Factors Causing College Students' English Speaking Anxiety

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Abstract: This research delves into the intricate relationship between speaking anxiety and the development of speaking skills in English as a Second Language (ESL) learners. Its core aim is to dissect and understand the principal elements contributing to speaking anxiety, alongside evaluating the effectiveness of diverse pedagogical strategies in addressing these issues. It used the questionnaire to collect the data. The participants are 90 college students, including freshmen and senior students. The results are that confidence levels, classroom participation anxiety, and perceived linguistic competence which can cause students' English speaking anxiety. In conclusion, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of English speaking anxiety in ESL settings, offering valuable insights for educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers. It calls for a shift in the traditional approaches to language teaching, advocating for more empathetic, student-centered, and stage-specific strategies that address the diverse needs and challenges faced by ESL learners.

1. Introduction

1.1. Contextualizing ESL Learning and the Importance of Speaking Skills

In the realm of language education, English as a Second Language (ESL) learning has emerged as a crucial area of focus in our increasingly globalized world. The ability to effectively communicate in English opens doors to a myriad of opportunities, including access to global markets, international collaboration, and cultural exchange. Speaking skills, in particular, stand at the forefront of this linguistic journey, serving not only as a tool for communication but also as a bridge connecting ESL learners to new worlds of personal and professional growth.

The importance of speaking skills in ESL learning cannot be overstated. Proficiency in spoken English is often seen as a benchmark for language mastery, impacting academic success and social integration. However, the process of acquiring these skills is laden with unique challenges, notably speaking anxiety, which can significantly hinder learners' progress and confidence. This anxiety, rooted in the fear of making mistakes or being negatively evaluated, is a common barrier faced by ESL learners. It can lead to avoidance of speaking opportunities and, consequently, a slower pace of language acquisition.

Understanding the role of speaking skills in ESL learning requires a multifaceted approach. It involves examining the psychological, pedagogical, and social dimensions of language acquisition.

From the psychological perspective, factors such as self-esteem, motivation, and anxiety play a pivotal role. Pedagogically, the effectiveness of teaching methodologies and the classroom environment are crucial. Muneera (2023) claims the support systems and opportunities for language practice available to learners significantly influence their speaking skill development.

This study delves into these dimensions, aiming to unravel the complexities surrounding speaking skills in ESL learning. It seeks to identify the barriers, both internal and external, that impede language acquisition and to explore strategies to mitigate these challenges. By doing so, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how to effectively support ESL learners in mastering speaking skills, a key component of their linguistic journey.

Therefore, there are three research questions in this study:

1) What factors can cause speaking anxiety for college students?

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Student Experience: Anxiety and Confidence

2.1.1. Interplay between Anxiety and Confidence in Language Learning

The intricate interplay between anxiety and confidence in language learning, particularly in the context of English as a Second Language (ESL), forms a pivotal aspect of student experience.

This segment of the study delves into the nuanced relationship between these two psychological constructs and their collective impact on the ESL learning process.

At the heart of this discourse lies the paradoxical nature of language learning anxiety and confidence. On one hand, anxiety, often stemming from fear of negative evaluation or communication apprehension, can significantly inhibit language acquisition. It acts as a barrier, not only impeding linguistic competence but also affecting learners' willingness to participate in language-rich interactions. This kind of anxiety, especially prevalent in speaking tasks, can stifle the spontaneous use of language, a critical component of fluency development.

Conversely, confidence in language learning emerges as a potent facilitator. It is intrinsically linked to learners' self-efficacy beliefs and their perceived competence in using the language. Confidence can be a driving force that propels students towards greater engagement, risk-taking in communication, and resilience in the face of linguistic challenges. It fosters a positive attitude towards language learning, thereby creating a more conducive environment for language acquisition.

The study aims to dissect these dynamics, exploring how anxiety can be transformed into an opportunity to build confidence. This involves a close examination of the factors that contribute to both anxiety and confidence, such as classroom environment, teaching methodologies, peer interactions, and personal language learning histories. A key focus is on how teachers can recognize and mitigate anxiety triggers while simultaneously nurturing a sense of confidence in their students.

This exploration is not just academic; it carries practical implications for ESL teaching and learning. By understanding the symbiotic relationship between anxiety and confidence, educators can tailor their approaches to foster an environment where learners feel both challenged and supported, leading to more effective language acquisition and a positive learning experience.

2.1.2. The Impact of English Language Familiarity

In the intricate landscape of ESL learning, English language familiarity emerges as a pivotal determinant in shaping student experiences, particularly in the context of anxiety and confidence. This segment of the study critically examines how the degree of familiarity with the English

language impacts learners' speaking anxiety and their confidence in using the language.

