

RELATION BETWEEN INDIVIDUAL STUDENT BACKGROUND AND ANXIETY AT SPEAKING SESSION: A CASE STUDY ON MIU STUDENTS, BANGLADESH

Farzana Zaman*
Marzia Shurovi**

ABSTARACT

This paper aims to investigate the relation between individual background, personal traits and anxiety at speaking session at EFL classroom of the students of Manarat International University. Apart from looking at the reasons, manifestation, and effects of their anxiety on overall English performance, the paper proposes some probable strategies that could reduce their EFL anxiety. Direct interviews with nine students were held to extract case study data. Findings suggest that more social and extrovert learners become less shy in classroom speaking sessions than their more introvert counterparts, also they brought with them positive experience from previous English classes that in turn lessened their fear of negative feedback. All the students recommended some probable measures that could help them to overcome their speaking anxiety in classroom. To address the demotivation of majority of the students to speak up at speaking sessions in class, the study on the relation between individual student background and classroom anxiety could bring forth significant suggestions.

Keywords: *Anxiety, EFL classroom, Speaking session.*

1. INTRODUCTION

According to Rod Ellis, (1985) “Affective factors concern the emotional responses aroused by the attempts to learn a L2.” Among the affective factors that play positive and negative roles in EFL classrooms, anxiety has been receiving growing attention from the researchers in the last three decades. Horwitz et al.(1986) stated, “no other fields of study implicate self concept and self expression to the same degree as foreign language study”. So, while acquiring a new language or being asked by the teacher to speak that language, even before acquiring it at a satisfactory level, it

* Assistant Professor, Department of English, Manarat International University, Gulshan, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

** Senior Lecturer, Department of English, Manarat International University, Gulshan, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

is quite natural for a student to get afraid or anxious in front of other students or their teachers. In the early 20th century, a plethora of research was dedicated to identify the reasons, manifestations and solutions to the anxiety of students in EFL classes. As the years passed by, from 1980s onwards, the Asian researchers started probing the same predicament of EFL students at speaking sessions. This study attempts to examine the previous experience and attitude of Bangladeshi private university students, especially in context of MIU and whether it is somehow related to their anxiety in speaking at English classes. The significance of the study lies in searching for the reasons of EFL speaking anxiety which might bring some suggestions to help the students overcome such anxiety and practice speaking more in and out of English classroom.

1.1 Key Questions

1. Is the socio academic background of a student somehow related to a students' anxiety at speaking session in EFL classroom?
2. Students of what kind of social and academic background suffer from more anxiety while speaking in front of peers and teachers?
3. What measures could the teachers take to reduce their speaking anxiety in EFL classroom?

1.2 Objective of the Study

1. The study seeks to explore the relation between the socio-academic backgrounds of an individual and FLA(Foreign Language Anxiety) at speaking session.
2. To indentify the predicaments of EFL students at speaking session in the context of Manarat International University(MIU).
3. To suggest some strategies to reduce anxiety at EFL speaking session.

1.3 Literature Review

During the last two decades anxiety has been one of the most growing field of research arena particularly after Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) contended that foreign language anxiety was distinct from other anxieties. Among other researchers Bailey(1983),Brown(19780),Chastain(1975), Scovel, Aida(1994), MacIntyre and Gardner (1991,1994)were the pioneers who explored EFL anxiety and revealed epoch making theories.

EFL anxiety was classified into basic two types –trait anxiety which is the tendency of a person to be nervous or feel tension regardless of the particular circumstances and state (situational anxiety) which is nervousness or tension on particular moment in response to some outside stimulus. (MacIntyre and Gardner 1989). Daly (1991)discusses communication anxiety “*which may occur when people interact verbally.*” Horwitz and Young, (1991) explored some other facts related to classroom environment that might “*contribute to making formal foreign language learning a particular at risk experience for many learners.*”

According to David Nunan (2003), “Many people feel that speaking in a new language is harder than reading, writing and listening for two reasons. First, unlike reading or writing, speaking happens in real time. Usually the person you are talking to is waiting for you to speak right then.

Second, when you speak, you cannot edit and revise what you wish to say as you can if you are writing.”

Penny Ur (1996) says, “Learners are often inhibited about trying to say things in a foreign language in the classroom, worried about making mistakes, fearful of criticism or loosing face, or simply shy of the attention that their speech attracts.”

The anxiety that some students experience at speaking session at classroom is directly related to situational communication and classroom anxiety .This study also explores the kind of student background that might increase speaking anxiety of the students in the class.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Participants

For the case study, 9 participants were chosen from MIU with various backgrounds ranging from age 19-28. Among them, 6 were females and 3 were males. Among them 6 came from Bangla medium school background, one from English medium background and two from Madrasha background. The students were being selected on the basis of difference in terms of age, social-family background, academic background, English learning experiences, speaking performance in the class.

