

A study of anxiety among the Graduation Learners of English as a Foreign Language in Pakistan.

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Abstract: The learning of English as a foreign language in Pakistan takes place in two different types of Educational Institutions – Urdu and English Medium. Some students, in a pilot study, were reported to have acquitted themselves well in their language class while others not so well, particularly in speaking the language in the classroom. The main reason for low performance in this regard was reportedly attributed to anxiety and nervousness among the low performers. In order to ascertain this hypothesis empirically, this researcher carried out a full fledged research to this effect. The study as such used qualitative semi- structured individual interviews and focus group discussion. A total of thirty four participants including twenty seven learners and seven experienced language teachers participated in the research. The findings suggest that anxiety in communication stems, on the one hand, in the learners from their self created perceptions and beliefs about themselves, and on the other, from the strict and formal classroom environment in the educational institutions. On the basis of these findings the study suggests some measures to be followed in the classroom to alleviate the element of anxiety in the learners. Such measures are expected to yield positive results in the performance of the learners.

1. Introduction

Foreign language scholars, teachers and learners have long been interested in identifying variables which affect the process of foreign language learning. Foreign language researchers have empirically found that variables play a vital role in learners' success or failure in academic settings in learning a foreign language. Krashen (1985) observed speaking/talking in classroom as the most anxiety stimulating activity for learners. Kim (1998) reported that students in a reading classroom undergo lower anxiety level than students in conversation class.

This study intends to find the answer of the following research questions related to anxiety in Pakistani learners in English at advanced level.

- 1) What kind of anxiety is encountered by Pakistani learners in speaking English language?
- 2) What are the various factors of anxiety in speaking English in language classrooms?
- 3) What kind of techniques can be used to alleviate anxiety while the English language in the class?

2. Literature Review

Anxiety which stems from learning and speaking a foreign language is termed as 'Foreign language anxiety'. This multifaceted phenomenon was defined as "distinct complex of self-conceptions, beliefs, feelings and behavior related to classroom learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986, p. 128).

Some researchers reported a negative relationship between foreign language anxiety and language achievement (Clément, Gardner, & Smythe, 1980; Clément, Gardner, & Smythe, 1977). However, others reported no relationship or a positive relationship between language anxiety and performance (Backman, 1976; Chastain, 1975; Pimseleur, Mosberg, & Morrison, 1962; Scovel, 1978).

Research on 'Language anxiety' has suggested that certain false beliefs about language learning have a constant source of tension, anxiety and frustration in the classroom (Horwitz et al., 1986, p. 127). Gynan (1989) used terms such as 'erroneous' and 'irrational' for the beliefs held about language learning by learners which can be a constant source of anxiety..

In addition to unrealistic beliefs different activities performed in the language classroom which mainly involves speaking in front of the class, have been marked out as most anxiety provoking factors. Koch and Terrell (1991: cited in Young, 1991, p. 429 and Horwitz 2001, p. 119) found that in Natural Approach classes

more than half of their subjects expressed oral presentations and oral skills in front of the class as most anxiety-producing activities.

3. Methodology

In order to shed light on diverse experiences of individuals, qualitative method was considered as an appropriate approach in this study.

3.1 Population

The population of the present study was a large university i.e. **COMSATS** Institute of Information Technology at Lahore, Pakistan where total of 4671 students were enrolled in various disciplines at graduation, post graduation, M.Phil and PhD levels.

3.2 Participants

The participants of the study were seven experienced Non-Native teachers of English Language and twenty seven university students of graduation level. Out of thirty four subjects, eighteen were males and sixteen were females. Their ages ranged between seventeen years to thirty eight years. The teaching experience of all teachers ranged between one and a half years to eleven years at various levels.

3.3 Instrument

a. Individual Interviews

Individual interviews were conducted from learners as well as teachers within two weeks time. The time taken by interviews ranged from 10 min to 20 min. All the interviews were conducted in English language and tape recorded (see appendix for questions adapted from Tanveer, 2007).

b. Focus Group interviews

Fifteen learners in total from various disciplines participated on voluntary basis in focus group discussion which lasted for about forty minutes.

