Research Paper

Coping with English Language Speaking Anxiety-A Case Study

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Anxiety is a general feeling of fear. It is 'an emotion characterised by feeling of tension, worried thoughts, and physical changes' according to American Psychological Association (2015). English language speaking anxiety is a fear to speak English language. According to MacIntyre and Gardener, it is 'the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language contexts, including speaking, listening, and learning' (MacIntyre and Gardener, 1994). It is also situation specific according to MacIntyre. (as quoted in Zheng, 2008)

Various research studies proved that second language anxiety, an affective factor, has a strong influence on oral performance of the speakersas well as on the learning of English on the whole. It has been observed that English language speaking anxiety has a direct connection with the confidence levels of the learners.There are six general sources of language anxiety according to Young (1991):1) personal and interpersonal anxieties, 2) learner beliefs about language learning, 3) instructor beliefs about language learning, 4) instructor-learner interactions, 5) classroom procedures, and 6) language testing.

Many research studies focussed on the effects of anxiety on performance of the learners in second and foreign language. The present study, unlike previous studies, investigated into the aspects which transformed a subject severely suffering from English language anxiety into aconfident speaker of English language.

Objective: The objective of the present study is to explore the English language speaking anxiety of a university student as it was experienced by him in his school days and the subject's coping with his anxiety to excel in speaking English at present time. This is about the journey of the student from the state of anxious, worrying, shy, fearful, hesitant learner to a confident speaker. This is retrospective in nature as it explores how the subject suffered from English speaking anxiety in the past.

Method: Both the quantitative and qualitative data gathering techniques were followed to elicit data from the subject. Therefore, the method followed for this study was a mixed method approach.

Subject: The subject of the study was a student of Integrated Masters' Programme, of age 18 years, currently studying IMA Telugu, in the University of Hyderabad, a premier higher education institute.

Background of the subject: The subject was selected from a homogenous class of 30 students which is at the basic level of English learning. He came from poor, rural and regional medium background.

Procedure: The quantitative data gathering was done by administering the 'English Language Classroom Anxiety Scale' questionnaire which has 33 items. This is a modified version of 'Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale' by Horwitz and Horwitz (Horwitz, E.K., Horwitz M. B., Cope, J. 1986). This questionnaire was administered twice as the study compares the past and present conditions of the subject.It was initially administered to explore the English language anxiety of the subject as it was experienced in his school days and later to explore the same at present time. The subject was asked 'to think back and answer questions about the past' (Dornyei, 2007). The subject was cautioned to be careful in providing data as there is a possibility for retrospective studies to become 'simplified and selective with some important details omitted, suppressed, or simply wrong' (Dornyei, 2007).

For qualitative data gathering, a detailed interview was conducted with the subject to explore the subject's experience of English Language Speaking Anxiety. The instrument used was an open-ended interview schedule. The interview took one hour time and it was recorded. The first part of the interview focussed on the background of the subject and the second part on the actual objective of the research study –investigating the English language anxiety. The following questions and other follow up questions were asked.

1.   Did/Do you feel anxious to speak in English language?
2.   What are/were your exact feelings while speaking in English class or outside class?
3.   Did/Does your anxiety in speaking English affect your performance in English subject?
4.   Did/Do you find difference between speaking in English and speaking in your mother tongue?
5.   Are/Were you a shy student in general?
6.   What were/are the fears that you had/have regarding English language?
7.   Did/Do you do any oral presentations in your school/university?
8.   Did you do any oral presentations apart from those in the E-Plus programme?
9.   What were/are the feature of the class which were/are anxiety provoking?
10.   Were/Are you aware of the mistakes that you were/are committing in your speaking?
11.   Were/Are English classes in general stressful?
12.   Could/Can you mingle with people easily? Or did/do you want to be away from people avoiding them?
13.   Did/Does your English teacher find that your were anxious in speaking English language?
14.   What is to be done to reduce stress in English classes?
15.   What were/are the reasons for your English language speaking anxiety?
16.   Who were/are the people in your life who encouraged you speak in English?
17.   How did you practice speaking English?
18.   How do you assess your own English speaking ability?

Results and Discussion: Though all the 33 items in the questionnaire deal with the concept of anxiety of the subject in an English course/class, there are 10 items which specifically deal with the speaking anxiety of the subject (Items 1, 9, 14, 18, 23, 24, 27, 30, 31 and 32). The subject was never confident when he spoke in the English class (Item No. 18), never felt sure of himself when he was speaking (Item No. 1),gets nervous and confused when he was speaking (Item No. 27), was afraid that the other students would laugh at him when he speaks in English (Item No. 31), was very self-conscious about speaking English in front of other students (Item No. 24), always felt that the other students speak English better than he did (Item No. 23),would start to panic when he had to speak without preparation in English class (Item No. 9), would be nervous speaking the English language with foreign speakers (Item No. 14), was overwhelmed by the number of rules he had to learn to speak English language (Item No. 30), and would probably not feel comfortable around native speakers of English language (Item No. 32).

It can be understood that the subject suffered seriously from English language speaking anxiety. The item numbers 3, 8, 10, 12, 15, 16, 20, 22, 26, and 33 strongly reveal that the subject was very anxious about himself being called on in the English class, not at all at ease during test, would worry about the consequences of failing his English class, could get so nervous that he used to forget things he knew, would feel anxious even when prepared well for language class, could feel his heart pounding when going to be called on in the class, would feel pressure to prepare well for English class and more tense and nervous in English class than in his other classes, and would get nervous when the English teacher asked questions which he hadn't prepared in advance.

