



Kinds of Classroom Activities that Could Reduce Learners' Speaking Anxiety: An Exploration of Pakistani University English Language Learners' Perceptions

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Abstract- A sizable body of anxiety research has consistently reported that various classroom activities invoke higher levels of foreign language speaking anxiety (e.g. Horwitz, 2016; Zhang, 2010; Milan, 2019). In this reference, some studies have highlighted the need to investigate classroom activities that could alleviate students' speaking-anxiety (SA) and promote their speaking skills (e.g. Aydin, 2016; Kojima, 2007). However, a far less attention has been paid to this important topic. The present study aims to fill this research gap by exploring the perceptions of Pakistani EFL university students about the kinds of classroom activities that could help alleviate their SA. The sample for the questionnaire comprised of 170 students while 20 students were interviewed. The quantitative data were analysed through SPSS while exploratory content analysis procedure was employed to analyse the qualitative data. Results of this study highlight various classroom activities that may relieve students of SA namely, advance preparation, practice speaking, adequate wait-time, the use of Urdu, participation is voluntary, incorporation of interesting speaking activities, incorporation of activities that involve little exposure, and group work. Finally, pedagogical implications and recommendations for further studies are offered.

Keywords: speaking-anxiety (SA), English Language, classroom activities

I. INTRODUCTION

English is viewed as an international language. People across the globe believe that its knowledge is essential to ensure career success and attain economic opportunities at international as well as national level (Crystal, 2003). Hence, English is taught as a major subject in the academic institutions of many countries. In the same line, it is taught as a compulsory module from elementary to higher educational level in Pakistan. Moreover, English is used in powerful institutions such as media, judiciary, bureaucracy, and parliament (Ahmad and Rao, 2013). People in Pakistan believe that competency in English can help secure admissions in renowned institutions and get lucrative jobs. Consequently, English language acquisition is given a lot of importance by teachers, students and parents. Many Pakistani writers report that the majority of students desire to be competent in speaking skills (Shamim & Tribble, 2005). It could be due to the reason that those who can speak this language well usually succeed in getting prestigious jobs and also, they are regarded socially superior to others. However, a number of studies carried out in the Pakistani context lament that besides strong motivation and efforts, most of the students cannot communicate meaningfully in English. In the same vein, Hafeez (2004) found that the majority of English language students avoid to participate in oral tasks in the classroom. The author further stated that students show dissatisfaction and disappointment with their English language learning. Therefore, it seems useful to investigate variables that could encourage students to participate more in classroom and in turn, improve their spoken English.

Horwitz (2017) believes that anxiety is strongly associated with language learning situations. Malik et al., (2020), conclude that anxiety is the variable that most persistently influences language learning contexts. Its negative effects seem understandable because "it can interfere with the acquisition, retention, and production of the new language" (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991:86). The majority of anxiety studies conclude that oral activities in class are frequently reported source of anxious language students seeking support (Horwitz, 2010; MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012; Horwitz, 2017; Milan, 2019). Therefore, it seems imperative to explore kinds of classroom activities that could help reduce Pakistani EFL students' speaking anxiety (SA). Thus, this study is being carried out to achieve this aim.

Rationale

Gregersen (2003) and Zhang (2010) found that students report oral activities as a major source of anxiety. Likewise, Cheng (2005) concluded that activities that put students at display create higher levels of anxiety for students. In the same vein, Malik et al., (2020) and Milan (2019) highlight that various classroom

activities such as skits and presentations were found as a major contributor to anxiety. It seems that a sizable body of anxiety research strongly suggests that various classroom activities provoke SA for students. In this reference, it seems important to investigate classroom activities that could reduce students' SA and promote speaking skills. However, literature review reveals that a far less attention has been paid to the exploration of anxiety-reducing activities. Rather a number of studies have highlighted the need to investigate this topic (e.g. Aydin, 2016; Marwan, 2016; Kojima, 2007). Moreover, no study in Pakistan has specifically identified kinds of classroom activities that may decrease students' SA. Therefore, this study aims to fill this research gap.

Research Question

What kinds of classroom activities could be helpful in alleviating Pakistani EFL university students' foreign language speaking anxiety?

