



EFL Learners' Speaking Anxiety and the Strategies for Improvement

Melaku Bayu Workie, Department of English Language and Literature, Debre Tabor University,
Debre Tabor, Ethiopia, melakubayu19@gmail.com / melabay@dtu.edu.et

Abstract: The purpose of the present study was to assess the speaking anxiety of second year EFL college learners and the strategies for improvement at Begemidir College of Teachers' Education in Ethiopia. The study used descriptive survey design that involved quantitative method. The data were collected through questionnaire. One hundred-twenty students' participants were certain through comprehensive sampling for questionnaire. The study revealed that students had extremely negative experiences with speaking activities in a foreign language classroom. English speaking anxiety was a big problem of college English language learners. Learners believed that they could not perform in English and consequently form negative expectations which in turn lead to decreased effort and the avoidance of opportunities to enhance their communication skills.

Key Words: EFL; EFL learners; FLCAS; Improvement; Speaking Anxiety; Strategy

INTRODUCTION

Language is a momentous tool for communiqué in delivering and sharing ideas, information and feelings. English language dominates all aspects in communication. We can see that almost all electronic devices use English. Thus, learning English is very important in the modern eon. It has a prodigious role in the aspects of economy, politics, education and technology. Besides, the people assume that learning and mastering English becomes an important thing to their continuation of education, job and social eminence (Fulcher, 2003; Melaku, 2019; Yuan & Minghe, 2013).

The feast of English language is often discussed in terms of three distinct groups of users; it is used as native language, second language or foreign language. In Ethiopia, this global language is learnt and taught as a foreign language. As for English as a foreign language (EFL) students who seek to accomplish proficiency in English, they need to develop the ability to read, write, listen and speak the language (Woodrow, 2006).

The contemporary approaches of language learning and teaching provide much importance to the English speaking skills (Anyadubalu, 2010). Of all the four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), speaking appears subliminally the most important skills. Speaking enables the students to parade different functions which are helpful in communication (Fulcher, 2003).

Yet, foreign language learners often prompt feelings of stress, nervousness or anxiety while learning to speak the target language and claim to have mental block against learning. Ewald (2007) states that language anxiety among college students was alarming; and it was estimated that up to one half of all language students experience debilitating levels of speaking anxiety.

Studies in the field of foreign language anxiety have recurrently shown that of all the language skills speaking is the most anxiety provoking to students (Horwitz, 2001; Tsiplakides & Keramida, 2009; Melouah, 2013; Melaku, 2019). Speaking anxiety can be considered one of the most common



problems students face in their foreign language classrooms. Foreign language speaking anxiety hampers learners' performance in communicating with interlocutors, as anxiety affects their attention and interferes with their ability not only to comprehend what is said in the target language, but also to generate ideas as well as to retrieve the necessary vocabulary (Tóth, 2006; Al-Saraj, 2013).

Self-perception, social environment, cultural differences, social status, gender and classroom environment are the dynamics causing speaking anxiety (Tseng, 2012; Rafada & Madini, 2017; Melaku, 2019). It is buttressed by Thornbury (2012) who avowed that dearth of vocabulary, indecorous grammar and fears of mistakes are some of the problems that contribute to speaking fiasco and cause an acute sense of anxiety when it comes to speaking. Moreover, Fujii (2015) signposted that the potential sources of language anxiety embraces personal and interpersonal factors, learners' beliefs about language learning, instructor learner interactions, classroom procedures and language tests

There are strategies to uphold speaking skill such as discussion, role play, simulation, information gap, brainstorming, storytelling, interview, story completion, reporting and picture narrating (Kayi, 2006; Mall-Amiri & Ghanbari, 2014).

This study, therefore, aimed at weighing the speaking anxiety of second year EFL college learners and the strategies for improvement in Begemidir College of Teachers' Education. To this end, hence, this study bid to address the following basic research questions.

