



**EXPLORING THE REASONS AND REMEDIES FOR SPEAKING ANXIETY
IN THE ESL CLASSROOM: A STUDY BASED ON THE FACULTY OF
ARTS, UNIVERSITY OF PERADENIYA**

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Speaking is one of the most essential to develop in the process of teaching/learning English as a second language. Many students experience anxiety when they try to speak in the ESL classroom. This study explores the reasons behind speaking anxiety among students along with the remedies used by instructors to reduce speaking anxiety in the ESL classroom. Since the study is exploratory in nature, qualitative research methods were employed in this study. The study was conducted at the Faculty of Arts, University of Peradeniya during the second semester of the academic year where the first-year undergraduates were following a compulsory oral English course. At the beginning of the academic year, students were divided into groups based on their competency level for English classes using a placement test. Many students in the basic competency level found it difficult to express themselves in English. Therefore, purposive sampling was used for this study and focus group discussions were conducted with 30 first year undergraduates belonging to the basic competency level. Interviews were also conducted with 10 instructors who taught ESL to students in the basic competency level. Thematic analysis was employed to analyze these data. The qualitative data gathered from focus group discussions revealed that the fear of making mistakes while speaking, having a limited vocabulary, lack of confidence, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation were the reasons behind speaking anxiety among the students. Making the classroom more learner-friendly, using pair work, using a variety of teaching materials, and conducting practice sessions for upcoming speech tests were revealed to be the remedies used by instructors to reduce speaking anxiety in the ESL classroom. While highlighting the reasons for speaking anxiety the study provides insights to teachers regarding the remedies to reduce speaking anxiety and help their students to develop their speaking skills.

Keywords: English as a Second language, Speaking anxiety, Undergraduates, Reasons, Remedies



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INTRODUCTION

Speaking is one of the most essential to develop in the process of teaching/learning a second language. In the Sri Lankan context students learn English as a second language. Many students experience anxiety when they try to speak in the ESL classroom. Hence the ESL instructors face difficulties while trying to improve their speaking skills as the students neither cooperate nor actively participate in classroom activities. Speaking in a foreign/second language causes higher anxiety compared to anxiety over other language skills such as reading, writing, and listening. (Horwitz et.al.,1986) As a result of speaking anxiety, many students tend to remain silent in the ESL classroom.

Horwitz et. al (1986) proposed a theory to identify the causes of foreign language learning anxiety and developed the FLACS (Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale). According to it, three components namely communication apprehension, test anxiety, and the fear of negative evaluation inhibit the students from succeeding in learning a foreign language.

While many studies have investigated the reasons for speaking anxiety among students in the EFL setting only a few studies have been conducted in the ESL setting. However, these studies have only investigated the reasons for speaking anxiety among students. Therefore, it is important to identify the reasons along with the remedies for speaking anxiety in the ESL classroom. This is the research gap the present study aims to fill.

The main objectives of this research include exploring the reasons behind speaking anxiety among students along with the remedies used by instructors to reduce speaking anxiety in the ESL classroom in the Sri Lankan context.

METHODOLOGY

Since the research aims to explore the reasons behind speaking anxiety among students, along with the remedies used by instructors to reduce speaking anxiety in the classroom, qualitative research methods are employed in this study. The study was conducted at the Faculty of Arts, University of Peradeniya during the second semester of the academic year where the first year undergraduates were following an oral English course for a period of 15 weeks. At the beginning of the academic year, students were divided into groups based on their competency level for English classes using a placement test.

Many students in the basic competency level found it difficult to express themselves in English. Therefore, purposive sampling was used for this study and focus group interviews were conducted with 30 first year undergraduates to identify the reasons for speaking anxiety in the classroom. These students had to attend ESL classes 3 days a week and each of these classes lasted for 2 hours. Of the participants, 20 were female students and 10 were male students. The researcher met the students in five separate groups for focus group discussions. The focus group discussions were conducted in person at the university after the ESL classes. Each focus group discussion lasted for approximately 20 minutes.



Interviews were also conducted with 10 instructors who taught ESL to students in the basic competency level to identify the remedies they used to reduce speaking anxiety in the classroom. Of the respondents 7 were female instructors and 3 were male instructors. They prepared weekly tasks to help students develop their speaking skills. All the interviews were done in person during work hours. These interviews approximately lasted for 30 minutes.

After the focus group discussions and interviews were transcribed by the researcher, the data were organized around two major themes that correspond to the two main objectives of the research.

1. Reasons for speaking anxiety in the ESL classroom.
2. Remedies used by instructors to reduce speaking anxiety.

Then the data collected from focus group discussions with the students and the interviews with the instructors were organized around these two themes and were analyzed thematically.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Reasons for speaking anxiety in the ESL classroom.