For the questionnaire survey, 61 students from BBA and English discipline were chosen, all of them had various schooling, social and family background. Among them 48 were females and 13 were males.

2.2. Procedure

For the case study interview, the students were informed about the objective of the study and asked to reflect on the questions carefully. The responses were obtained in written format and qualitative process was applied to analyze and present the data.

For the questionnaire survey, the students were thoroughly briefed about the meanings and explanations of each question and were assured that there were no possibility of their grades being influenced by their frank answers of those questions and for their anonymity purpose, pseudonyms for each student were used in the analysis and data presentation of the study.

After collecting the questionnaire data, SPSS analysis was done to extract the percentages of students' exposure to different usages of English at different levels, as well as their attitude to speak up in class sessions.

2.3. Materials

For the case study, questions addressing the social background, schooling and family backgrounds and feelings at speaking sessions at class were developed for stimulating a semi-structured interview of the participants.

On the other hand, for the questionnaire survey, a Needs Analysis questionnaire adapted

from Nunan (1998) was used. Apart from 14 questions there, 4 more questions were added that seemed necessary for analyzing the relation between individual student background and their anxiety at the speaking sessions in the class.

3. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

3.1 Analysis

Among the nine participants, all of them admitted that since English is an International language, it is very important for them to learn English for “higher education, good job” etc. And only two among them did express their passion for learning English- Shojol from Madrasa background and Tithi from English Medium background. Shojol said, he is “very interested to learn English” and Tithi had “great desire to learn” English. Interestingly, none of them suffered from “fear of negative feedback” from teachers and they felt that they had no special fear in speaking English in front of others. Both of them termed their previous experience of English classes as “Excellent”. For Tithi, the factor that hinders her spontaneous speaking at speaking session is “lack of information and friendly atmosphere” and Shojol mentioned “environment at class and home isn’t suitable, my near and dear ones usually laugh at me.” And they get 4/5 social meetings and conversation a month which they think help them develop spoken English. Ellis (2003) asserted, “Extroverted learners will find it easier to make contact with other users of the L2 and therefore will obtain more input.”

Among the rest, Reaz from Bangla Medium and Rony from Madrasa background admitted that they normally became afraid in their previous experience of English classes and Toma from Bangla medium said that normally she got negative feedback from her previous English classes. These three participants usually become anxious at speaking session in the classes and the various reasons are “fear of making mistakes”, “If I make mistakes, people will laugh at me, I will be a matter of fun”, “I fear when I see that people are staring at me”, “I suffer from a lot of grammatical mistakes and lack of vocabulary”, “I am not good at spoken English” etc.

All of them admitted that they suffered from “fear of negative feedback” from the teachers before they spoke in class and speaking sessions, particularly, aroused special fear in their mind. Among them, Reaz had “not a single” get together with friends or relations a month, Toma had “very rare” get together and Rony had “not at all” a social get together a month. Among the rest of the participants Santa, Rima, Marry and Shelly come from Bangla Medium who brought good experience from previous English classes, had “many” social meetings a month but became anxious at speaking sessions because of “lack of confidence”, “lack of proficiency” etc. Two reported “I stammer, feel that friends and teachers will laugh at me and my heart goes pit-a-pat” at speaking session but three of them admitted that they get afraid of negative evaluation from their teachers.

From the SPSS analysis, we can see that, as the **table 1** shows first, 47% female students and 35% male students like to learn English from listening.

Reading Writing		\$Q_1^a\$					Total
		Listening	Speaking				
Gender	Female	Count	5	4	9	4	19
		% within Gender	26.3%	21.1%	47.4%	21.1%	
		% of Total	8.9%	7.1%	16.1%	7.1%	33.9%
	Male	Count	7	9	13	8	37
		% within Gender	18.9%	24.3%	35.1%	21.6%	
		% of Total	12.5%	16.1%	23.2%	14.3%	66.1%
Total		Count	12	13	22	12	56
% of Total		21.4%	23.2%	39.3%	21.4%	100.0%	
		Female	26.3%	21.1%	47.4%	21.1%	
		Male	18.9%	24.3%	35.1%	21.6%	
		Overall	21.4%	23.2%	39.3%	21.4%	

From the SPSS analysis, we can see that, first, 47% female students and 35% male students like to learn English from listening. Surprisingly, both male and female show preference to listening rather than any other modes of learning.