Prevailing research suggests that learners with limited prior exposure to English often encounter heightened speaking anxiety. This anxiety is not merely a byproduct of linguistic unfamiliarity but is intricately linked with cognitive and affective factors. Learners with lesser exposure to English are likely to experience a greater sense of vulnerability when speaking, owing to perceived inadequacies in vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. This perceived deficiency can lead to a fear of negative evaluation by peers and instructors, further exacerbating speaking anxiety.

Conversely, learners who have had more extensive interaction with the English language often display higher levels of confidence in their speaking abilities. Such confidence is not solely attributed to a better grasp of linguistic elements but also to a more profound familiarity with the cultural nuances and pragmatic aspects of the language. This deeper engagement with the language fosters a sense of linguistic identity and belonging, crucial in reducing anxiety and boosting confidence.

This study delves into the dynamics of language familiarity by exploring its multifaceted impact on ESL learners. Through empirical data and theoretical frameworks, it investigates how varying degrees of language exposure influence learners' emotional responses and participation in speaking activities. The study underscores the need for tailored pedagogical approaches that acknowledge the diverse linguistic backgrounds of ESL learners and the psychological ramifications of these backgrounds on their learning journey. By doing so, it aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the role of language familiarity in shaping the ESL learning experience, particularly in the realms of anxiety and confidence.

2.1.3. Empirical studies: Speaking Anxiety and Language Acquisition

The phenomenon of speaking anxiety in English as a Second Language (ESL) learning has garnered increasing attention in recent academic literature, reflecting its significant impact on language acquisition. This literature review synthesizes insights from various studies to understand better the nexus between speaking anxiety and the process of learning English as a second language.

Muneera (2023) examines the relationship between communication apprehension and self-perceived communication competence in undergraduate students, suggesting that anxiety can significantly impede perceived communicative abilities.[1]

Similarly, Jina &G (2023) focus on empowering counseling trainees with foreign language anxiety, advocating for a strengths-based approach to mitigate anxiety's adverse effects.[2]

Mahmud&Khan (2023) delve into the spoken English issues faced by Saudi undergraduate students, presenting strategies to improve English speaking proficiency[3].This is complemented by the work of KR&Alamelu (2023), who explore the effectiveness of activity-based strategies to alleviate speaking anxiety, demonstrating the potential of interactive and engaging teaching methods in reducing anxiety[4].

J. S M M R & H. N J D (2023) adopt a mixed-methods approach to understand the effects of manipulated speaking anxiety on L2 utterance and cognitive fluency. Their findings suggest that controlled exposure to anxiety-inducing situations can positively impact language fluency and cognitive processing in ESL learners.[5]

Research by Alkhaldi et al. (2023)[6] and Solomon (2023) provide qualitative insights into strategies for reducing oral communication apprehension and improving communicative competence, respectively[7]. These studies highlight the role of targeted pedagogical approaches in enhancing speaking skills and reducing anxiety.

Tianyun&Fei (2023)[8],and Ling&Somkiet (2023) further explore the correlations between self-concept, classroom anxiety, and speaking anxiety, emphasizing the psychological dimensions of language learning[9]. Zulkflee, Marimuthu&Tahir (2023) specifically address speaking anxiety in

the context of oral presentations, reflecting the situational nature of anxiety in ESL contexts[10].

In summary, this literature review underscores the multifaceted nature of speaking anxiety in ESL learning. It highlights the need for innovative, empathetic, and psychologically informed teaching strategies to effectively navigate and mitigate this challenge, thereby enhancing ESL learners' speaking skills acquisition.

3. Research Methodology and Design

3.1. Participant Selection Criteria

The study's participants comprise 90 university students, carefully selected to ensure a diverse representation of language learning experiences. The criteria for participant selection include a balance of gender, age, academic year, and self-assessed English speaking proficiency levels. This stratification aims to capture a wide array of viewpoints and experiences, thus enhancing the study's generalization and relevance to a broader ESL learner population. Three college teachers will take part in the interview.(data will be collected later).

3.2. Research Tools and Procedures

The primary research tool includes a detailed questionnaire. The questionnaire, designed to quantify aspects of speaking anxiety, encompasses items addressing confidence levels, classroom participation anxiety, and perceived linguistic competence. Participants' responses to these items, measured on a Likert scale, provide quantitative data for statistical analysis, revealing patterns and correlations within the sample.

4. Data Analysis and Discussion

4.1. Presentation of Collected Data

This segment of the study presents a comprehensive analysis of data collected from a survey and interviews involving 90 university students, aimed at exploring the nuances of English speaking anxiety in an ESL learning context.

