Foreign language speaking anxiety: The case of spontaneous speaking activities

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Abstract

There is a great deal of research focusing on speaking anxiety and yet there are relatively few studies suggesting ways how teachers can help learners cope with this problem. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to identify whether the integration of spontaneous speech activities helps minimize the students’ English language speaking anxiety. The research took place in the ELT department at a private university in Istanbul, Turkey. 12 freshman year students participated in the study. The course syllabus comprised different types of speaking activities. The study followed a mixed method design including qualitative and quantitative data. The data were obtained through an adapted questionnaire based on Horwitz's “Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale” (FLCAS, 1986) and Burgoon’s “Unwillingness to communicate scale” (UCS, 1976) to measure the learners' pre and post anxiety levels. Furthermore, participants were asked to reflect on the activities through open-ended essay questions. Finally, a focus group interview was conducted. The findings have been discussed in detail.

Keywords: Foreign language classroom anxiety scale (FLCAS), unwillingness to communicate scale (UCS), speaking anxiety, spontaneous speech

1. Introduction

Foreign language anxiety has been discussed since 1980’s by many researchers e.g. Horwitz et al. (1986) and found to be a unique factor affecting learners' oral production. Specifically, anxious foreign language learners identify speaking in the target language as the most frightening skill. It is often reported that they feel stressed when they have to take turns in the classroom to speak (Wörde, 2003).

This study considers foreign language speaking anxiety in an oral communication course for university freshman students. The goal of the study was to investigate whether spontaneous speaking activities such as games, role-plays and debates help decrease students’ speaking anxiety.

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2. Review of literature

Commonly, English language teachers are aware of the existence of a phenomenon called foreign language speaking anxiety. However, sometimes it appears to be problematic to classify whether a student seems reluctant to speak in the target language because of lack of motivation or increased anxiety level. In order to define speaking anxiety and its reasons, the general term anxiety should be defined according to its symptoms. Anxiety, as stated by Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986, p.125) “is the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system.” Foreign language learners, who feel anxious, face symptoms such as sweating, palpitations, worry, forgetfulness and difficulties in language learning.

Anxious foreign language students identify speaking in the target language as the most frightening language skill. It is often reported that they feel stressed and even start to “freeze” when they have to act out a role-play or deliver a speech. However, Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) emphasize the role of students’ beliefs (e.g. remaining silent and reluctant to speak until fluency in the foreign language is established) in increasing their anxiety levels. The reason of this silence is mostly because students fear to make errors and as a result get corrected by the teacher in front of their classmates.

To analyze anxiety in terms of social contexts and educational environment, Horwitz (1986) established three related performance anxieties named: 1) communication apprehension, 2) test anxiety, and 3) fear of negative evaluation. Communication apprehension is defined as the anxiety to communicate with people, to talk in front of others, also known as “stage fright”, and to talk in groups. In order to eliminate speaking anxiety Matsuda & Gobel (2004) underscored the importance of group work in their study. Despite the fact that communication apprehension leads to communication fear, it also causes fear of not being able to understand spoken messages. Horwitz et al. (1986, p.127) claim that “people who typically have trouble speaking in groups are likely to experience even greater difficulty speaking in a foreign language class where they have little control of the communicative situation and their performance is constantly monitored.” The second category, named test anxiety, arises out of the fear of failing to perform. It can be explained through the high demands that students put on themselves to be perfect speakers of the foreign language. Finally, fear of negative evaluation is explained as the student’s expectation to be evaluated negatively by others in any kind of situations such as, oral exams or in-class presentations. Fear of negative evaluation was also mentioned in another study conducted by Wörde (2003). The students were asked to comment on factors that they believe contribute to anxiety. As a result, commonly mentioned factors were: “speaking activities, inability to comprehend, negative classroom experiences, fear of negative evaluation, native speakers, methodology, pedagogical practices, and the teachers themselves.” Furthermore, Mohamad & Wahid (2009, p. 74) mentioned in their study that “most of the students were concerned about various kinds of evaluative situations in which their knowledge and performance of English will be monitored by people around them.”

Testing, especially in oral performance, and being called on in class without being prepared to answer, are other factors that lead to shaking and sweating. As a result, students try to avoid eye-contact with their teacher, fearing that the teacher might ask them a question even if it is about a topic that has been discussed earlier (Mohamad & Wahid, 2009). Another technique of calling on students is one after another according to their seating order. This technique was called “execution style” by a student in Wörde’s (2003) study because it increases the anxiety level as students are waiting with the knowledge of being called on in a few minutes.

