Helping Students Overcome Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety in the English Classroom: Theoretical Issues and Practical Recommendations

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Abstract

Despite the fact that foreign language speaking anxiety is a common phenomenon in the teaching of English as a foreign language in Greece, teachers do not always identify anxious students, and often attribute their unwillingness to participate in speaking tasks to factors such as lack of motivation, or low performance. This article aims to contribute to the literature on language anxiety and to provide teachers with strategies for reducing foreign language speaking anxiety stemming from students' fear of negative evaluation from their peers and perception of low ability. Using qualitative research, it presents a classroom-based case study which aims at examining the characteristics of anxious students with a view to implementing classroom interventions to reduce foreign language speaking anxiety. The effectiveness of these interventions is also presented and evaluated, and the pedagogical implications of the findings are discussed.

Keywords: Foreign language speaking anxiety, English

1. Introduction

A negative correlation between second and foreign language anxiety and achievement is established in the literature (Horwitz, 2001; Aida, 1994; MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991). Empirical research shows that anxious foreign language students are less willing to participate in learning activities, and have lower performance than non-anxious students (Aida 1994, MacIntyre and Gardner 1991).

Foreign language anxiety consists of "self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope 1986, 128). Foreign language learning process is a unique proccess, because learners are required to communicate using a language which they have not mastered perfectly. Three components of foreign language anxiety have been identified (Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope 1986): a) communication apprehension, b) fear of negative evaluation, and c) test anxiety. Students who exhibit communication apprehension do not feel comfortable communicating in the target language in front of others, due to their limited knowledge of the language, especially in relation to speaking and listening skills. Students who experience fear of negative evaluation do not consider language errors as a natural part of the learning process, but as a threat to their image, and a source for negative evaluations either from the teacher or their peers. As a result, they are silent and withdrawn most of the time, and do not participate in language activities (Ely 1986). Students who experience test anxiety consider the foreign language process, and especially oral production, as a test situation, rather than an opportunity for communication and skills improvement.

In order to measure foreign language anxiety, the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) has been developed, a self-report measure which assesses "the degree of anxiety, as evidenced by negative performance expectancies and social comparisons, psychophysiological symptoms, and avoidance behaviors" (Horwitz 1986, 559).

Many studies have addressed the relationship between language anxiety and motivation. More specifically, integratively motivated students "are less anxious in second language contexts" (Gardner, Day and MacIntyre 1992, 212) than students who students who are instrumentally motivated. Their research findings provide indications that anxiety and motivation are "two separate dimensions with overlapping behavioral consequences" (Gardner, Day and MacIntyre 1992, 212).

Six types of sources of foreign language classroom anxiety have been identified (Young, 1991): personal and interpersonal anxieties, learner beliefs about language learning, instructor beliefs about language learning, instructor-learner interactions, classroom procedures, and testing.

Apart from general foreign language classroom anxiety, many learners are highly anxious with respect to participation in speaking activities. Indeed, it is often suggested that speaking is the most "anxiety-provoking aspect in a second language learning situation" (Cheng, Horwitz, and Schallert, 1999: 420). An examination of sources of foreign language speaking anxiety showed a correlation between a) anxiety and fear of negative evaluation, and b) anxiety and perception of low ability in relation to peers and native speakers (Kitano, 2001). Kitano suggests that teachers should find ways to support students with fear of negative evaluation, which may involve providing these students with positive reinforcement, such as positive comments. In relation to learners' perception of low ability, teachers should make interventions in the classroom environment and practices and create a "sense of community in the classroom", so that students do not perceive it a competitive, while pair and group work can be incorporated (Kitano, 2001).

While foreign language speaking anxiety is a common phenomenon in the teaching of English as a foreign language, it seems that teachers do not always identify anxious students, and attribute their unwillingness to engage in speaking tasks to factors such as lack of motivation, or "poor attitude" (Gregersen, 2003: 30). An additional problem concerns the fact that although there is an abundance of theoretical articles on general language anxiety, there seems to be a relative paucity of empirical studies focusing specifically on the sources of foreign language speaking anxiety and providing practical recommendations and strategies to address it.

Consequently, it was our intention to contribute to the literature on language anxiety by using a classroom-based case study in order to: a) examine the characteristics of anxious students and the sources of foreign language speaking anxiety, b) implement interventions to overcome it, and c) evaluate the effectiveness of these measures for reducing foreign language speaking anxiety in the English classroom.