3.4 Data Analysis

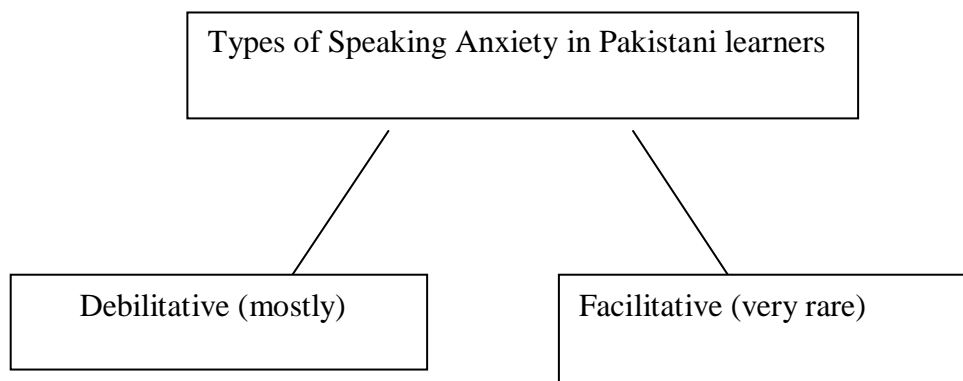
The tape recorded individual and focus group interviews of both learners and teachers were listened and transcribed 'verbatim' by the researcher. Afterwards, initial and focused group coding was applied to obtain results.

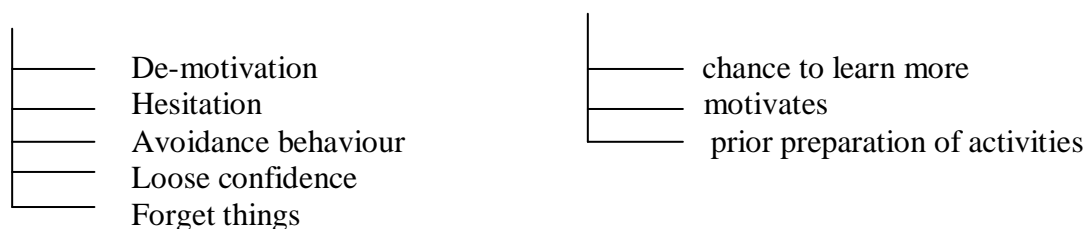
4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Types of Anxiety in Pakistani Learners

Most of the previous researches identified the enervating effect of anxiety while communicating in the foreign language (Beier, 1951; Deffenbacher, 1980; Spielberger, 1966). Consistent with the past research approximately all the participants of the present research reported the negative impact of language anxiety on communication which result in hesitation and avoidance behavior.

All the participants strongly agreed on the debilitating effect of language anxiety on learners while speaking. There were only two respondents who pointed out the facilitative effect of language anxiety apart from negative one.





4.2 Sources of Anxiety in English Language Classroom

The classroom environment, different communicative situations, and general perceptions of learners on speaking English language have been found to have strong links with language anxiety while speaking.

4.2.1 Strict and Formal Classroom Environment

Consistent with the previous research, the participants (both teachers and learners) of the present research stated strict and formal classroom environment as one of the very important cause inducing speaking anxiety in learners.

a) Fear of Negative Evaluation

Many learners asserted that classroom is the place where so many students and teachers are constantly noticing their mistakes and the responses of the class fellows make them afraid to speak.

The same apprehensive feelings of students were also pointed by language teachers. Many of them expressed that students get silent and unvoiced because of this fear clearly showing their speaking anxiety. Such responses articulate fear of negative evaluation under highly formal classroom environment which are similar to the past research which also revealed that the level of anxiety of learners increases under highly evaluative situations, specially in foreign language classroom where teachers and peers constantly monitor their performance (Daly, 1991: cited in Onwuegbuzie, Bailey, & Daley, 1999, p. 218).

Due to dual schooling system (Urdu and English medium) of Pakistan many learners are unable to develop required communicative skills in them. In Pakistan Urdu medium schools do not provide exposure and practice of second language speaking to learners. As a result, whenever they are required to express themselves in front of others the fear of negative evaluation over powers them.

b) Role of language teacher

Teacher is responsible for creating communicative environment between students. While certain teachers are strict in terms of accuracy and they believe on snubbing the students at the spot. Their humiliating methods of error correction of learners induce anxiety in them. It was also elaborated that teacher has a 'power-relation' with the students and whenever they exercise this power it stimulates language anxiety in speakers and makes the classroom environment strict. Moreover, many of students felt that the method of error-correction of certain teachers is so direct and humiliating that they never want to participate in their class.

In Pakistani education system mostly teacher is an 'authoritative' figure and learning is 'teacher-oriented' instead of students. This reduces students' chance to speak in classrooms to a great extent. The negative image of teachers in the mind of students does not let them participate in their classrooms and they avoid future communication attempts and prefer to remain silent.

c) Classroom activities

Different classroom activities make classroom environment threatening for learners. Participants were of the view that class presentations make the classroom environment stressful and highly formal. Even the very confident learner expressed his inability and lack of confidence in giving presentations.

