

Students' Anxiety in Speaking Class and Ways of Minimizing It

Ni Nyoman Padmadewi

Abstract: This study investigated the anxiety levels of ability groups streaming by their perceived ability. It also dealt with the investigation of possible factors which provoked the students' anxiety and finding out ways of minimizing the anxiety level. The study approached the first problem by conducting a survey study and the second and the third ones by a case study of two sample students. The results of the data collection showed that both groups, average and above average students felt anxious when they had speaking class. The results of the case study stated that factors like examination, individual presentation, spontaneous activity and limited availability of time were found to be the sources of students' anxiety. Conclusions and comments at the end of students' presentation, a tolerant teacher, and close relationship between the teacher and students in class were believed to help minimize students' anxiety level.

Key words : anxiety, above average-rated students, average students.

Anxiety is an abstract construct which can be inferred from behavioral signs. A person can be considered in the state of anxiety if he feels anxious, frightened, apprehensive, or if he is trembling or his heart is beating rapidly (Gaudry and Spielberger, 1971). Lefrancois (1988) who has the same idea stated that an anxiety is a feeling which characterised by varying degree of fear and worry.

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The anxiety level of students in relation to their study in the classroom has long been a subject of interest. A lot of research on the relationship between educational streaming and anxiety level has been reported. Across a number of studies (Cox, 1962; Cox and Hammond, 1964; Levey et.al., 1969; Gaudry and Spileberger, 1971), a striking similarity in research has been found that the children of lower ability generally show higher levels of anxiety than those of higher ability.

However these studies were limited to streaming which was based on the ability tests of the students and the investigation of difference of anxiety levels of students grouped on their perceived ability is likely not the interest of previous researchers.

This paper dealt with the investigation of anxiety levels of university students who took Speaking I class in the first year of university in the English Department of STKIP Singaraja, Bali. Since the researcher of this study only emphasized the anxiety of the students, the present study was limited to investigating the anxiety level of students streaming by their perceived ability. Further investigation about factors which might influence those students' anxiety was also conducted to establish a complete understanding of students' anxiety. How aware the students are of these factors and what coping strategies they use to reduce their anxiety, what factors they considered beneficial in minimizing the anxiety level were also briefly presented.

METHODS

To investigate the research questions, two approaches were utilized in this study. The first was a survey study which aimed at investigating the difference of anxiety level of perceived ability groups. The second was a case study which was conducted through an interview to explore the provoking anxiety factors in relation to the study in the classroom and to find out ways of minimizing the anxiety level.

Survey

This study intended to examine the difference of anxiety levels of the students in relation to their study in the classroom. The questionnaire was designed to collect data on self rated ability at 3 levels but consisting

of 1 below average students, 44 average students and 15 above average students. Since there was only one subject in the below average group, it was then included into the average group so the number of independent variable levels were 2 group.

The study was conducted on 60 university students that took Speaking I in English Department STKIP Singaraja, in the academic year 1996/1997. All subjects were from various family background but had studied English for 6 years (3 years in Junior High School and 3 years in Senior High School).

In the process of data collection, interview technique was applied. Before the interview was carried out the students were given brief questionnaires which involved the personal type information questions and questions of how they rated themselves in Speaking I.

An interview guide was employed to help the interviewer in interviewing the subjects to collect the data for the study. The interview was conducted in order to find out the level of the students' anxiety when they had Speaking class. Each interview was conducted for about 20 minutes.

Analysis and Results. This study was aimed at investigating the anxiety level of the average group (N=45) and the above average group (N=15) of students who took Speaking I. The data which were collected through interview were analyzed descriptively.

It seems that the results did not clearly support previous research and a belief that students who have low ability tend to have higher anxiety than that of high ability could not be proven in this study. From the interview it was found that almost all students regardless of their ability felt anxious when they had Speaking I. It seems there was no clear difference of anxiety level that could be shown by both groups of students. However, surprising result was found for the self rated below-average student. Compared with the anxiety level of the average students it was clear that this student felt more confident than that of the other more able students. It seems that this student had realized himself to be rated as the below-average student in class so he had no burden to perform himself in front of other students.

Compared with the previous research findings by Cox (1962) and Gaudry and Spielberger (1971), it seems that the present study showed

something different. The present study did not clearly show the difference of anxiety level for the compared groups as shown by Cox (1962) and Gaudry and Spielberger(1971). In studies by Cox and Gaudry and Spielberger, it was found that the lower ability students tended to be more anxious than the more able students.

A Case Study

In order to be able to explore factors which might affect the anxiety levels of the students (which was the second research question), the data was collected by interviewing the students who rated themselves in the dichotomy of being confident and being inferior. The use of possible coping strategies to reduce their anxiety level and finding out ways of minimizing the anxiety level would also be investigated and briefly presented in this report.

Subjects. Two subjects, 18 and 19 years old, were employed in this analysis. Both of them were first year undergraduate students. The criterion for selecting the subjects was based on their perceived ability. One was confident with her ability and the other often criticized himself as being inferior in classroom situation.

Procedure. To investigate the research questions of this study, a face-to-face interview technique was employed. The type of questions used were open ended questions so that it enabled the researcher to probe and get more information related to the research purpose. Each interview was conducted for about 20 minutes. With the permission from the interviewee, the interview was recorded so that it helped the researcher to replay the tape cassette, if required, in analyzing the data.