In this article, in order to set the scene for the case study, we first present the context of the teaching of English as a foreign language in Greek public schools. Then we present the qualitative classroom-based case study, including the effectiveness of project work and a supportive, collaborative learning community in reducing foreign language speaking anxiety. Finally, the pedagogical implications for addressing foreign language speaking anxiety are discussed.

2. English in Greek public primary and secondary education

Education in Greece is provided at the following levels: a) primary education, including kindergarten and primary school, which has six grades, b) secondary education, including lower secondary school, and upper secondary school, each lasting three years, c) post secondary education, and d) higher education. Studying in primary and lower secondary education is compulsory.

English is taught as a foreign language from the third grade of primary school for three hours per week. In lower and in most upper secondary schools, English is taught for three hours per week in the first grade, and two hours per week in the second and third grade.

The structure of the teaching of English as a foreign language is presented simply to help readers understand the context of the case study. However, the findings, measures taken to overcome foreign language speaking anxiety, suggestions, pedagogical implications, general insights, and conclusions presented in this article can help English teachers worldwide deal with the problem of foreign language speaking anxiety in their own teaching situations.

3. Research

3.1 Research questions

The research questions of the case study were:

- What are the characteristics of students who suffer from foreign language speaking anxiety,

- What are the sources of foreign language speaking anxiety?

- Can the incorporation of project work and a supportive classroom atmosphere help these students overcome their anxiety?

3.2 Research aim

The aim of the research study was not to establish a link between language anxiety and performance, because this is already well established in the literature. In contrast, the research aimed at linking the theoretical construct of foreign language speaking anxiety with everyday classroom practice. The overall aim was to provide English teachers worldwide with a useful array of suggestions, arising from a classroom-based case study, which will help them reduce language anxiety, promote motivation to learn, and, in the long run, increase English language acquisition.

4. Method

4.1 Participants

The sample consisted of fifteen students in the third grade of a lower secondary school in Greece, aged 13-14 years. Lessons were held three times a week for a period of forty-five minutes each. All students had been studying English for a total of 5 years, and the average classroom level was intermediate.

4.2 Data collection

Qualitative research techniques were employed in the case study, since research questions pointed to the need to gain access to "a wealth of detailed information" (Patton, 2002:14), and to "processes and meanings" that are difficult to measure (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994:4). The following techniques of qualitative data collection were used: a) semi-structured interviews, b) group discussion, and c) direct observation.

5. Results

After data was collected, we found that six of these students were experiencing English language speaking anxiety as a result of: a) fear of negative evaluation from their peers and b) perception of low ability in relation to their peers. Their anxiety was attributed to the above factors, on the basis of the following.

First, these students were unwilling to participate in speaking activities. While a number of factors can potentially account for this, research showed that their unwillingness was not due to the fact that they did not realise the value of learning English, laziness, or lack of interest in the English language. These students' narratives provided strong evidence that they did not participate in speaking activities, because they believed that they were not good at speaking. Consequently, they feared that their fellow students would evaluate them negatively. As Hara, a highly anxious student reported:

"I like English, but don't take part in speaking, because I'm so bad at speaking, and my friends will laugh at me."

Hara's text highlights her concern with her social image and her preoccupation with how her peers would perceive her.

Another source of fear of negative evaluation was the belief that they should produce faultless sentences. This finding seems consistent with Gregersen's (2003) suggestion that anxious learners tend to focus on form rather than content. All of these anxious students feared that mistakes in speaking activities would destroy their social image as able students. Nikos, a highly anxious boy describes feelings created by his exaggerated focus on avoiding language mistakes:

"When I speak I always make an awful lot of mistakes, and I don't like it. That's why I use Greek when I'm not sure of what to say. I also speak very slowly to avoid mistakes. If you listen to me speaking English, you'd think I'm not clever, but it is not so."

Fear of negative evaluation from their peers was also evident by the following characteristic, which was common to most of the above students. When asked to participate in speaking tasks with the teacher only, without their fellow students listening to them, these anxious students were markedly more willing to participate and experiment with language.

