CAUSES OF SPEAKING ANXIETY AMONG SAUDI STUDENTS: LEARNERS’ PROBLEMATIC ATTITUDES AND BELIEFS

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ABSTRACT

Speaking anxiety is considered a psychological phenomenon that occurs in different teaching and learning settings. Speaking anxiety faced by students hinders language learning and leads to other problems such as being reluctant to participate in classroom activities and overly dependent on their teachers. The purpose of this research is to explore the causes of speaking anxiety (SA) among Saudi university students in classrooms. This study employed qualitative method by using one-to-one semi-structured interviews. Data were collected during the academic years 2018/2019. A total of 20 students were involved in the interviews. Anxious personality, low confidence, wrong learners’ beliefs, unprepared learner, and negative pre-university and prior learning experience were the main causes of speaking anxiety among the Saudi students. This research emphasizes that understanding the main causes of speaking anxiety is necessary for both teachers and students to improve the learners’ speaking skill.

Keywords: Speaking anxiety, Saudi, English, learner belief, university students.


1.0 INTRODUCTION

Speaking anxiety (SA) is experienced by many students especially when they speak in front of the class. It is the feeling of shame, embarrassment, afraid of making errors during speaking. “Speaking in the foreign language is often cited by students as their most anxiety-producing experience” (Young 1990: 539).
Scovel (1978) defines anxiety as "apprehension, a vague fear that is only directly associated with an object" (p.134). Likewise, Spielberger (1983) defines anxiety as, "the subjective feelings of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry that are experienced by an individual" (cited in Wang 2005, p.13). These definitions indicate that anxiety has some basic features such as fear, unpleasant state, worry and uneasiness which may hinder the performance and abilities of individuals in different situations and in speaking skill particularly.

Many studies about Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) have been conducted in Saudi Arabia in several contexts (e.g, Aljafen, 2013; Alrabai, 2014a; Alrabai, 2014b; Alrabai, 2015; Alasmari, 2015; Alshahrani& Alandal 2015; Al-otaibi, 2016; Alshahrani, 2016; Asif, 2017). On the other hand, few studies so far on English language speaking anxiety in classrooms among male university students have been carried out in the Saudi context. The present research attempts to fill in the gap relating to the understanding and exploring of SA in the Saudi context, which is significant for the development and improvement of English language proficiency and acquisition in the kingdom.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Horwitz et al. (1986) observed psychological and physiological signs of anxiety among the members of their research such as “freezing in class, going blank before exams, and feeling reticence about entering the class” (p.128). Furthermore, their members experienced forgetfulness, dread, worry, palpitations, lack of concentration; also, they postponed their schoolwork and missed classes. Based on these findings, Horwitz et al. (1986) said that learning language settings create a unique kind of anxiety that is unlike its other kinds. This viewpoint provides a theoretical base to future studies in FLA (Tóth, 2010).

Therefore, from Horwitz et al.’s (1986) theory, Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) is not only viewed as “fears transferred to foreign language learning” (p.128) but rather theorized 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” (p.128).

Several researchers support Horwitz et al.’s (1986) theory of FLA. It has also acquired credibility and acceptance among several researchers in FLA. For example, Trang (2012) who states “Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope’s theory of foreign language anxiety has played a vital role in language anxiety research with a large number of studies using it as the theoretical framework”.

Moghaddam and Ghafournia (2019) explored the relationship between speaking anxiety in second language and language proficiency among Iranian English Foreign Language (EFL) students. The study also investigated factors of language anxiety among Iranian EFL students in both social context and in classrooms. The findings showed that the relationship between learners’ language proficiency and their language anxiety was significant. It also suggested different methods to deal with language anxiety. The data revealed several factors for language anxiety among learners such as linguistic, psychological, cultural, social, and environmental factors. For example, the sources of language anxiety related to psychology were shortage of motivation, over expectation from
others, and shortage of confidence. Also, the findings revealed that the instructors had an important role in decreasing and increasing language anxiety among learners.