Similarly, teachers also articulated that students have to collect material and arrange data before giving presentation in front of the audience; which was found by many learners as stressful activity of language classrooms.

The present research reinforced the findings of previous research by Young (1990), Koch and Terrell (1991) and Price (1991). All of them found that participants of their study considered oral presentations most anxiety-provoking activity in the language classroom.

Apart from class presentations, pointing students to speak or to give answers of the questions asked stimulates anxiety in them. On the other hand, group activities were pointed to be less anxious and comfortable by language teachers. In group work they have room to divide, discuss and share the given activity. In group work anxiety is present in learners but its level decreases.

Most of the learners agreed with the teachers that group work is less anxiety inducing. Those individuals who tried to escape from individual tasks for them group work is relaxing. It was found that many students in university at graduation level had their schooling in Urdu medium where English was just taken as a subject to obtain marks by cramming. Moreover, in Urdu medium schools learners normally start learning English language from grade five or above from very simple text books.

Such exposure to English language is not sufficient for students at all. When such learners reach at their university level, where different classroom activities are compulsory part of language classroom and good mastery of language is required. They find themselves unable to express due to low English proficiency which increases their anxiety many folds. In addition to that, the teachers who use to teach in Urdu medium schools are mostly found to be strict, authoritative and less skilled in language classrooms. This makes language classroom uncomfortable and exasperating for learners.

4.2.2 Self-related cognitions and perceptions about speaking English

Past research has revealed that anxiety in learners is created by their “cognitive interferences based on self-related cognitions” (Tanveer, 2007). The self-perceptions of learners, beliefs about speaking English language, perceived scholastic competence and self-esteem are some of the factors related to learners’ cognition which produced language anxiety in them (see Krashen, 1985; Horwitz et al., 1986; Onwuegbuzie et al., 1999). Some of the self-related cognitions identified in this research correspond to earlier cited cognitions, but they vary from individual’s personality traits and their experience of foreign language learning.

Many of the teachers posited that their students believe that they cannot speak English at all. They perceive English as a tough language. This feeling makes them tense and anxious about speaking English language.

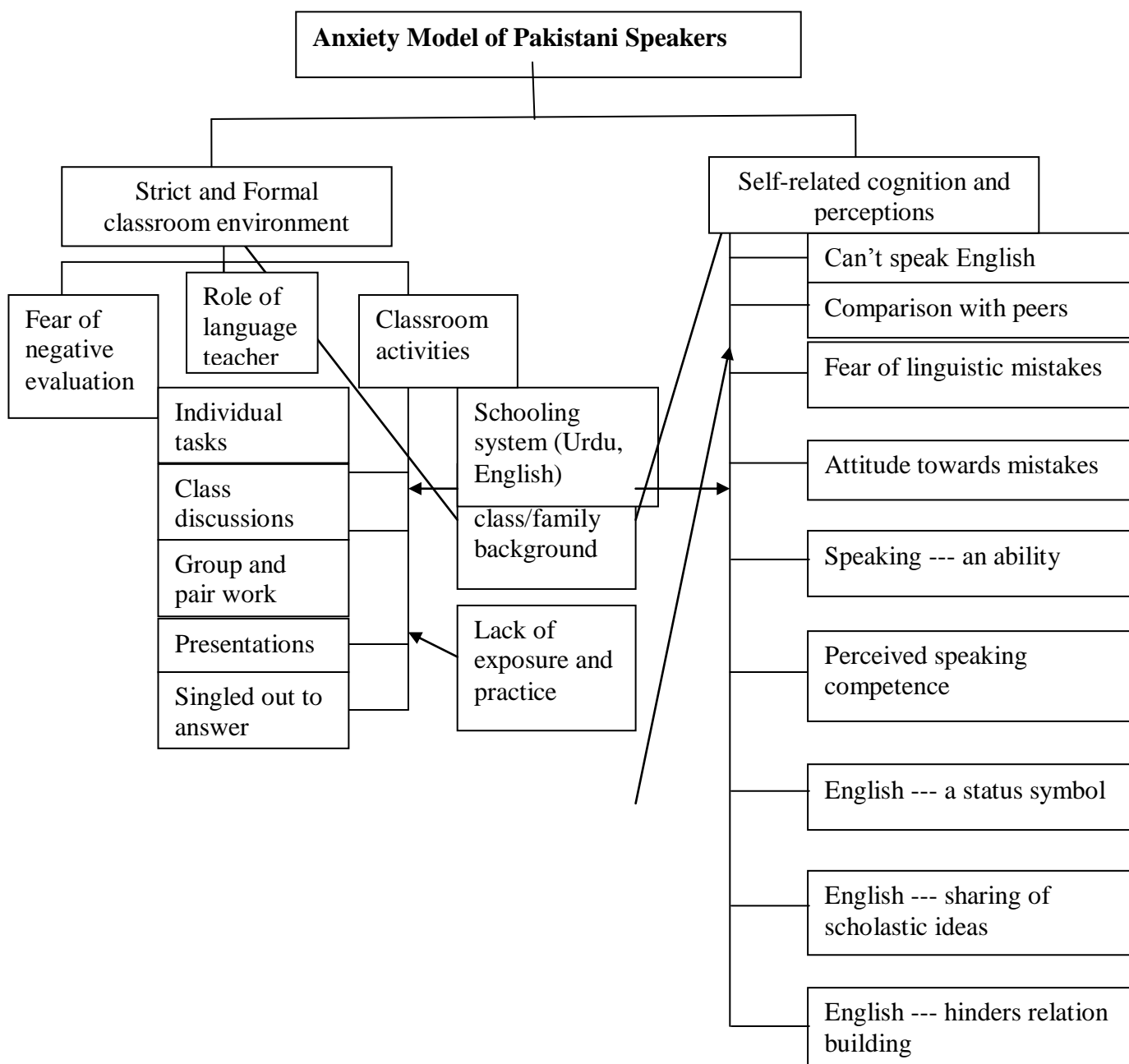
Many of the teachers and learners shared identical views on the students’ believe expressing their inability to speak English. One of the reasons for this perception is comparison with peers. As a result of this comparison many learners felt that they cannot speak English. This also generates inferiority complex in them.