Significance of the Study

Keeping in view the lack of research regarding the exploration of anxiety-reducing classroom activities, it is hoped that this study will recommend the incorporation of classroom activities that may reduce students' SA and in turn, lead students to better language learning and speaking. Likewise, this study will enable Pakistani teachers to respond to their students' SA through using classroom activities that may make students comfortable in the classroom. Moreover, this study could offer recommendations for language policy-makers in Pakistan. Since there is a scarcity of studies combining both quantitative and qualitative data collection tools, (Horwitz, 2016), this study aims to utilise these both standpoints to achieve a more comprehensive view of the topic.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

There are basically three types of anxiety including trait, state and situation specific anxiety. MacIntyre (1999) believes that trait anxiety is permanent and stable. A person with trait anxiety will feel anxious in reaction to all events and situations. It means trait anxiety is not affected by any specific event or situation. State anxiety is temporary and an event or situation may determine its intensity and level (MacIntyre, 1999). This type of anxiety is associated with certain conditions. In other words, if the source of anxiety is removed, state anxiety may decrease. However, these two types of anxiety failed to explain foreign language learning anxiety since these approaches do not ask students to link their anxiety to a specific event or cause. Horwitz et al., (1986) proposed that foreign language anxiety is unique and it is different from its other kinds. Horwitz & Young (1991) argue that "probably no other field of study implicates self-concept and self-expression to the degree that language study does" (p. 31). Therefore, it could be argued that foreign language anxiety is a distinct factor because of the specific dynamics of language learning and producing it in the classroom. In a language classroom, even some brilliant L1 users may not communicate well in a foreign language and this may lead to frustration. Horwitz et al.,s (1986) definition of anxiety has attained credence by anxiety studies (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012).

Horwitz et al., (1986) introduced three related anxieties namely, test anxiety, communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation. Test anxiety refers to anxiety associates with evaluative situations such as exams, presentations, quizzes. Communication apprehensions refers to a fear experienced before or during communicative situations. Finally, fear of negative evaluation refers to anxiety aroused by the feelings that one could be evaluated negatively by others. Since the 1970s, scholars have been suggesting that language learning situations can be seriously influenced by anxiety. However, studies conducted during that time could not provide consistent results regarding the relationship between anxiety and language learning (Gregersen, 2005). In other words, some studies found that anxiety affects language learning process while others concluded a positive relationship between language learning and anxiety. However, in the 1980s, it was established that anxiety is a pervasive force in the field of language learning. For example, Krashen (1982) highlighted that anxiety diverts the attention of language students and they cannot concentrate on classroom activities. In the same line, Horwitz et al., (1986) and Young (1991) reported that almost half of the students in a language class experience higher levels of anxiety. Moreover, Tobias (1986) suggested that anxiety affects the acquisition and production of language. Since then a number of language anxiety studies in diverse contexts have clearly highlighted that anxiety has debilitating effects on the language learning and speaking process (e.g. Horwitz, 2016, 2017; Aydin, 2016; Marwan, 2016; Malik et al., 2020; Milan, 2019; Yan and Horwitz, 2008). In the same line, numerous studies have concluded that students link their anxiety with speaking skills (e.g. Liu & Jackson, 2008; Naudhani et al., 2018; Oteir & Al-Otaibi, 2019). Speaking in a foreign language could be particularly anxiety-inducing when spoken activities single out students to speak.

Various anxiety studies highlight that one of the useful methods to reduce anxiety is to make students independent learners and equipping them with anxiety coping strategies (e.g. Phillips, 1999; Ewald, 2007).

This could be done through seminars, workshops and also through informing them about strategies that could minimise their anxiety. Likewise, Horwitz (2017) states that it is important to inform students that language learning situations do produce certain levels of anxiety. Moreover, students should be taught to have positive and realistic beliefs regarding their language studies. In the same vein, certain other anxiety-reducing strategies include boosting students' self-perceived competence (Piniel & Csizér, 2015), assigning them tasks that develop their confidence (Ewald, 2007), teaching them language learning strategies (Oxford, 1999), encouraging feedback and positive reinforcement, and giving them time for advance preparation (Cheng, 2005). Huang et al., (2010) aimed to explore factors that contribute to anxiety. The findings suggested that students feel more anxious when singled out to speak, on the other hand, they feel relaxed when they perform in groups. The study further reported that students were ready to be corrected but not harshly and particularly in front of the whole class.