Gender * Q_2 Cross tabulation						
Study Grammar Learn New Words		Q_2			Total	
		Practice Conversation				
Gender	Female	Count	2	5	12	19
		% within Gender	10.5%	26.3%	63.2%	100.0%
		% of Total	3.6%	8.9%	21.4%	33.9%
	Male	Count	11	11	15	37
		% within Gender	29.7%	29.7%	40.5%	100.0%
		% of Total	19.6%	19.6%	26.8%	66.1%
Total		Count	13	16	27	56
% within Gender		23.2%	28.6%	48.2%	100.0%	
% of Total		23.2%	28.6%	48.2%	100.0%	

Second, 63% female students like to practice conversation outside the class. And 41% male students like to converse in English out of the class.

Gender * Q_5 Cross tabulation					
Yes No		Q_5		Total	
Gender	Female	Count	15	4	19
		% within Gender	78.9%	21.1%	100.0%
		% of Total	26.8%	7.1%	33.9%
	Male	Count	30	7	37
		% within Gender	81.1%	18.9%	100.0%
		% of Total	53.6%	12.5%	66.1%
Total % within Gender % of Total		Count	45	11	56
		80.4%	19.6%	100.0%	
		80.4%	19.6%	100.0%	

Third, 81% male students and 79% female students like to learn English by talking to friends.

Gender * Q_6 Cross tabulation					
Yes No		Q_6		Total	
Gender	Female	Count	10	9	19
		% within Gender	52.6%	47.4%	100.0%
		% of Total	17.9%	16.1%	33.9%
	Male	Count	25	12	37
		% within Gender	67.6%	32.4%	100.0%
		% of Total	44.6%	21.4%	66.1%
Total % within Gender % of Total		Count	35	21	56
		62.5%	37.5%	100.0%	
		62.5%	37.5%	100.0%	

Fourth, 53% female students like to learn English with the whole class, whereas 68% male students agree that they like learning English with the whole class.

Gender * Q_11 Cross tabulation					
		Yes	Q_11		Total
		No			
Gender	Female	Count	6	13	19
		% within Gender	31.6%	68.4%	100.0%
		% of Total	10.7%	23.2%	33.9%
	Male	Count	15	22	37
		% within Gender	40.5%	59.5%	100.0%
		% of Total	26.8%	39.3%	66.1%
Total		Count	21	35	56
% within Gender			37.5%	62.5%	100.0%
% of Total			37.5%	62.5%	100.0%

Fifth, 32% female students have confidence to speak English in front of a group of people but the percentage of male students in this regard is 41%.

Gender * Q_16 Cross tabulation					
		Yes	Q_16		Total
		No			
Gender	Female	Count	12	7	19
		% within Gender	63.2%	36.8%	100.0%
		% of Total	21.4%	12.5%	33.9%
	Male	Count	16	21	37
		% within Gender	43.2%	56.8%	100.0%
		% of Total	28.6%	37.5%	66.1%
Total		Count	28	28	56
% within Gender			50.0%	50.0%	100.0%
% of Total			50.0%	50.0%	100.0%

Sixth, 63% female students communicate in English with their family members whereas about 43% of their male counterparts do that.

Last but not the least, 53% students from English medium background think that their schooling background helps them in speaking up at the tertiary level speaking sessions. And 37% Bangla medium students find their schooling background helpful in speaking English in the classes but the percentage of Madrasha background's students who feel the same is about 9% only.

3.2 Findings

- a) From the socio academic background and attitude of Shojol and Tithi, it becomes obvious that people who bear a passionate mind to learn English apart from realizing its necessity, have excellent experience at previous English classes plus mingle with a good number of people in social day to day life do not suffer from anxiety in speaking English in front of others in class.
- b) Interviewing these three people we found that socially introvert people who do not mingle with a lot of people in their day to day life and people who bring negative experience from their previous English class experience, normally become anxious at speaking sessions in the English classes. Because of their more shyness and lack of participation in speaking session, they suffer from grammatical, vocabulary as well as state or situational anxiety aroused from psychological fear of “peer pressure” or “negative feedback”.
- c) This observation confirmed that irrespective of much social mingling and previous good experiences of English classes, some people may suffer from anxiety at speaking sessions in English classes.
- d) Greater ratios of students, irrespective of the gender difference, like to learn English from listening.
- e) More female students than their male counterparts like to practice conversation in English outside the class and they communicate in English with their family members. But what is significant is a greater ratio of female students than their male counterparts admitted that they do not have enough confidence to speak up in formal situation. So, female students suffer from speaking anxiety more than the male ones.
- f) More male students than the female ones informed that they like learning English with the whole class which indicates that they suffer from speaking anxiety in formal situation much less than the female students.