The subject was a worrying person as he would get worried by his inability to understand what the teacher was saying in English class (Item No. 4) would get upset when he didn't understand his teacher's corrections (Item No. 15), not very sure and relaxed when on his way to English class (Item No. 28), and wouldbe nervous when he couldn't understand every word the English teacher said (Item No. 29).He felt he was left behind the class (Item No. 25).

The subject also showed low self-confidence as he used to think that the other students in the class were better at English than he was (Item no. 7) and also shows avoidance behaviour by often feeling not going to English class (Item No. 17).

The subject is confused-the more he studies for an English test, the more he used to get confused (Item No. 21). He suffered from a feeling of embarrassment to volunteer answers in class (Item No. 13). He would easily get diverted in English class as he found himself thinking about things that had nothing to do with the course (Item No. 6) and worried about negative evaluation of the teacher (Item No. 19).Therefore, it is very well established that the subject was a very good case of English language speaking anxiety.

As the present study aimed to trace the trajectory of English speaking of the subject, it also investigated the present condition of him. According to the data elicited from the subject related to the present time, the

subject scored very low on anxiety. He has improved tremendously in his speaking and isa very self-confident English speaker/learner. He is sure of himself when speaking in his English class, comfortable with speaking without prior preparation, not nervous speaking with foreign speakers, feels confident while speaking in the English class, never feels self-conscious about speaking in front of other students, does not get nervous and confused speaking in the English class, never overwhelmed by the number of rules needed to learn to speak in English, never worried about peers' negative evaluation or discouragement and feels comfortable around native speakers of English.

The subjectalso shows low anxiety as he was low on item numbers 3, 8, 10, 12, 15, 16, 20, 22, 26, and 33. The symptoms of anxiety are absent and showed high self-confidence (Item No. 7). He showed no avoidance behaviour in attending English classes (Item No. 17), showed focussed behaviour in English class. He is low on worry, and exhibited relaxed behaviour (Item Nos. 4, 28 and 29). He also scored low on getting confused in English subject (Item No. 21) and on negative self-assessment (Item No. 19). He feels he is moving along with the class in a concerted manner (Item No. 25).

From the above data, it can be comprehended that there is a remarkable difference between the condition of the subject in school days and the same at the present time. The subject has improved a lot in English speaking and became a successful English learner by getting relieved of his English language speaking anxiety. The qualitative data gathering technique of the detailed interview was of great help in investigating this particular aspect. The subject revealed that when he was in ninth standard the Social Welfare Residential Schools started a new programme called 'The E-Plus Clubs' in all the social welfare residential schools in the undivided Andhra Pradesh state to improve soft skills of the students. This was as a part of the strategic plan P-5 to strengthen the social welfare residential education system where thousands of students of marginalized sections study. For reforming the entire residential educational system, P-5 plan was conceptualized byDr. R.S. Praveen Kumar IPS, the Secretary of Social Welfare residential educational institutions society. It was conceptualized,'many school time activities like E-Plus Clubs are non-competitive and are aimed at improving communication skills, bust the fear factor and improve social bonding' (Kumar, 2016). E-Plus was designed and entrusted to the English teachers in the schools. The official document says, 'The E-Plus started with an intention to provide the students a take-off point to the world of English. This creates opportunities to enhance their taste in reading their sense of appreciation of literary expressions and their scope to speak English fluently… . These E-Plus Clubs can be one of the effective tools in acquiring English language' (Kumar 2014).

According to the above plan, the class teacher conducts this activity after the school hours, gives the topic for the day and also the hints and suggestions that can guide the students speak. The topics are given by the Head Office. The students are encouraged to speak at least two or three simple sentences a day in English using the hints provided. The subjects wouldrigorously practise various topics after the school hours.

The subject ascribes his success also to the encouragement given by his English teacher who noticed the subject's anxiety of speaking English. The subject though was suffering from anxiety and negative feelings which are detrimental to English speaking and learning, had a good attitude towards English learning. The subject,with very high self-esteem, aspired to command English language which motivated him to go against the flow and face discouragement he received from his peers in the form of negative peer evaluation. Krashen says 'people with low self-esteem worry about what their peers think' (as cited in Young, 1991).Positive reinforcement,the subject received from his teacher when participatingin debates,created confidence in him. The programme,the government conducted, gave him an opportunity to shed his fear and anxiety. Finally, the subject entered a university for pursuingpost-graduation where English language rules the roost. A cosmopolitan and elitist university can itself be a great source of anxiety for students who never got used to it where competitiveness can lead to anxiety when the learners of marginalized sections indulge in comparing themselves with fluent learners from very good social, economic and academic background. Bailey talks about comparing with others or with an idealized self-image (as stated inYoung, 1991). The positive attitude towards learning English that the subject learnt to cultivate in his school days, the exposure he got through regular English-speaking activity at school and a very strong determination to use only English language in all possible contexts made the subject survive as a successful learner. He takes a threatening condition asa challenging and learning context.Personality factors inherent to the subject and motivation from outside provided by the English teacher and the larger institution worked hand in hand in fighting against English speaking anxiety.The self-assessment of the student of his present English-speaking ability is above 75% which says that the student has high self-esteem. Hembree states, 'students who start out with a self perceived low ability level in foreign or second language are the likeliest candidates for language anxiety...' (as stated in Young, 1991). High self-perceived ability level is seen in the present subject's case.

This case study is a good example of how English language anxiety can be ridden off by cultivating positive attitude, planned academic programme, and motivation and moral support.

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