Moreover, Sadighi & Dastpak (2017) conducted a study in an Asian context (Iran). The study found that a social classroom environment plays a key role in motivating students and making them feel comfortable. The participants themselves suggested that such an environment can be developed through activities for example, pair and group-work and advance preparation. Students may favour group-work as this activity does not put them at display but rather gives them a chance to learn from each other. It could be argued that students may feel relaxed when they feel that other students feel anxiety as well. In this reference, Foss & Reitzel (1991) suggested that teachers should ask their students to note their feelings, fears and perceptions regarding language learning on the board. While, Crookall & Oxford (1991) suggest writing an 'agony column' that can help students find solutions to their language-related fears. Since studies reveal that fear of making mistakes provokes anxiety, Crookall & Oxford, (1991) recommend a technique called 'mistake panel'. This strategy shows that mistakes are normal and represents mistakes as an enjoyable practice. Cheng (2005) and Hurd & Xiao (2010) found that students suggested that they would feel relaxed if their teacher gives them ample time to answer to the question. Wang (2005) concluded that classroom activities for instance, small groups, easy and interesting topics, parties and games can help create a relaxed classroom environment that in turn, makes students comfortable.

III. RESEARCH METHODS

Most of the anxiety studies are descriptive in nature. There is a lack of studies examining anxiety qualitatively or through both quantitative and qualitative tools (Horwitz, 2017). Therefore, this study followed both approaches (qualitative and quantitative) to collect data. The research methods for this study include a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. The development of these both instruments was informed by previous literature and the study's aims. Both of the instruments were piloted before conducting actual research.

Research Sites and Sample

Five universities in Pakistan were selected for the collection of data. One department was taken from each university to collect the data. Sample for the questionnaire was composed of 170 Pakistani students aging between 19 to 24. These students were studying English as a non-major subject. So far the qualitative sample, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 students. Four students were interviewed from each university with the hope to find diverse data.

Data collection and Data Analysis

The first phase of the study was the administration of the questionnaire. The second phase was the conduction of semi-structured interviews. All of the ethical guidelines were ensured before, during and after the collection of the data. The quantitative data were analysed through SPSS while exploratory content analysis procedure was employed to analyse the qualitative data. The findings achieved through interviews and questionnaire are presented together below.

IV. FINDINGS

Results revealed the following eight types of classroom practices and activities that may help alleviate students' SA and encourage their speaking performance in class. It seems obvious that students prefer those activities that do not expose their inadequacies and those that allow them to prepare in advance. The following table (table 1) offers students' views regarding various classroom activities.

Table 1: Students' opinions about anxiety-reducing classroom activities

No	Statement	Very Relaxed	Moderately Relaxed	Neither Relaxed nor Anxious	Moderately Anxious	Very Anxious
1	Voluntary participation in discussions and debates in class	14.1%	52.9%	5.2%	22.9%	4.7%
2	Work in groups of 3 or 4 and prepare an oral presentation.	10%	55.8%	4.1%	23.5%	6.4%
3	Repeat something as a class after the teacher.	17%	55.8%	2.9%	20%	4.1%
4	Make an oral presentation with 2 or 3 other students in front of the class.	9.4%	50%	8.8%	27%	4.7%
5	Participate in debates in my own seat.	11.1%	50%	7.6%	25.2%	5.8%
6	Interview each other in pairs.	12.9%	62.9%	7%	11.1%	5.8%
7	Learn speaking through interesting activities such as games.	22.9%	48.2%	4.1%	21.7%	2.9%
8	Make your oral presentation to a group instead of the whole class.	11.1%	44.7%	8.2%	28.8%	7%
9	Perform oral tasks in front of the class having prepared in advance.	10%	47%	5.8%	27.6%	9.4%
10	Called upon to answer when given a sufficient time to formulate the answer.	17%	50%	5.2%	23.5%	4.1%
11	Allowed to use some Urdu when I can't express myself in English.	17%	45.8%	12.9%	22.3%	1.7%