Irrespective of the gender difference, the students from English medium background are already equipped with more confidence for speaking sessions at the tertiary level, here, the Bengali medium background is in second position and last comes the madrasah background. It seems that the fact that they got more practice in speaking and that their eagerness and confidence was imprinted in their mind in their childhood actually plays a vital role in lessening speaking English in class activities.

4. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

According to Horwitz et.al (1986), ‘the existence of foreign language anxiety is not a favorable phenomenon and it must be overcome by students at different stages of learning and for different language learning situations, so that they can take full advantage of foreign language instruction.’

In this study, we observed that among nine participants, all felt more or less shy to speak English in front of others and all the students except one suffered from a special feeling of ‘fear’ to speak English in the classes, (not to read, write or listen). It is obvious that any kind of anxiety will affect the overall English performance of the students and to optimize the maximum learning

opportunity of the students, it is a prerequisite of the educational institutions to reduce the student anxiety through various measures.

In this study, all the students recommended some actions that might provide them an anxiety-free environment. These are:

1. Out of 9 participants, 6 students demanded ‘friendly environment’, 1 demanded ‘very friendly and frank environment’.
2. One reported, “If the teachers teach spontaneously and treat us as own people, it will help me to overcome my anxiety. Jo McDnough and Christopher Shaw quote Bartram and Walton (1991) who see the teachers as a. Social organizer, b. Encourager, c. Time keeper, d. Counselor, e. Educator, f. language Arbiter.
3. One expected “no side comments” from friends at speaking session. Jeremy Harmer (page 272) says, “One of the reasons that discussions fail is that students are given an opinion in front of the whole class, particularly, if they cannot think of anything to say and are not, anyway confident of the language”. Many students feel extremely exposed in discussion situations.”
4. One demands, “appreciation of my effort in speaking enthusiasm from everyone at home might help us to overcome anxiety.”
5. According to another one, “If all of my teachers and friends and family members speak English and if they help me to overcome all of my mistakes” it would be helpful to him.
6. The last recommendation was “An environment where all my friends will speak English and they will also make mistakes but nobody will laugh” will be effective to overcome my speaking anxiety.
7. All agreed that group activities and pair works in class activities also lessened their anxiety. So it is clear that “environment” or “atmosphere” at home plus university English classes and university premises has to play the first and foremost key roles to reduce student anxiety in speaking classes. In this regard, family members plus relatives at home, as well as the friends plus teachers have to ‘appreciate’ or provide positive feedback to the students irrespective of how many mistakes they make while speaking English who put their effort to speak English.
8. From the questionnaire survey, it seems that more listening sessions in class activities could help build confidence to learn English, and to speak more in class sessions as the most students find listening activities interesting.
9. Separate speaking sessions for the male and female students may bring out more spontaneous responses from the female students in speaking sessions as they are less interested to speak up in front of the whole class.
10. To encourage the students to speak up in English inside and outside the class could play invaluable role to build up confidence in their minds for speaking activities.

REFERENCES

- Andrade, Melvin. Kenneth Williams. (2009). Foreign Language Learning Anxiety in Japanese EFL University Classes: Physical, Emotional, Expressive and verbal Reactions. *Sophia Junior College Faculty Journal*. Vol 29. 1-24.
- Ellis, Rod. (1985). *Understanding Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford University Press.
- Harmer, Jeremy. (2001). (2001). *The Practice of English Language Teaching*. Essex: Pearson Education Limited.
- McDonough, Jo. Christopher Shaw. (1993). *Materials and Methods in ELT*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors.
- Mirjan, Harck. Stella Hurd (2005). Exploring the link between Language Anxiety and Learner Self Management in open language learning context. *European Journal of Open Distance and E-Learning*, Vol.2.
- Mohammadi, Ebrahim Ghorbas, Reza Biria , Marsour Koosha. Azan Shahsa vari (2013). The relationship between Foreign Language Anxiety and Language Learning Strategies among university students. *Theory and practice in Language Studies*, vol.3, Mo.4, 637-646.
- Nunan, David.(2003). *Practical English Language Teaching*. New York: Mcgraw-Hill companies, inc.
- Onwuegbuzie, J. Anthony (2000). The Validation of Three Scales Measuring Anxiety at Different Stages of the Foreign Language Learning Process. The Input Anxiety Scale, The Processing Anxiety Scale, and The Output Anxiety Scale Learning. *Language Learning*, 50:1, 87-117.
- Trang, Tran Thi Thu (2012). A Review of Horwitz and Cope's Theory of Foreign Language Anxiety and the challenges to the theory. *English Language Teaching*, Vol.5, No. 1.
- Ur, Penny. (196). *A Course in language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.