Apart from anxiety due to fear of negative evaluation from their peers, all anxious respondents compared their speaking skills negatively in relation with their peers. As an anxious girl commented:

"You listened to them (fellow students), didn't you? They speak English as if it's Greek. They're so much better than me. It's better if I just listen and not speak."

The language here is one of desperation and low self confidence. Not unsurprisingly, this student was withdrawn and silent during speaking activities.

6. Interventions to reduce foreign language speaking anxiety

Having established the sources for their English language speaking anxiety, the following classroom interventions were implemented, to help them overcome it:

6.1 Project work   Short-term   projects were used due to the following benefits of project work in foreign language settings cited in the literature: a) students are more personally involved, so they usually have increased motivation (Lee, 2002), b) they do not feel that they are constantly assessed, and c) it is easier for them to focus on communication, rather than on accuracy, and are less concerned with language errors and the consequences of "imagined failure" (MacIntyre, Noels, and Clement, 1997: 269). An additional advantage of project work is that students have an active role and responsibilities in the implementation of project work, which can boost their confidence and reduce the effect of perceptions of low ability in the target language.

6.2 Establishing a learning community and a supportive classroom atmosphere

Creating a learning community that provides the environment for "optimal motivation" (Alderman, 2004), and a "collaborative atmosphere" (Gregersen, 2003:30) can help reduce fear of errors. The following classroom interventions were made, drawing principally on suggestions for creating a supportive learning classroom community (Brophy, 2004; Dornyei, 2001).

6.2.1 Teacher-students relations

A set of classroom rules and norms was negotiated with the students. Making fun of a wrong answer was not accepted, and a norm of "mistake tolerance" was ratified. Errors were considered a natural part of learning a foreign language,

and students were encouraged to ask for help without running the risk of embarrassment (Dornyei, 2001). In addition, teaching practices communicated expectations of success for all students. For example, as far as grouping practices were concerned, groups were formed from mixed ability students, students were given equally academically challenging tasks, and the same questioning strategies were used for all students (Alderman, 2004), so that they realized that there was no differential treatment with respect to their language performance and out-of-school support.

6.2.2 Providing indirect, rather than direct correction

We avoided direct, on the spot correction in speaking activities, since it can undermine students' confidence, and because it discourages learners who are anxious about "sounding silly" to experiment with new language (Lightbown and Spada, 1999). I also tried to foster the belief to anxious students that they should aim at continuing a speaking activity, despite making errors. For example, we provided scaffolding so that the students had an opportunity to continue speaking despite making a mistake. Scaffolding included cognitive modeling, in which I explained the steps necessary for task completion. Alternatively, prompts and questions were provided in order to foster the development of repair strategies in case of a breakdown in communication.

6.2.3 Accepting the need for self worth protection

Behaviour that could be considered a threat to these students' social image and a potential source of anxiety was avoided. For example, information about students' test scores was kept private and was not announced to the whole classroom, while portfolios were used to evaluate their progress. These measures aimed at reducing preoccupation with fear of negative evaluation, which can lead to withdrawal from activities that "could increase their language skills" (Gregersen and Horwitz, 2002: 563).

6.2.4 Teacher immediacy

Both verbal (use of humor, use of students' first names) and nonverbal (eye contact, positive gestures) types of immediacy behavior were employed, since they can reduce anxiety and impact positively on motivation to learn (Christophel, 1990; Frymier, 1993).

6.2.5 Provision of praise

We soon realized that praising these students in front of their classmates for a minor accomplishment had a negative effect, since they considered it as an indication that the teacher had little confidence in their abilities (Thompson, 1997). As a result, non-verbal praise (e.g. a positive head movement) was most often used, instead of direct verbal praise.

7. Evaluation of effectiveness of interventions

The effectiveness of the interventions was assessed on the basis of a) students' willingness to participate in speaking tasks, and b) language performance in speaking activities at the end of the school term.

Willingness to engage in speaking activities is considered important, because unless students have ample opportunities to practice oral fluency and accuracy skills, they will not develop these skills. To measure willingness, a classroom diary was kept in which these students' willingness to participate in speaking tasks was recorded. Research findings provided strong evidence that at the end of the school term these anxious students were significantly more willing to participate in speaking activities. Apart from being willing to participate, these students did not avoid eye contact with the teacher, as they did at the beginning of the school term. Avoiding making eye contact with the teacher is a typical non-verbal reaction of anxious students (Gregersen, 2003). At the end of the school term, they were looking directly at the teacher more often and for more time. Although non-verbal communication is not as straightforward as encoded language, we attribute the change in eye contact patterns to the fact that they felt more relaxed, and eager to take part in speaking tasks.