Advance Preparation

Interviewees were unanimous in stating that they would feel more comfortable, encouraged, confident and motivated when participating in oral activities if they are allowed to prepare oral tasks in advance. They believed that this practice can reduce their SA, encourage their participation and make them feel secure during classroom oral tasks. This finding is supported by item 9 in table 1 as 57% of students agreed with this item. The analysis of interview data highlighted various advantages of preparation of speaking tasks in advance for instance, this strategy could allow learners to formulate their ideas about the task, boost their confidence and make them feel psychologically secure. In turn, students may not experience fears such as fear of negative evaluation and of making mistakes. Consequently, they may feel encouraged to participate actively. For example, Tahir stated that advance preparation allows him to “work on grammar, sentence structure and vocabulary”. Thus he felt “ready and confident during oral tasks”.

Practice Speaking

Results suggested that students would feel encouraged, confident and less anxious if they are given chances to practice speaking in class. Students suggested that their teachers should incorporate those activities in class that allow students to practice their spoken English. The benefits of practice speaking are evident in the following statement by Hussain, “if we practice more, we will learn more and improve our weak points”. So, we will not experience anxiety when asked to give presentations or participate in group discussion”. It implies that the use of activities that encourage practice speaking English could lead to better performance and eventually to less anxiety.

Adequate Wait-time

Several interviewees stated that they would feel confident, comfortable and at ease if they are provided with enough time to respond to the teacher’s question or perform in class. They believed that adequate wait-time helps them answer correctly and in this way they feel happy and relaxed. The questionnaire item 10 in table 1 confirms this finding as 67% of students agreed with this statement. Interviews suggested that giving students adequate time could help them formulate their answers and search appropriate words and thoughts. In turn, their fear of mistakes or of being laughed at could reduce. One sample comment from Javed’s interview is as follows, “I will not get confused if the teacher gives me some time to collect my ideas and words”. Another benefit of adequate wait-time as highlighted by the data was that students will have time to translate their thoughts and perceptions from Urdu into English.

The Use of Urdu

Results appear to suggest that students’ SA may decrease and spoken proficiency may increase if their teacher allows them to use some Urdu language when speaking in English. Students believed that sometimes it is difficult for them to express themselves in English and in turn, they feel frustration. Therefore, they suggested that their teachers should give them permission of using Urdu to explain difficult concepts and they will switch to English once the difficult part is over. They believed that in this way they will not be afraid of speaking but rather they will volunteer to speak in class. This finding lends its support from item 11 in table 1 as 62.8% of participants agreed with this item. This is an interesting finding as no previous study has highlighted that the use of L1 in foreign language classroom may reduce students’ SA. In light of various interviews, it is stated that students may not be competent enough in speaking thus, they may get stuck when speaking perhaps due to scanty vocabulary or poor knowledge of grammar. Thus, they may feel embarrassed. However, if they are permitted to use their L1 to some extent to express their views, they could feel satisfied that could make them feel confident and comfortable. This point was explained by Ali, “I get stuck when speaking English just because of the absence of English words. I have ideas but I can express in Urdu. The teacher should allow me to use some Urdu. Gradually, I will give my whole presentation in English.” Allowing students to use L1 at times may encourage students’ willingness to speak and this strategy could particularly be useful when students are called on the spot.

Participation is Voluntary

The data suggested that students feel anxiety when they are forced to speak. In other words, students would feel confident and relaxed when it is left to them whether they want to participate or not. This result is supported by item I in table 1 where 67% of participants agreed with this statement. Many interviewees clearly stated that their teacher should not compel them to participate in debates, discussions or in other oral tasks but rather it should be their choice. For example, one student, Huma, stated that she will concentrate more on the lessons if she does not have the fear that she could be instructed anytime to stand up and speak. The analysis of data further suggested that a student may not be ready to speak and if he is forced to speak, the result could be discouraging. The culture of forced participation may keep students very uncomfortable in the class while the culture of voluntary participation may create a positive and effective language learning environment. Adnan stated “I feel confident when I am ready to speak”.

