils, as well as the fact that there are a variety of ways of attaining these goals. Special attention must be given to those pupils who for different reasons experience difficulties in attaining the goals for education.”

These statements are a part of our national curriculum. English is one of the core subjects in the Malaysian schools which mean that it is obligatory for every class. Oral communication especially is a big part of our everyday life and nowadays it is not unusual to hear a person speak several different languages. However, in most cases we feel most comfortable with speaking our mother tongue since it is the language we have learned naturally. To speak is therefore natural for most people and not something we bother to think about. When we speak we also at the same ask for attention, and share our thoughts and feelings with other people. In other words, speaking makes us visible and is a big part of our social life. To learn a new language is therefore a great accomplishment which opens up doors to many new opportunities and experiences.

To practice speaking is a central part of English lessons in schools today. It is however also in these situations that our students easily become speechless. It is not a surprising reaction since most of us are used to become less talkative in new situations where we feel insecure. A similar feeling is produced when we are attending a job interview, or give a speech in front of a large group of people. We say that we feel nervous, shy, tense or anxious. These are however feelings that we know vanish with time. If not, it would probably be a huge obstacle for one's oral communication and one would probably be marked as a shy and withdrawn person.

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In a classroom, there are a lot of different individuals. A language teacher surely hopes that the majority of them are outgoing and talkative since those are the characteristics of a good language learner. But what about those quiet students? Do they attain the goals for the English course and should they receive special attention? We are after all striving after an education of equal opportunity.

2. Objective

The objective of this study is to investigate in what way speaking anxiety can affect second language acquisition. Secondly, I wish to examine why this phenomenon is not dealt with more in polytechnic and how a teacher can encourage students to communicate orally.

3. Methodology

This study is mainly based on literature. Since the topic of the study, speaking anxiety, is also covered by terms such as speaking apprehension, inhibition of speech, and communication apprehension, I have used different terms when searching for material. I have decided however to use only the term *speaking anxiety* in the study. The second part of my study contains a questionnaire to find out how students perceive speaking anxiety and the obstacle they have to face on a day to day basis. Furthermore, I have referred to my own teaching experiences and thoughts.

4. Speaking Anxiety

When looking up the word anxiety it is described as:

“An abnormal and overwhelming sense of apprehension and fear often marked by physiological signs (as sweating, tension, and increased pulse), by doubt concerning the reality and nature of the threat, and by self-doubt about one's capacity to cope with it.”

Anxiety is explained as a sort of fear that is manifested by visual signs. I have therefore interpreted the word speaking anxiety as a fear of expressing oneself orally which can be recognized by the physiological signs mentioned above. It is most likely that these signs can obstruct and inhibit one's ability to speak since a person who experiences that kind of anxiety will not be able to focus on the speaking process.

Irregular heartbeat, perspiration, stumbling and an inability to act are a few symptoms that block one's capacity to act and speak. Lanerfeldt explains that this issue often turns into a vicious circle because one bad experience from speaking often becomes a reminder when the next opportunity arises. If a student with speaking anxiety experience failure he or she will rather remain quiet than take the risk of failing again. This situation drags them into a silence that becomes more and more difficult to break since it contributes to a role as “the quiet one” in class. Speaking anxiety creates a low self-confidence which makes students remain quiet in all situations, even if they have the capacity to express themselves and knowledge that is worth hearing.

“If students are not using English everyone is wasting their time.”

The above cited quote is from Jeremy Harmer's book *The practice of English language teaching*. He explains that a situation where students are not speaking English is often seen as a teacher/student failure. When reading about different teaching methods and theories it is evident that using target language in the classroom is very central. Harmer also argues that it is a question of the age of students, how much English they can already speak and what tasks they are doing. He states that code-switching is acceptable if it is done to further students' understanding of English, or in pedagogical situations such as explaining grammar or giving instructions. If the students are doing oral fluency activities however, the use of English becomes more significant. He also explains that teachers have a lot of responsibility in language acquisition since they are the source of comprehensible input and therefore it is important that the teacher speaks as much English as possible in the classroom.

5. What Causes Fear of Speaking

Speaking anxiety has to do with fear, which in most cases has developed from bad prior experiences. It is frequently suggested that children who have not been encouraged to speak from an early stage also create a weaker communicative behaviour pattern. Becoming silent at an early stage also contributes to limited opportunities to practice oral skills. Parents' behaviour and views on outspokenness have therefore a great impact on children's speaking development.