Regarding the context of current study - Saudi Arabia - many studies explored language learning anxiety in general without focusing on speaking aspect amongst Saudi EFL learners. For example, Asif (2017) investigated the causes of language anxiety among Saudi EFL students. The findings showed that FLA has a significant role in EFL learning among Saudi learners. The findings revealed that most of the Saudi EFL students were afraid of committing mistakes, they have no initiative, and they favor to keep quiet to avoid making mistakes in front of their peers. The findings also revealed that lack of English vocabulary and discouraging classroom environment are considered as major causes of anxiety among Saudi EFL learners.

On the other hand, few studies in Saudi Arabia were conducted about Speaking Anxiety (SA) in particular. For example, Rafada and Madini (2017b) investigated the main reasons of speaking anxiety among Saudi EFL students in language classrooms. The main reasons of speaking anxiety were: lack of vocabulary, oral test anxiety, teachers' role in reducing or raising anxiety, schools' weak educational system, and peer anxiety. EFL teachers, tests, and classroom atmosphere were the main three themes and domains.

Saudi English Foreign Language students might also experience Speaking Anxiety (SA) due to factors such as their own lack of speaking proficiency, test-oriented learning and teacher-centered classrooms. These causes and other causes have been also stated as sources of SA in other studies (e.g, Aydin et al., 2018; Ahmed et al., 2017; Bensalem, 2017; Leong & Ahmadi, 2017; Zhou, 2017; Akkakoson, 2016; Lababidi, 2016).

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This research adopts qualitative method by using one-to-one semi-structured interviews.

Data generation took place in the entire Semester one of the academic years 2018/2019. The semester began in September 2018 and ended in January 2019. The data was collected from four main branches of Al-Ghad colleges for Applied Sciences in the main cities in Saudi Arabia namely Riyadh, Alqassem, Najran, and Medina. The participants for the interview were 20 students, five from each branch in order to have students from all research sites. They were all male and aged from 18-22 years old.

Criterion sampling approach was used in the current research in order to select teacher and student interviewees, which appears a main strategy in qualitative studies. Kuzel (1992) and Patton (1990) indicate that this strategy permits the researcher to select the participants who has a desire to participate and meet some important and useful particular criteria for the research. The criteria for choosing interviewees’ students were any student who was available and willing to be interviewed.

The data was analyzed by using thematic analysis. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. The data were obtained from these transcribing interviews. The data were classified into themes that arose from analysis. The following code was used in the transcription SI (refers to students’ interview). The names of students are kept anonymous and they were replaced byS1, S2, S3 etcetera.
4.0 FINDINGS

Interviews in this study supplied an outlet for learners to express their concerns, views and feelings about their anxiety during speaking English. The findings showed that speaking anxiety was caused by the following learners’ problematic attitudes and beliefs.

4.1 Anxious Personality

The interviews revealed that some learners may have an apprehensive personality and experience anxiety in different situations. Similarly, some studies state that some learners tend to experience SA (e.g., Alsowat, 2016; Zhang, 2010; Tóth, 2010).

The interviews revealed that some students were introvert and shy; consequently, it was a hard mission for them to speak and use English in front of too many learners in the classroom. Furthermore, they sometimes were not comfortable even talking in their native language in front of a large audience. The following remark was presented by student 20 in his interview:

Excerpt 4.1
I sometimes feel anxious speaking Arabic in front of public. Nevertheless, speaking English is very hard job. You can’t see how difficult it is for me to talk in English in classroom. I know this refers to my personality.

(SI, 20)

The next excerpt from the interview with Student 10 indicates that learners with an anxious character may have wrong anxiety’s perceptions. He declared:

Excerpt 4.2
I sometimes remain worried in classroom because of the fear that the instructor will only request me to speak but sometimes the instructor even does not observe me and I experience anxiety without any cause.

(SI, 10)

In conclusion, some learners may possess an anxious personality; so, they are more apt to have anxiety. Furthermore, they seem to experience anxiety in different situations.