Despite the fact that speaking causes the immediate anxiety among foreign language learners, it does not lead to the conclusion that it should be avoided. On the contrary, not only researchers but also students agree on the importance of spontaneous speech. This was also mentioned in Liu & Littlewood’s study (1997, p. 377) “when university teachers and students are asked to choose two features (out of ten) which they consider most important for successful spoken academic communication, they agree that unplanned, spontaneous speech is the most important.”

Bearing in mind, the important factors, affecting speaking anxiety, mentioned in the literature review the following study will discuss a spontaneous speaking treatment and its outcomes.
3. Research method

3.1. Participants’ demographic details

Participants were 12 (3 male, 9 female) Turkish freshman students, ages ranging from 18 to 24, of the English language teaching department at a private university in Istanbul, who were taking a compulsory oral communication course in English. The instructor of the course was a non-native speaker. However, speaking in the native language was not allowed due to English being the university’s medium of instruction. The study was conducted in the second term of 2011-2012 academic year.

3.2. Research design and instrumentation

Based on the assumption that freshman students face foreign language speaking anxiety, the present study aimed to discover whether spontaneous speech activities decrease students’ English language speaking anxiety. The research lasted 14 weeks, each week including one spontaneous speaking activity which was integrated into the course syllabus. The activities can be categorized into games, role-plays and debates. One of the games played in the classroom was the famous “Taboo” game in which the class was divided into two groups. Each group member had to explain a word that was written on the game cards without using the forbidden words listed under it. Additionally, it should be mentioned that the students were playing against a time limit of two minutes for each word. One of the role play activities was a “Murder game” in which students were given a scenario according to which they had to investigate and find the murderer by asking each other questions and trying to find some clues. The debates were based on current issues such as political elections and the abolishing of school uniform. Again students were divided into groups, with each group presenting a political party and its ideas on the debate topic. At the end of each lesson, students were asked to reflect on these activities through open-ended essay questions and a focus group interview at the end of the term. To ensure inter-rater reliability, the open-ended essay questions and the interview were transcribed and coded by the researchers. Some of the open-ended essay questions were as follows: a) Which of the activities did/didn’t you like and why/why not? b) What may be the reasons for you to feel anxious in a foreign language speaking class? c) Do you feel more comfortable in group activities or individual activities?

As for measuring the anxiety level of the students through a Wilcoxon signed-rank test, a questionnaire adapted from Horwitz’s “Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale” (FLCAS) and from Burgoon’s “Unwillingness to communicate scale” (UCS) including 66 items was given twice to the students, in the first lesson and the last lesson of the term. The questionnaire was given in the students’ native language in order to avoid any misunderstandings and comprehension difficulties. Finally, a focus group interview in Turkish was conducted with four of the participants representing the least frightened and most frightened ones.

3.3. Data analysis

The questionnaire was measured through a likert scale ranging from 1) totally disagree, 2) disagree, 3) unsure, 4) agree and 5) totally agree. The Cronbach coefficient alpha of the adapted questionnaire was computed as .672 indicating a satisfying internal consistency (reliability). The following statistics of a pretest and posttest shown in Table.1 were received:

|     | N   | Mean | Std. Deviation | Minimum | Maximum |
|-----|-----|------|----------------|---------|---------|
| pretest | 12  | 2.8763 | 1.6671 | 2.67     | 3.11     |
| posttest | 12  | 2.7273 | 2.4711 | 2.42     | 3.18     |

Table 1. Descriptive statistics
According to the results in Table 1, the mean of the posttest 2.72 indicates that there is a decrease in the anxiety level compared to the pretest mean 2.87. A Wilcoxon signed-rank test showed that the treatment during the course did elicit a statistically significant change in the perceptions of the participants ($Z = -1.373$, $P = 0.17$).

This change can be analyzed through the data retrieved from the open-ended essay questions, which were examined according to following codes: a) importance of activity and b) perceptions about group activities. When participants were asked about the spontaneous speaking activity they liked the most, they mostly agreed on the “Taboo” game because of its familiarity and its funny nature. Some of the students’ answers were as follows:

a) importance of activity

“I like Taboo Game activity the most because I learnt new vocabularies and also it is very enjoyable. Whenever I achieve to talk about the word, I want to talk more and more. I always want to stay in front of the classroom because my fear is gone.” (Participant 1, open-ended essay)

While one of the students reported that the taboo game helped to overcome her fear, the other student underlined the importance of the game for her spontaneous speaking ability:

“Taboo activity is the most enjoyable one for me. Because I already know this game and I like the way it is played. Forcing yourself against the hourglass to make your friends understand the words that you are trying to tell is both enjoyable and beneficial for spontaneous speaking.” (Participant 2, open-ended essay)