Analysis and Results. Based on the results of the interview, the factors which were considered as the sources of students' anxiety can be classified in the following table.

Table 1 The Sources of the Students' Anxiety

High rated student (Student A)	Low rated student (Student B)
• Examination • Individual activity in front of the class • Limited availability of time • Spontaneous activity • Partnered with less able student	• Examination • Individual activity in front of the class • Limited availability of time • Spontaneous activity

From Table 2 above it was found that both types of students had different numbers of anxiety sources but some of them were similar.

DISCUSSION

The findings above showed that both students had the same provoking anxiety factors in the first four factors. Despite the same factors, the reason of being anxious and the degree of the anxiety level of high rated student (student A) was higher than student B (low rated student). Student A felt nervous not only during the exam like student B, but also before the examination.

With regard to individual activity in front of the class, both students felt nervous for different reasons. Student A felt nervous because in that situation (ie in classroom presentation) she had to control the audience, which she did not really have to do because she was not the real teacher. She also found her anxiety increased because she felt that everyone in the classroom judged her. In that situation she felt that she was the center of the classroom attention. Student B, on the other hand, admitted that he was not too anxious. This condition was recognized as a common thing. He explained that making mistakes in Speaking class was not unusual for him, moreover he felt that everybody in class had already realized his ability so it was just like a usual activity.

Limited time available for speaking exercises was also considered as a source of anxiety. Student A considered that time is the key to reduce anxiety level. Having little time left made her badly prepared, having done insufficient preparation for examination and being poorly prepared for presentation which all led to the increase of anxiety. Student B realized that the amount of time available could help to improve the performance in the presentation and if he could show better presentation he will have higher self confidence. However he also felt nervous especially in examination regardless of the adequate provision of time.

Being partnered with less able student was considered as another source of anxiety, but this is only experienced by the high rated student. For this student, the speaking presentation would likely be worse than if he/she had a better friend because the less able would find it difficult to improvise the communication if they experienced a communication gap.

Even though both students experienced anxiety situations, they were both aware of their anxiety level and hence, tried to cope with it. Student B reduced it by having well planned preparation if the task could be prepared at home. But for the spontaneous activity he had no other alternative but calming down himself. Student A, however, did not mention any particular strategies like those of student B. For student A, once she got nervous, it was very difficult for her to control herself. Based on the interview it was found that the ambition of always being the best student-the criteria that had been likely to be given to her-made her in a very high level of anxiety especially if she carried out an individual presentation. Very different result was shown by the lowest student. Even though he felt nervous because of the speaking activities in front of the class, he was not badly nervous since, as he admitted, all of class mates had recognized him to be in that level of quality. Because of this there was no such burden if he made mistakes. Thus, it could be concluded that the lower rated student had lower level of anxiety than that of higher rated. This findings did not support the previous research findings.

Ways that could be used to minimize the anxiety level was also investigated through the interview. Both students considered that direct and frequent interruption during the individual presentation can increase students' anxiety. Interrupting students in the middle of their presentation can decrease students' self confidence and this can make them feel nervous

and anxious. Because of this, they both explained that giving comments and conclusion at the end of presentation would help much.

Another factor that was considered as a help in minimizing students' anxiety was the teacher-students relationship. If the teacher placed herself or himself too distant, there would be a kind of a loose relationship between them, and as a result, there would be a fear if they made mistakes. And if they made mistakes, self confidence would be lost, and anxiety increased. The situation might even be worse if the teacher flew into a temper to face students with low self confidence. Because of this they both expected that the teacher be more patient and more tolerant towards the students' condition.

In order to improve the validity of the research and the findings of the study, the data were triangulated with different sources. Such triangulation was conducted on one of the teachers and one of close friends of each subject. The results of the triangulation confirms the findings of the case study.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

Conclusions

This study attempted to answer some questions concerning the anxiety levels of the students: Does average ability students have different anxiety level than the above average students? What are the factors which provoke the students' anxiety in relation to their study in the classroom? And what are the ways that can minimize the students' anxiety in Speaking class? This research approached the first question by conducting a survey study and the second and the third question by conducting a case study of 2 sample students.

Based on the research findings and the discussion above, the answers of the above questions can be concluded as follows.

Both average group and above average group stated that they all felt anxious when they had Speaking class. But when their levels of anxiety were compared, the surprising result was found that low rated student tended to have a lower level of anxiety than the students of high rated ability.

Examination, individual presentation, spontaneous activity and using time available were sources of anxiety for both types of students.

Concluding and giving comments at the end of the students' performance instead of in the middle of presentation, a tolerant teacher and a close relationship between the teacher and the students were considered as factors which can minimize the students' anxiety.

Suggestions

Since the research was conducted on limited number of subjects and descriptively analyzed, it was recommended that further research be carried out with wider sample and analyzed using inferential statistical analysis.

It is expected that the study described here will help the teachers to encourage the students, highly anxious students in particular, to eliminate their anxiety by providing them the free anxiety environment and by assigning them to tasks which are not anxiety arousing. As such, it would seem important that the teacher plans activities in advance with the students so that they will not be anxious about them.

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