4.2 Low Confidence

The interviews showed that learners’ lack of confidence in their abilities in speaking English can lead to SA. For example, Student 11 has no desire to speak because he thought:

Excerpt 4.3
I never be true. I realize I can’t speak similar to other learners. I know I will commit grammatical errors.

(SI, 11)

So, lack of confidence seems to seriously hinder learners’ learning. Some students aware the shortage of confidence impacts their progress. Perhaps they need positive reinforcement and some guidance from the instructor. For example, student two stated in his interview:
Excerpt 4.4
I should push myself to participate. If I keep thinking if I wrong or right and I don’t attempt, I won’t improve or learn.

(SI, 2)

4.3 Wrong Learners’ Beliefs

The data proposed that some learners can bear impractical beliefs for speaking and learning English and they could feel unsatisfied if these unrealistic expectations do not become reality. For example, Student 9 believed that:

Excerpt 4.5
Mastering grammar can only assist me to speak English without mistakes. I can’t speak English until my brain is intelligent enough to translate thoughts from English into Arabic. It is hard to speak in English language …. I can’t talk English properly.

(SI, 9)

Some learners had a faith that good oral skills need certain aptitudes; for example, an “intelligent memory” and an “intelligent mind”. As student 12 stated:

Excerpt 4.6
I am not smart; so, I cannot talk easily. I know three students who are clever and they express in English very excellent.

(SI, 12)

4.4 Unprepared Learner

Most of students stated in interviews lack of preparation as a reason of SA. The following remark by student eight shows that learners may get fail, lose confidence, and confused to complete their mission if requested to talk unprepared:

Excerpt 4.7
I stayed silent for more than half minute when my teacher told me to talk about a topic that I didn’t prepare. Then, I gave a very short talk and again became silent. I remember that I couldn’t concentrate and I felt that I had no ideas in my mind. It was a type of pain. It was unfamiliar.

(SI, 8)

Student three also agreed:

Excerpt 4.8
Not preparing of speaking is depressing and difficult.

(SI, 3)

4.5 Negative Pre-university and Prior Learning Experience

The data revealed that SA may also come from learners’ earlier negative experiences about oral communication. MacIntyre and Gardner (1989) state the majority of learners enter a new studying environment with their prior experiences about language learning. Moreover, Sila (2010) debates that learners with former SA experience are more willing to feel anxious in
alike situations in future. If learners have prior bad learning involvements, they may increase anxiety in their new lecture and do poorly, because it could be difficult for them to replace their negative viewpoint of speaking foreign language. Furthermore Kim (2009) and Horwitz (2010) debates that students’ experiences in their early school may also produce their anxiety besides their target language.

For example, Student one clarified in his interview:

Excerpt 4.9
When I was in school, My English instructor used to hit me … I was frightened of the instructor. I sometimes feel anxious in my present class without any reason although the environment is better than in my school. I can’t participate confidently … I am fearful of doing errors when speaking.

(SI, 1)

This point is in line with MacIntyre and Gardner (1989) who claim that language learners’ former negative experiences may come from the instructor.

5.0 DISCUSSION
This research highlighted that the shortage of confidence causes SA among learners. Several studies have stated lack of confidence as important reason for SA (e.g, Moghaddam & Ghafournia, 2019; Asif, 2017; Gregersen, 2005; Sultan, 2012; Ito, 2008; William & Andrade, 2008; Matsuda & Gobel, 2004; MacIntyre et al., 1997).

Learners’ lack of confidence might come from several socio-cultural causes. For example, in Saudi society most of learners do not have choice and freedom of decision and expression (Asif, 2017). Parents in most cases decide their offspring’s profession or the field of study. For example, parents push their children to be engineer or doctor. Because of this reliance on their parents it may be that learners lose confidence and disbelieve their own capacities in different situations. Furthermore, it is mostly parents who rule their children’s activities, behavior and opinions. Chiding, blaming, punishing or even insulting children is common in Saudi culture. Other reasons such as: past negative experiences, authoritative instructor, past failures, learners’ shortage of speaking proficiency, unreasonable anticipations about performance, and negative beliefs towards English could also impact learners’ confidence.