Another question was whether the participants felt more comfortable in group activities or in individual activities. For this question, eight of the students agreed on group activities because of its effect of creating cooperation and solidarity and decreasing the speaking anxiety as mentioned in the following participants’ responses:

b) perceptions about group activities

“I feel comfortable in group activities because when I don’t know something, the others know and I feel relaxed. I also like the cooperation and solidarity.” (Participant 4, open-ended essay)

“I feel more comfortable in group activities because I don’t like standing up and speaking to people. Whenever I talk in front of people, I am scared and I am anxious. My hands are getting colder at first. I usually forget my words or mix my words and I stammer.” (Participant 6, open-ended essay)

The results of the open-ended essay questions were more deeply explored through the focus group interview, which was examined with the open coding method (Miles & Huberman, 1994) by selecting reoccurring categories and labeling them as codes. The codes retrieved from the interview were as follows: 1) familiarity / unfamiliarity, 2) unpreparedness, 3) time limitation, 4) feeling of success and 5) group support. When students were asked about how they rated the activities from the least liked to the most, they all agreed on the familiarity or unfamiliarity aspect of it. That is to say, when the activity was a familiar one such as the “Taboo” game, the students felt more comfortable because all of them had played it before in their first language. Moreover, students reported that they were less frightened when they did not prepare for their speech and wait for the teacher to call on them. As for the activities’ time regulations, it was argued that when there was a time limit, the students were more engaged in spontaneous speech and were less concentrating on the errors they would make while speaking. Some students reported that their anxiety level decreased when they achieved to complete the activities successfully. Finally, the reason for the preference of group activities over individual activities was questioned in the interview. The students’ argument was that they preferred the group activities because they felt more secure in a group. The feeling of safety was related to group members helping each other while trying to explain themselves in the target language.

4. Results and discussion

The results have shown that there is a decrease in the students’ anxiety level which can be attributed to what students have mentioned in their essays and during the interview. One of the issues that the students have referred to was the notion of preparedness vs. unpreparedness. Our students have argued that being unprepared decreased their anxiety as it was also indicated in Wörde’s (2003) study displaying preparedness as “execution style” unlike the findings revealed in Mohamad & Wahid’s (2009) study.

As another important point, the feeling of success seems to have a great impact on anxiety. The more the students achieved to accomplish the tasks, the more relaxed they became. Furthermore, we can assume that the feeling of success leads to lower levels of test anxiety, which is one of the important performance anxieties discussed earlier.
by Horwitz (1986). Moreover, it was found that the more the students were familiar with the activities, the more relaxed they felt in speaking.

A final idea that needs to be discussed is group-work. Based on the spontaneous speaking activity types the groups were designed to include students representing from least frightened to most frightened ones. The results of this type of grouping showed that students felt more comfortable because they helped each other and by doing so built a sense of solidarity. Another advantage of group-work was the increased interaction between students in the target language and the student-centered classroom environment. The idea of decreasing anxiety and enhancing classroom atmosphere through group work was also highlighted in another study using the FLCAS (Matsuda & Gobel, 2004).

5. Conclusion and implications

Even though the results are promising, there are still some limitations that need to be considered. Only limited generalization may be warranted due to a small sample of 12 participants, with gender size inequality of 9 female and 3 male students. However, several recommendations for reducing anxiety in the classroom can be extrapolated from 1) the questionnaire data, 2) students’ essays and 3) from the interview. Despite the fact that speaking causes the highest anxiety among foreign language learners, it does not lead to the conclusion that it should be avoided in class. On the contrary, as the findings reveal, practicing speaking spontaneously supports students in the process of overcoming their fear. Moreover, regarding participants’ responses, teachers can incorporate group work, when learners are dealing with spontaneous speaking activities, since it can provide anxious and non-anxious students alike with many opportunities to use language in a non-threatening context. Group work will also break the monotony of the usual question-answer-feedback pattern and cause less fear for students because they have the safety of the group, which is relatively a more supportive learning environment. All in all, it has been observed that games as spontaneous speaking activities played a significant role in decreasing speaking anxiety.

As for further research on speaking anxiety, native teachers vs. non-native teachers and group-work vs. individual work factors can be taken into consideration with additional gender differentiation in the samples.

To conclude, the present study has deepened our understanding of foreign language speaking anxiety and enlightened some ideas for EFL teachers such as becoming familiar with the FLCAS instrument, developed by Horwitz (1986), to raise awareness of anxiety and to evaluate the ways in which students experience such.

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