1. What are the difficulties that contribute to EFL learners speaking anxiety?
2. Which factor poses the most difficulty to the EFL learners speaking anxiety?
3. What are the strategies that lessen EFL learners speaking anxiety?

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Speaking

Speaking is the uttered use of language so as to interconnect with others. From this notion, it can be perceived that speaking acts as a tool to bridge the people in building relationship and communication. Besides, it is the process of building and sharing meaning using verbal and non-verbal symbols in a variety of contexts. Such a process itself occurs in the part of brain in which some representations kept, then the utterances will be produced through the sound of the language. In other words, we make meaning through the process of encrypting codes in our mind. Not only does speaking take such process in our mind, but it also involves dynamic interaction of mental, articulatory and social process. Thus, the speaker needs to choose what to say and use linguistic knowledge to build the utterances and encode this message by sound that can be understood by the listener (Fulcher, 2003; Bahadorfar & Omidvar, 2014; Goh, 2016).

Anxiety

Anxiety is the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system. With this frame in mind, it can be concluded that anxiety may exist in the form of panic, fear, uncontrolled thoughts and tension (Hortwitz, 2001).

Contrariwise, anxiety is defined as an emotional state which is experienced by an individual who feels danger, powerlessness and tension. As an affective state, anxiety can be pigeonholed into three types as *trait*, *state*, and *situation-specific*. Trait anxiety is seen as an aspect of personality whereas state



anxiety is an apprehension experienced as a response to a definite situation at a particular moment. Situation-specific anxiety is experienced when the individual encounters specific situations and events (Wu, 2010; Yahya, 2013).

Foreign Language Anxiety

Foreign language anxiety constitutes a distinct complex of feelings, beliefs, perceptions and behaviors in relation to classroom language learning (Horwitz et al., 1986; Tanveer, 2007). In this sagacity, Matsuda and Gobel (2004) define foreign language anxiety as an apprehension that is experienced when a situation requires using a foreign language in which the user is not fully proficient. Thus, it can be inferred that foreign language anxiety is under the category of situation-specific anxiety (Aydin, 2008). Foreign language anxiety has three varieties: communication apprehension - occurs when the learner lacks mature communication skills; fear of negative evaluation - an apprehension towards evaluations by others when the learner feels incapable of making a proper social impression; test anxiety - an apprehension towards academic evaluation when the learner feels the fear of failing in tests (Horwitz and Young, 1991; Yim, 2014).

Students' negative reaction towards language learning was a result of foreign language learning anxiety. An instrument was presented to measure this anxiety known as the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). FLCAS has been used by a large number of studies on foreign language learning anxiety. And it has been the starting point for many other anxiety measurements such as Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety Scale (Gregersen, 2003; Burden, 2004; Occhipinti, 2009).

Speaking Anxiety

Speaking anxiety is a fear of expressing oneself orally. It has a great impact on one's self-confidence since it often makes one experience failure when not being able to speak out and show what one knows. This issue often turns into a vicious circle because one bad experience from speaking often becomes a reminder when the next opportunity arises. If a student with speaking anxiety experience failure he or she will rather remain quiet than take the risk of failing again. This situation drags them into a silence that becomes more and more difficult to break since it contributes to a role as "the quiet one" in class. Speaking anxiety creates a low self-confidence which makes students remain quiet in all situations, even if they have the capacity to express themselves and knowledge that is worth hearing.

Symptoms of Speaking Anxiety

Based on the findings of previous studies, physiological, behavioral and psychological symptoms are concomitant with speaking anxiety. These symptoms are experienced by speakers in different situations and under many reasons (Woodrow, 2006; Tadjouri, 2016; Sanaei, 2016).

Physiological



Physiological are observed on individual's bodies. We might observe our heart pounding or our hands feeling clammy. Sweating can also be observed as well as feeling nauseated by experiencing stomach butterflies. The hands and the legs might begin to quiver so that we move down and up nervously. Our voices may shake and a dry mouth is noticed, which cause a hard articulation for even simple words. Indeed, breathing occurs more rapid and it reaches its extreme cases. Effectively, we can neither control our thought and movement nor balance between them (Wrench, et al., 2012).