This research showed that some learners may possess an anxious personality; so, they are more apt to have speaking anxiety. Furthermore, they seem to experience anxiety in different situations. This finding is in agreement with former studies (e.g, Aydin et al., 2018; Asif, 2017; Rafada & Madini, 2017a; Frantzen & Magnan, 2005).

The research revealed that some learners were discovered to be introverted and shy. Because of this introvert personality, they didn’t even feel comfortable and relaxed speaking their mother language ahead of other people. Consequently, they may not be proficient in speaking English and it is difficult for them to speak ahead of the whole class. This could be the cause that language anxiety is particular to language-learning contexts because learners in a language session have to actively take part in classroom tasks and in doing so their personality and character may be exposed. Furthermore, errors are frequent in a foreign language setting and the data showed that learners classified as introverts may worry more
and over-concern about their errors. They may discover it hard to stop thinking about their own low and poor performance and, in sequence; they may miss confidence in their abilities and expand unrealistic fears. As introverted learners are not sociable and prefer to be alone, they may not establish friendly rapports with other learners. Consequently, they may explain their instructors’ and colleagues’ criticism and opinions negatively and could choose not to take part in classroom activities and tasks any more. One significant finding of the current study indicated that introverted learners were relatively aware that their equivalent learners also make errors and hear negative feedback and comment, but that these other learners could obviously forget their seeming failure and breakdown more easily and quickly. However, introverted learners appeared unable to resolve their own low and poor performance. Because of this over-concern and worry about performance, it is possible that learners might have a phobia about the instructor, classroom and/or other learners.

When learners have to talk without preparation in advance, they may feel anxious. The learners in the current study stated that preparation would increase their confidence and let them feel relaxed when talking in class. This finding confirms the findings of Aydin et al.’ (2018) study on Turkish learners which found that Lack of readiness before speaking is one of main reasons of high FLA anxiety level among learners. Also, it is in line with Liu’s (2007) research on Chinese learners which revealed that the majority of participants stated that their mind becomes empty when speaking English in class without preparation in advance.

Horwitz et al. (1986) pointed out that some foreign language learners may have low linguistic competence; therefore, they may need more time to master speech content and grammar patterns. If learners are asked to take part in an activity without preparation, they may not do well and, consequently they may feel disappointed and demotivated. This could encourage them to avoid participating in classroom tasks and to lose attraction in learning. Shortage of preparation leads to other reasons of speaking anxiety for instance fear of making mistakes, lack of confidence and as a result learner may experience speaking anxiety as higher levels.

6.0 CONCLUSION

This article reviews major causes of speaking anxiety. Anxious personality, low confidence, wrong learners’ beliefs, unprepared learner, negative pre-university and prior learning experiences were the main causes of speaking anxiety among Saudi students. These causes were presented and discussed in order to help learners and teachers overcome speaking anxiety in classrooms. It is recommended to carry out further studies that follow each cause separately in order to investigate it comprehensively.

This research has several important implications and recommendations for language learners, teachers and educational policy-makers in Saudi Arabia. Firstly, applying systems and mechanisms for teacher-training to equip and train them with the essential skills to deal with and discourse affective issues such as anxiety which may impact learning of foreign language and speaking. Also, holding conferences and workshops about language teaching and learning to inform instructors about the language and speaking anxiety phenomena, and the helpful ways to decrease language and speaking anxiety.

It is also recommended for educational policy makers to stress more on the significance of English learning from the early stages in schools and advising the parents of learners to
support their kid’s English learning in order to encourage and support better learning and teaching.

This study used interviews as data collection instrument. It is recommended to use further qualitative tools in future studies such as focus group meetings, journal, and student diaries in order to discover more hidden data about SA. In addition, as this research explored non-major English Language students only, further comparative studies about major and non-major English may lead to find out new reasons and issues related to SA.

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