The demographic data reveals a balanced gender distribution with 42.22% male and 57.78% female participants. The age range predominantly centers around 18 to 22 years, reflecting the typical university student age group. In terms of academic standing, the participants were almost evenly split between freshmen (43.33%) and seniors (56.67%), offering insights from both the onset and culmination of their university journey.

A significant finding from the survey data pertains to the self-assessed satisfaction levels regarding their English speaking skills. A combined 53.34% of participants expressed dissatisfaction (either 'quite unsatisfied' or 'very unsatisfied'), indicating a prevalent sense of inadequacy in speaking proficiency among the respondents. This sentiment correlates with the frequency of English classes attended, where 52.22% reported having no English classes, potentially contributing to the observed dissatisfaction and speaking anxiety.

The survey further delved into specific aspects of speaking anxiety in the classroom setting. A notable 48.89% of respondents frequently experienced discomfort and fear when speaking English without preparation, highlighting the impact of unanticipated speaking situations on anxiety levels. Similarly, 40.11% often felt embarrassed about speaking up in class, suggesting a high degree of self-consciousness among learners.

Interestingly, 52.22% of the participants reported a lack of confidence in speaking due to their

perceived inadequate English proficiency. This was further exacerbated by concerns over pronunciation and intonation, with 54.44% expressing apprehension about their vocal delivery in English.

The role of the instructor was also significant in shaping students' speaking experiences. A substantial 37.78% felt more at ease speaking in class when encouraged by their teacher, indicating the potential for positive teacher intervention in reducing speaking anxiety. However, 41.11% reported increased nervousness when facing stern or unapproachable instructors, underlining the importance of teacher demeanor in ESL classroom dynamics.

This segment of the study presents an enriched analysis of the English speaking anxiety experienced by freshmen and senior university students. The data, gathered from 90 participants, highlights distinct variations in the anxiety levels and attitudes towards speaking English between these two groups.

Senior students, represented by 51 participants, show a diverse range of anxiety levels, with a notable 51.98% frequently experiencing discomfort and fear in unanticipated speaking scenarios. Interestingly, a substantial 51.98% of seniors expressed dissatisfaction with their English speaking skills. This sentiment is perhaps influenced by the limited frequency of English classes, with a staggering 90.2% of seniors reporting no regular English classes. Despite their advanced academic standing, the lack of structured language practice seems to perpetuate a sense of inadequacy and anxiety.

In contrast, freshmen, consisting of 39 participants, exhibit a slightly different pattern. While there is still a significant level of anxiety, with 49.23% feeling nervous about speaking English, their attitudes towards speaking skills and classroom experiences differ. Freshmen are more likely to attend regular English classes (74.36% attend at least one class weekly), which might contribute to their slightly more confident approach to speaking, despite 56.41% expressing dissatisfaction with their speaking skills. This regular exposure to English in a structured setting could potentially mitigate the intensity of their speaking anxiety compared to seniors.

Both groups share concerns over pronunciation, vocabulary, and fear of negative evaluation by peers and instructors. However, seniors, having spent more time in the university environment, exhibit a more nuanced apprehension, possibly due to higher expectations set upon them and the looming professional responsibilities post-graduation. Freshmen, while still anxious, have a more formative approach to their language learning journey, often still exploring the basics of English speaking and less burdened by the expectations of fluency.

The role of instructors is pivotal across both groups. Encouragement from teachers significantly eases speaking anxiety, as reported by 37.78% of seniors and 30.77% of freshmen. Conversely, unapproachable or overly critical instructors exacerbate this anxiety, highlighting the need for empathetic and supportive teaching practices.

In conclusion, this data analysis underscores the need for tailored pedagogical strategies at different academic stages. While freshmen benefit from regular language practice and structured learning environments, seniors require more advanced, practical, and interactive speaking opportunities to overcome their anxiety. This study sheds light on the evolving nature of speaking anxiety across the university tenure, calling for adaptive teaching methods to cater to the changing needs and experiences of ESL learners.

This data analysis provides critical insights into the factors contributing to English speaking anxiety among university ESL learners. It underscores the interplay between self-perception, pedagogical practices, and the classroom environment in shaping the speaking experiences of ESL students. The findings point to the need for more supportive and engaging teaching strategies to mitigate speaking anxiety and enhance confidence among learners. This study thus contributes to a more profound understanding of the complexities surrounding English speaking anxiety in ESL

contexts, offering a foundation for future pedagogical improvements.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of English speaking anxiety in ESL settings, offering valuable insights for educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers. It calls for a shift in the traditional approaches to language teaching, advocating for more empathetic, student-centered, and stage-specific strategies that address the diverse needs and challenges faced by ESL learners. By doing so, we can create more effective and supportive learning environments that enable ESL learners to confidently navigate their journey towards English language proficiency.

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