When children that are not used to speaking out are confronted with schools' challenging requirements in oral proficiency, their inhibition often results in silence and withdrawnness. Students who have speech anxiety are often very calm and passive and can therefore also receive less attention from teachers in comparison with noisy, antisocial and aggressive children. Since these students do not cause any discipline problems their "calls for help" are seldom noticed, which contributes to them sinking in to a deeper and deeper silence. These students usually give up very early and continue to be quiet throughout their years in school. Margaretha Lanerfeldt argues that speaking anxiety is a speaking disorder such as stuttering. However, in contrast to stuttering, speaking anxious people's handicap is not acceptable. The difference is that other speech impediments have an advantage, because teachers and students can be aware of them and therefore not demand the same type of oral presentation. In contrast, students with speaking anxiety are seen as weaker as and less motivated than others, which also have an effect on their grades.

6. Questionnaire

Since one of my intentions with this study was to examine how speaking anxiety can affect second language acquisition and also how teachers can deal with speaking anxious students I found it relevant to design a questionnaire and distribute it to 30 Polytechnic students.

7. Findings

After the questionnaire was distributed and data was analysed, it appeared to be that most of them developed anxiety as early as 7 years old. This was due to the lack of exposure to 2nd language and the lack of speaking the language publicly. Some students are very loud and outgoing and some are shy and quiet. When a student is shy and quiet as a person it is often seen as a positive characteristic. Nevertheless when a student is quiet all the time including during discussions, seminars and speaking activities it becomes a question of something more than just shyness. This is a problem many students have but also something that is very hard for a teacher to identify and understand. Speaking anxiety makes school and especially language courses very hard to master since communication is an important part of them.

8. Conclusion

Speaking anxiety affects second language learning since it impedes students in improving their oral skills which is crucial when learning a new language. It automatically affects students' grades since syllabuses demand oral proficiency and activities in classrooms often require oral communication. I believe that it is important to understand that it is inhibition that is a major obstacle to second language acquisition since it makes students not practice their oral proficiency. Inhibition can nevertheless have many different reasons. This study has shown that speaking anxiety can partly explain problems in language learning. I have noticed that most books about language learning explain inhibition as one problem in second language acquisition which mostly also has one way to be solved, for example by creating a more pleasant classroom atmosphere. It is believable however that inhibition can be solved differently depending on what makes a student inhibited. A student that stutters may have the same problem as the speaking anxious one but they have completely different grounds and therefore also different solutions.

Since fear of speaking has a direct connection with fear of exposure and not feeling confident in a group it is probably also there the solution lies. The questionnaire also point out the importance of a pleasant classroom atmosphere. It is also underlined in the study made by Freidman and Sober and also by Penny Ur and Jeremy Harmer. Another frequently mentioned solution is working in smaller groups. The main part of making students willing to speak is to make sure that they get along with their classmates and feel supported. It is therefore very important to work with speaking activities as fast as possible after a class is put together. It also prevents the vicious circle to be formed if one is trained to speak right from the beginning. To make a class participate in easier short speaking activities every day could probably be useful for a class's speaking development.

Speaking anxiety can be hard to recognize since everyone can feel anxious sometimes, in contrast with other learning difficulties. I can however agree with Lightbown who argue that one should distinguish temporary anxiety from anxiety that interferes with a student's learning process since that form of anxiety hinders all oral communication in the classroom. Speaking anxiety seems to be an obstacle for language learning which in my opinion therefore makes it worth highlighting in those areas as well. Research about speaking anxiety from a pedagogical perspective might be a way to raise awareness about this topic. This study has convinced me that speaking anxiety is not a prioritized problem in polytechnic today. It is paradoxical though when looking over the Malaysian national curriculum and reading about the importance of communication skills and the schools responsibility of improving them.

9. Recommendation

As a current language teacher, I believe it very important to find out what the reason for a student's constant silence is. It is pointless to spend a long time in a language classroom if one is never going to use the language orally. If a student has the ability to speak but does not, something obviously must be wrong. What surprises me though is the fact that a large amount of these students never get the help they need during their years in school. They are there, in a classroom with the capacity to speak and probably many interesting things to say that are never said. These students' knowledge is being wasted, not to mention their self-esteem is being undermined, and nothing is done about it. The teachers interviewed in this study use to handle the problem with anxious students by allowing them to perform orally individually or in smaller groups. Perhaps that can be a problem in itself since these students then are excluded from speaking activities that are important for their language learning. I believe that teachers instead should work towards making the speaking anxious students feel comfortable about communicating orally with their classmates.

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