Incorporation of Interesting Speaking Activities

Studies such as (Young, 1990) conclude that students feel motivated, engaged and comfortable if their teacher incorporates interesting oral activities in the class. It implies that teachers should make their lessons interesting. One major theme that was found in interviews was the suggestion regarding the use of simple and enjoyable speaking activities in the class to decrease students' SA. This finding agrees with item 7 in table 1 as 71% of students agreed with this item. Some students highlighted the benefits of using interesting activities. For example, one student Akbar stated, "The use of interesting activities will increase our interest and pleasure about learning and we will not feel bored." Some other advantages gleaned from the interviews included that interesting activities help students improve grammar, practice English in a non-threatening environment, vocabulary and pronunciation. In turn, students would feel more comfortable in class. Even some students suggested a few activities. For example, one student suggested that story-telling can improve their speaking skills. Learners may favour interesting and easy topics and activities as they may have prior information about such topics. One statement from an interview included, "I am not afraid of attending the class of a teacher who uses interesting and enjoyable activities".

Incorporation of Activities that Involve Little Exposure

The results suggested that students do not want to be the focus of their peers' and the teacher's attention. In other words, they do not like classroom activities that expose them to the whole class for example, presentations and singled out to answer to the question. Therefore, they strongly and unanimously suggested that they would feel comfortable and participate more actively in classroom activities that do not spotlight them. These findings are supported by following three items in the questionnaire above: item 8, item 5 and item 3. The majority of students agreed with each of the items. One important point to note is that in all of these three activities a little exposure is needed. Thus, it is obvious that students may experience less SA in oral tasks that do not put them at display. In this regard, Tahir stated, "I feel confident speaking English when no one is looking at me...I feel nervous when speaking in front of the whole class but I do not feel stressed when I speak in sitting position."

Group Work

This is the last classroom activity revealed by the data that could reduce students' SA. Interviewees stated that they would experience less fear of communication when performing oral tasks in pairs or groups. They further stated that group work decreases their anxiety triggered by mistakes and fear of negative evaluation. These findings are supported by the following three items in the questionnaire above: item 2, item 4 and item 6. These items asked students whether or not they would feel relaxed when participating in groups. The majority of students agreed with each of the items. The data suggested that group work can save students from being put at display in front of the whole class. Moreover, students feel that they are not the only focus of others' attention. For example, javed stated, "I would feel relaxed when I perform oral tasks in groups as I will not be the only speaker. Thus, I will feel protected.". Some other important points highlighted by the data are that group work can specially help anxious, introvert and less proficient students. Moreover, this practice can create a sense of community and an atmosphere for peer learning in the classroom.

V. DISCUSSION

Firstly, the findings of this study suggested that students favour classroom activities that do not involve high exposure. For example, performing oral tasks in groups, presenting something to the group, and answering in sitting position. Since these activities do not make a student the mere focus of others' attention, she/he may feel relaxed due to the feelings that he is a part of the group. On the other hand, the data in this study suggested that students became flustered when they were singled out to speak in front of the whole class. In such situations, anxiety may seriously affect students' cognitive abilities because they might be thinking about FNE and fear of making mistakes, and in turn, they may not pay complete attention to language input (Gregersen, 2005). The findings of this study corroborate the outcomes of many other works (e.g. Malik et al., 2020; Aydin, 2016; Horwitz, 2017; Marwan., 2016; Toubot & Seng, 2018). In the same line, Matsuda & Gobel (2004:32) found that "students feel more comfortable about speaking with a small number of people than confronting the whole class".

Activities that involve little exposure such as pair or group-work have many benefits. For instance, such activities ensure students that they are not the sole point of attention therefore, they participate more actively in class. Moreover, these may create a collaborative and facilitative classroom environment. It could be argued that these activities may increase students' participation and decrease their various fears regarding language learning. Liu (2006) reports, "all of them [students] acknowledged that they did not feel nervous during pair work or group work" (312). Likewise, performing in groups may make students feel

comfortable because they may think that the whole responsibility is not on their shoulders. Another major benefit of group work is that since this activity does involve little exposure, it can gradually encourage shy students to perform individually. However, one caution is that teacher should be capable enough to judge the students' learning styles as Horwitz (2013) found that group work could be anxiety provoking for some students. It could be argued that speaking creates anxiety however, it may generate more anxiety when students are singled out to speak. In conclusion, oral activities do involve certain levels of exposure, however, incorporation of activities that require little exposure may decrease learners' anxiety.