A female teacher asserted that many of the students believe that there is no room for mistakes while speaking. For them making mistakes was something highly negative. Another belief of learners was pointed by another teacher that speaking a language is ability, not possessed by all. This is consistent with the findings of Horwitz et al. (1986).

Another identified belief of students was that many students compare themselves with the anchors and actors in TV and movies. They feel that they should be like them and in practical life when they find themselves unable to express the way they think; this creates a negative perception in them about their abilities and language competence.

One more perception about speaking English was that it is used to share scholarly ideas only by learned and educated people. The most important belief of students was that speaking English is a ‘status’ symbol and many of them felt that people speak English to ‘show-off’ not to convey their message.

The same belief of students was assured by teachers that general prevalent perception in our society is that English is a ‘status symbol’ and people use to ‘show off’ knowledge. It is considered in our society that English is language of elite class and people use it to impress somebody rather than conveying knowledge or ideas. Moreover, people believe that a person who speaks English belongs to educated and economically well settle family.



4.3 Strategies to Reduce Speaking Anxiety

In order to improve speaking, by lowering anxiety of learners in foreign language following techniques are suggested in language classrooms.

1. Truly communicative approach should be applied by language teachers which provide learners with maximum room for practice of speaking English.
2. Teachers should be supportive and congenial and should utilize indirect method of error correction.
3. Students should be realized that errors are part of speaking.
4. Adequate time for classroom activities and continuous practice should be provided to students to build up their confidence.
5. Teachers should help learners in realizing their irrational beliefs and they should be substituted with reasonable commitments for English language speaking.

6. Different creative and fun activities like discussions, presentations, interviews, videos, songs, role plays etc should be employed by language instructors tactfully to make speaking of English language fun for learners.

5. Conclusion

Like previous conducted research this interview study also revealed that speaking is most anxiety provoking second language skill. All the participants agreed that learners undergo language anxiety in speaking more than any other skill of language. There was no significant difference in the perceptions of teachers and learners on the identified language provoking factors but they differ in their experiences and observations. Almost all research participants emphasized that speaking English in front of others induces feeling of anxiety and nervousness. Most of the times classroom situations are extremely challenging to learners' communicative abilities in the form of class discussion, pair and group work, class presentations and answering questions when singled out. In addition to that, many other self-created concepts about speaking English were found to be aggravating factors of anxiety for learners.

Appendix

Interview Questions

Q1: What do you think is the role of anxiety in speaking English language?

Q 3: What are the different situations and language classroom activities that have been found by you to be anxiety- provoking?

Q 5: Have you noticed any particular kinds of beliefs or perceptions about speaking English language? and what do you think how they play a role in causing speaking anxiety?

Q 6: How do you think speaking anxiety can be successfully controlled?

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1st International Conference on Foreign Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics
May 5-7 2011 Sarajevo

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