Behavioral

Behavioral signs are observed when the person experiences speaking anxiety. The first behavior which is common in people who have especially high level of communication apprehension is avoidance by avoiding the speaking situation. Zourou (2012) claims that the person handicapped by communication apprehension would be expected to avoid communication much of the time because he or she would experience negative reactions from anxiety that would surpass projected gain from interaction.

The individual with communication apprehension prefers to keep silent, quiet in any direct interaction with others and is intimidated by super ordinates. Also, he/she is uncertain about expressing his/her views and matters. These individual apologies when his/her views are challenged, and he/she often interprets others' questions as criticisms. Moreover, communication apprehensive person feels that he/she is not safe and protected, feels not good enough in communication, is quickly embarrassed, shy, does not want to talk to other people, and prone to share the same idea with others Tseng (2012). As a result, the individual may show an unwillingness to communicate with others.

Psychological

There are invisible mental signs of speaking anxiety that need to be known. Kanar (2011) asserts that learners who experience anxiety in speaking are characterized by these mental symptoms: disorganized thoughts, forgetting what they had planned to say, feeling of inadequacy and negative self-talk. She claims that students experience the physical and mental symptoms before speaking or when they begin to speak.

Speaking Anxiety Reducing Strategies

There are strategies so as to reduce someone's speaking anxiety in the English language classroom. Shams (2005) states that small group work, pair work, games, simulations and structured exercises can help shift the communication pattern of the classroom away from being teacher-learner approach to a more interactive one. In addition, fluency-building activity as a way of helping foreign language learners acquiring the target language and reduce their anxiety. By using fluency-building activity such as asking learners to move around and share personal information with their classmates, learners can interact with most of their classmates; this might help to reduce their anxiety and shyness while speaking in the target language (Nation, 2008; Patterson, 2013)

METHODS AND MATERIALS

In the study descriptive survey design, which aim to get data about the status of phenomena, was employed. It is concerned with providing description of phenomena that occur naturally without intervention of an experiment (Jackson, 2008). Quantitative approach was used via questionnaire.

The study was conducted in Amara Regional State in South Gondar Zone particularly at Begemidir College of Teachers' Education, Debre Tabor town, Ethiopia. The target populations of the study were second year EFL college learners in the 2019/2020 academic year. College students were selected for the study since the researcher had personally witnessed the problem under investigation at this level.

In the study, the target population were a hundred-twenty EFL college learners; sixty-nine were females and fifty-one were males. All second year EFL learners, a hundred-twenty, were selected via comprehensive sampling for questionnaire. To attain passable information for the study, data collection tool was employed, notably, questionnaire - opened and closed-ended questions.

The collected data were analyzed, interpreted and discussed accordingly. The quantitative data which were collected from the respondents were analyzed using frequency, percentage and mean.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this strand, the snags and stratagems that contribute to EFL speaking anxiety are presented based on the data gained from the respondents such as second year college EFL learners' responses on the questionnaires.

Table 1: *Speech Anxiety and Fear of Negative Evaluation*

Item	Statement		Responses					Total	Mean
			5	4	3	2	1		
1	I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak English.	F	62	42	0	9	7	120	4.2
		%	51.7	35.0	0.0	7.5	5.8	100	
2	It frightens me when I don't understand what the instructor is saying in English.	F	60	30	2	16	12	120	3.9
		%	50.0	25.0	1.7	13.3	10.0	100	
3	I always feel that the other students speak English better than I do.	F	51	33	3	13	20	120	3.7
		%	42.5	27.5	2.5	10.8	16.7	100	
4	Even if I am well prepared for English class, I feel anxious about it.	F	47	59	0	11	3	120	4.1
		%	39.2	49.2	0.0	9.2	2.5	100	
5	I am afraid that my English instructor is ready to correct every mistake I make.	F	57	43	5	10	5	120	4.1
		%	47.5	35.8	4.2	8.3	4.2	100	
Grand Mean								4.0	