Secondly, the study suggested that students favour classroom activities that give students time to prepare and practice oral tasks. Such activities may make students feel comfortable because these activities give students time and chance to: gather, form and reformulate the answer and linguistics elements, and evaluate their importance and suitability prior to the assigned task or the answer is responded in the class. The findings highlighted that advance preparation for oral assignments makes language learners confident. This finding agrees with Wang (2005), Cheng (2005) and Milan (2019). Self-confidence could be one of the major contributors to effective communication. It is better to speak prepared and confidently rather than speaking unprepared accompanied with many fears and thoughts. Advance preparation could play a key role in students' improvement while speaking unprepared may lead to undesired consequences. However, it is noteworthy that sometimes, it could be helpful to ask students to speak unprepared to prepare them for daily life situations.

Likewise, the findings highlighted that giving students opportunities to practice spoken English may alleviate students' SA. A study carried out by Liu (2006) concluded that "more students attributed the alleviation of anxiety to more practice" (p.313). Foreign language learners may not have enough chances of having spoken input. Speaking practice may allow students to improve their weak areas and thus they may feel confident of their performance. This strategy can be used through many ways in the classroom for instance, role plays. Lastly, the data suggested that students do not feel confused if they are given enough time when performing oral tasks or answering to the question. In this way, they have time to look for well formulated and correct answers. This practice could give them a sense of achievement which in turn, may increase their willingness to speak. Giving students adequate wait-time has been found helpful in reducing SA (Zhang, 2010; Milan, 2019).

VI. IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study offer the following implications for language teachers to enable them to reduce their students' SA and promote their oral proficiency. Firstly, since students are afraid of speaking when singled out, it is important to boost their confidence to motivate them to perform in front of the whole class. Secondly, teachers may have effective communication with anxious students. The knowledge of their problems may enable the teachers to address their SA. Thirdly, students should be informed that speaking in a foreign language does involve exposure to the whole class thus, they should be taught to accept that speaking may arouse anxiety thus, it should be taken normally. Similarly, they should be taught some anxiety managing strategies so that they may address their anxiety on their own.

Moreover, the results that students become extremely anxious and self-conscious when exposed to the whole class suggest that language instructors should devise classroom activities that do not involve high exposure to the whole class. For instance, teachers should allow students to carry out tasks in pairs or groups. In turn, students may not feel that they are the sole object of attention. This feeling may make them confident and motivate them to be more actively involved in the classroom. If they are not singled out, they may be less afraid of making mistakes and of negative evaluation. Likewise, teachers are suggested to give students adequate wait-time before answering or performing in the class.

Furthermore, giving students opportunities to rehearse and practice speaking may make them confident and in turn, they may experience less anxiety when participating in oral tasks. In light of the findings, the incorporation of interesting, simple and enjoyable speaking activities in the classroom and choosing relevant and easy topics is suggested to maintain students' interest in the class. Moreover, students should not be forced to participate in classroom activities but rather the culture of volunteer participation may be introduced. Finally, language policy makers may design materials and activities that involve little exposure so that students may learn and speak foreign language comfortably and effectively.

VII. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDIES

This study aimed to explore the types of classroom activities that may help reduce students' SA. The results clearly revealed that activities that allow students to prepare oral tasks in advance and give students opportunities to rehearse speaking, and activities that involve little or no exposure to the whole class may alleviate students' SA and promote their speaking skills. Moreover, it was found that students favour

voluntary participation. It is suggested that teachers may give adequate wait-time to students when speaking in class or answering to questions.

Likewise, students should be allowed to perform oral tasks in pairs and groups so that they may not be spotlighted. Such strategies encourage students' active participation and in turn, improve their speaking skills. This study utilised questionnaire and interviews as data collection tools. Further studies are suggested to use more qualitative data collection tools such as classroom observations, diaries and journals to better understand this complex topic of anxiety. Likewise, this study could be replicated with larger sample to find better explanations for this topic. Finally, since anxiety is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon, a longitudinal study may give us better insights and results.

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