With respect to English language speaking performance, these students showed improvement. We recorded the progress of these students and their performance in speaking tasks. Performance was measured in terms of both accuracy and fluency in a speaking test conducted at the end of the school term. Although a similar speaking test was not conducted at the beginning of the school term, improvement was evident for these students.

More specifically, most students' accuracy, their "ability to produce grammatically correct sentences" (Richards, Platt, and Weber, 1985: 109) increased, mainly in relation to the use of tenses and prepositions. They still made errors, however, but in most instances this did not stop them from trying to communicate.

Their fluency, that is, "natural language use" (Brumfit, 1984: 56) also increased. At the end of the school year they exhibited many characteristics of fluency, such as increased ability to concentrate on content rather than form, and increased conversational speed, compared to the beginning of the school term. They also showed more qualities of natural speech, such as more appropriate use of intonation and stress, ability to produce continuous speech without breakdown of communication, which, among others, are major parameters of language fluency (Richards, Platt, and Weber, 1985: 108-109). Finally, their tendency to revert to their mother tongue when they encountered difficulty

disappeared almost completely. Instead, they tried to express themselves in English, using gestures when necessary, and they developed the strategy of asking the teacher for help.

We attribute the greater part of the improvement in speaking accuracy and fluency to project work, which provided them with ample opportunities to practice language in a "natural" setting, negotiate for meaning, and helped them to develop strategies on getting their message across despite language difficulties. In accordance with Gregersen and Horwitz, we found that their suggestion that "anxious students could be taught to focus on continuing a conversation as a goal in itself whenever they make mistakes", can be facilitated by project work (Gregersen and Horwitz, 2002: 570).

At this point, two points need to be clarified. First, the above interventions do not constitute "ideal" interventions to reduce foreign language speaking anxiety. They are simply an attempt to move from theory to practice, focusing on a specific learning situation. In addition, it is not suggested that interventions were necessarily successful. For example, two students showed minimal improvement in willingness to engage in speaking activities and their speaking performance increased slightly. It seems that more individualized measures were needed, since what is effective for an anxious student may not be necessarily effective for another.

8. Conclusion and pedagogical implications

Teachers should realise that language learning, and particularly oral production, is a potentially stressful situation for some students, and that the "tension and discomfort related to language learning call for the attention of the language teaching profession" (Horwitz, 2001: 122). The recommendations we make are congruent with previous studies suggesting that teachers should not be consider withdrawn students as lazy, lacking in motivation, or having "poor attitude" (Gregersen, 2003: 30), when in fact they suffer from anxiety. Instead, they should identify anxious learners and make interventions to help them overcome foreign language anxiety (Aida, 1994).

Because foreign language speaking anxiety in the English classroom may stem from   fear of making mistakes and the consequent fear of negative evaluation, and students' perception of low ability in relation to their peers, we suggest that teachers may want to consider the following interventions. First, teachers can incorporate project work, because it can provide anxious and non-anxious students alike with abundant opportunities to use language in a non-threatening context. We argue that the first step in reducing anxiety is to actually have students participate in speaking tasks. Because students are more eager to participate in oral activities in small groups (Young, 1990), project work can be very helpful. Second, the creation of a friendly classroom atmosphere is important. The case study presented in this article showed that a supportive classroom atmosphere, in which language errors are considered as natural in the process of language acquisition, without overcorrection which can "draw students' attention away from communication and toward a focus on form and accuracy" (Gregersen, 2003: 31), can be instrumental in helping anxious students overcome their perception of low ability and fear of negative evaluation.

The final conclusion is that teachers need to assume the role of the researcher in their own classrooms. Before employing strategies to help students overcome foreign language speaking anxiety, foster motivation, and increase foreign language performance, practitioners should get to know their students, their attitudes toward oral production, and to shed light into the reasons that underlie their low performance and their unwillingness to engage in speaking activities. It is suggested that "teacher as a researcher" approach is an invaluable tool. Such an approach, which brings together theory and practice, can have positive effects both on the professional development of English teachers and on students' anxiety levels, motivation and language acquisition.

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