Key: 5=Strongly Agree, 4=Agree, 3=I am not sure, 2=Disagree, 1=Strongly Disagree, F=Frequency, %=Percentage

As it can be seen in the table above, majority of the respondents (51.7%) replied that fear of negative evaluation affected EFL learners' speaking skills. The result of the computed aggregate mean value is 4.0. This indicated that speech anxiety and fear of negative evaluation were the major problems. As Nagahashi (2007) explains the primary source of the learners' speaking anxiety appears to come from communication trepidation, a result that correlated with a low self-evaluation of speaking skills.

High levels of anxiety, in consort with low self-evaluations of skills, are injurious to the learning process (Aydin 2013).

Table 2: Negative Attitudes towards the English Class

Item	Statement		Responses					Total	Mean
			5	4	3	2	1		
6	It wouldn't bother me at all to take more English classes.	F	51	59	1	2	7	120	4.2
		%	42.5	49.2	0.8	1.7	5.8	100	
7	During the English class, I find myself thinking about things that have nothing to do with the course.	F	34	31	21	15	19	120	3.4
		%	28.3	25.8	17.5	12.5	15.8	100	
8	I often feel like not going to my English class.	F	49	48	0	14	9	120	4.0
		%	40.8	40.0	0.0	11.7	7.5	100	
Grand Mean								3.9	

Key: 5=Strongly Agree, 4=Agree, 3=I am not sure, 2=Disagree, 1=Strongly Disagree, F=Frequency, %=Percentage

As disclosed in the above table, 49.2% of the participants responded that negative attitudes towards the English class had deleterious contributions for the accomplishment of the EFL learners speaking skills. When this is explained in terms of mean, the mean value of the responses for these items is 3.9 which indicated learners' negative attitudes towards the English class were the major problems; it affected the college EFL learners speaking skills undesirably. Concerning this, anxiety stands as one of the main influential factors for effective language learning; this has an effect on the learners' attitude towards the English class (Brown, 2007; Nagahashi, 2007).

Table 3: Fear of Failing the Class/Consequences of Personal Failure

Item	Statement		Responses					Total	Mean
			5	4	3	2	1		
9	I worry about the consequences of failing my English class.	F	54	63	0	2	1	120	4.4
		%	45.0	52.5	0.0	1.7	0.8	100	
10	I get upset when I don't understand what the instructor is correcting.	F	33	43	13	17	14	120	3.5
		%	27.5	35.8	10.8	14.2	11.7	100	
11	I don't feel pressure to prepare very well for English class.	F	41	39	17	9	14	120	3.7
		%	34.2	32.5	14.2	7.5	11.7	100	
Grand Mean								3.9	

Key: 5=Strongly Agree, 4=Agree, 3=I am not sure, 2=Disagree, 1=Strongly Disagree, F=Frequency, %=Percentage

As shown in table 3, 52.5% of the respondents agreed that fear of failing the class, consequences of personal failure, la-di-da EFL learners' speaking skills. The result of the calculated aggregate mean value is 3.9. This signposted that fear of failing the class was the major hitches that affects the learners' speaking skills.

Fear of failing the class is the tendency to become alarmed about the consequences of inadequate performance on classroom evaluations. In such a situation, the student inevitably encounters difficulties and demanding obstacles which may increase his or her tension; the learner may become frustrated rather than rational towards the task (Koralp, 2005; Erözkan, 2009).