The focus group discussions were focused on the first main objective of the research; reasons for speaking anxiety in the ESL classroom. During the focus group discussions with the students, they revealed that the fear of making mistakes while speaking, having a limited vocabulary, lack of confidence, test anxiety, and the fear of negative evaluation were the reasons that made them anxious to speak in the ESL classroom. The frequencies of these reasons are presented in the table below.

Reasons	Frequency
Fear of making mistakes while speaking	30
Having a limited vocabulary	21
Lack of confidence	20
Test anxiety	30
Fear of negative evaluation	25

Many students tend to remain silent in the classroom due to the fear of making mistakes while speaking. They reported that “I feel anxious to speak in the ESL class because I am afraid of making mistakes” and “I do not know how to pronounce certain words, so I feel anxious to speak in class.”

Having a limited vocabulary was found to be another reason that inhibited the students from actively speaking in class. Some students reported that “Even though we have really good ideas we do not know how to express them properly due to having a limited vocabulary.”

Lack of confidence was also identified as a reason for speaking anxiety among students. The students reported that when they were asked to speak in class they would quickly write down what they wanted to say on a piece of paper and read it out. They emphasized that it was simply because they were not confident to speak in English.

Since passing the oral English course was an essential requirement to obtain their degree many students reported that they were anxious about facing the in-class speech tests. When the instructors assigned them the task of delivering a mini speech some students reported that, “I couldn’t utter a word when I had to deliver the speech as I was so anxious about the test.” and “I was worried that if I couldn’t do the speech properly I would get a bad grade and fail



this course. So I memorized what I had to say. But when I had to do the speech I forgot what I memorized because I was so nervous about the test.”

The fear of being negatively evaluated by their instructors was revealed to be another reason that caused speaking anxiety among the students. They reported that “I do not want to make mistakes in front of the instructor” and “I do not want to get a negative remark from my instructor.”

Remedies used by instructors to reduce speaking anxiety

The interviews conducted with the instructors were focused on the second main objective of the research; the remedies used by instructors to reduce speaking anxiety in the ESL classroom. The remedies that were identified are listed below.

1. Making the classroom more learner-friendly
2. Using pair work
3. Using a variety of teaching materials
4. Conducting practice sessions for upcoming speech tests

All the instructors emphasized the importance of making the classroom more learner-friendly as a means of reducing speaking anxiety. Encouraging the students to ask for help without being afraid, giving them a chance to voice their opinion, and praising them for their accomplishments were common strategies used by all instructors to make the classroom more learner-friendly.

Pair work was another remedy used by all instructors to reduce speaking anxiety among students. The students were given the freedom to choose their partners and all the instructors reported that it helped the students to relax and actively engage in classroom speech activities. After assigning them the task of creating a dialogue and presenting it to the class in pairs the instructors reported the following: “Having a friend by their side enabled the students to engage in speaking activities more enthusiastically.”, “My students seem more relaxed while presenting the dialogue as a pair.”, and, “I think my students liked to engage in pair work as it enabled them to help each other and correct their mistakes”

The instructors mentioned that using a variety of materials such as games, audio clips, cartoon pictures, and video clips helped in reducing their students’ speaking anxiety in the classroom. They used a variety of materials to convince their students that English was a fun subject to learn. They reported that, “I played several word games with my students to help them to improve their vocabulary. They enjoyed playing the games and I was pleased to see them using the new words learned through it while speaking in class.”, “When I used audio and video clips to teach certain lessons even the students who are usually silent in class shared their ideas and actively took part in classroom discussions.”, and “I gave my students the freedom to choose a cartoon picture and asked them to describe the social issues behind it. It was clear that they enjoyed this task as they confidently shared their thoughts about the pictures”

The instructors also mentioned that they conducted practice sessions to prepare the students for upcoming speech tests. According to the data gathered through interviews this remedy not only reduced their speaking anxiety but also increased their confidence. Some instructors reported that, “My students highly benefitted from these practice sessions. It helped them to



reduce their anxiety and enabled them to perform well during the tests.” and “After having practice sessions I observed that the students were able to deliver their speeches confidently.”

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

This study explored the reasons and remedies for speaking anxiety in the ESL classroom. The fear of making mistakes while speaking, having a limited vocabulary, lack of confidence, test anxiety, and the fear of negative evaluation were identified as the reasons behind speaking anxiety among students. Making the classroom more learner-friendly, using pairwork, using a variety of teaching materials, and conducting practice sessions for upcoming speech tests were revealed as the remedies used by instructors to reduce speaking anxiety. While highlighting the reasons for speaking anxiety the study provides insights to teachers regarding the remedies to reduce speaking anxiety and help their students to develop their speaking skills.

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