Table 4: Cooperation with Others

Item	Statement		Responses					Total	Mean
			5	4	3	2	1		
12	My anxiety decreases if I work together with my classmates.	F	78	40	0	1	1	120	4.6
		%	65.0	33.3	0.0	0.8	0.8	100	
13	Doing in smaller group and pair work reduces my anxiety.	F	83	31	1	2	3	120	4.6
		%	69.2	25.8	0.8	1.7	2.5	100	
14	When making presentations in small groups, I feel more relaxed than by myself.	F	65	55	0	0	0	120	4.5
		%	54.2	45.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	100	
15	Speaking English in front of a small group is less stressful than speaking to a large group.	F	35	44	11	13	17	120	3.6
		%	29.2	36.7	9.2	10.8	14.2	100	
Grand Mean								4.3	

Key: 5=Strongly Agree, 4=Agree, 3=I am not sure, 2=Disagree, 1=Strongly Disagree, F=Frequency, %=Percentage

As revealed in the above table, 69.2% of the participants responded that cooperation with others was the best strategy so as to alleviate speaking anxiety. When this is explained in terms of mean, the mean value of the responses for these items is 4.3 which shows cooperation with others was one of the strategies to lessen speaking anxiety.

Kondo and Yang (2004) state different strategies for coping with speaking anxiety - cooperation with others, building confidence and less-stressful teaching method.

Table 5: Less-stressful Teaching Method

Item	Statement		Responses					Total	Mean
			5	4	3	2	1		
16	I feel relieved if my instructor cares for my own anxiety.	F	81	30	5	3	1	120	4.6
		%	67.5	25.0	4.2	2.5	0.8	100	
17	If there are activities meeting various learning styles, I do not feel anxious.	F	51	67	0	2	0	120	4.4
		%	42.5	55.8	0.0	1.7	0.0	100	
18	My anxiety decreases when I am told it is okay to speak English with less than perfect performance.	F	49	53	2	7	9	120	4.1
		%	40.8	44.2	1.7	5.8	7.5	100	
Grand Mean								4.4	

Key: 5=Strongly Agree, 4=Agree, 3=I am not sure, 2=Disagree, 1=Strongly Disagree, F=Frequency, %=Percentage

As it can be seen in table 5, middle-of-the-road of the respondents (67.5%) replied that less stressful teaching method was one of the strategies to alleviate the speaking anxiety. The result of the computed aggregate mean value is 4.4. This indicated that less-stressful teaching method was one of the best strategies to lighten speaking anxiety.

Students might have the state of mind that they want their teacher to understand their concerns. Yet, they do not need a formal discussion related to their English learning. Teachers might need to have a careful discussion with students about their existing problems related to their anxious feeling (Horwitz, Tallon & Luo, 2010).

CONCLUSION



Based on the finding and discussions, some conclusions are drawn. First, anxiety plays negative roles in the students' English speaking skills. English instructors should build students' self-efficacy and decrease their anxiety by motivating them in the class, modeling good English in the class and being patience when teaching students in the class. The English instructors should motivate students to speak English in the class since the best way to learn it is through practices. Instructors also must provide students with a warm learning environment in the class and might not be temperamental or judgmental during the learning process, yet they need to be calm and kind. This study also provides new horizons in the field of teaching second language speaking.

Speaking-in-class anxiety in the Ethiopian context warrants attention because in addition to confirming previous findings (Liu & Jackson, 2008), this study has also provided evidence that learners' negative attitudes towards the language class can contribute to their overall levels of speaking anxiety. Negative attitudes, fear of negative evaluation and fear of failing the class can affect oral performance when meeting compulsory requirements to speak and contribute to role-plays and discussions in a positive manner. These requirements are unlikely to halt with more and more emphasis placed on the ability to communicate satisfactorily so all English language instructors, not just instructors of Ethiopian learners should endeavor to mitigate the effects of anxiety wherever possible. It can be concluded that cooperation with others and less-stressful teaching method were the best strategies to alleviate the EFL learners speaking anxiety.

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Author's Brief CV

Melaku Bayu Workie is a lecturer in the Department of English Language and Literature, Debre Tabor University, Ethiopia. He obtained his MA degree in TEFL from Addis Ababa University in 2016 and B.Ed degree in English Language and Literature from Ambo University in 2009. He desires to study his Ph.D. in Applied Linguistics.