

Students' Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety: The Roots of the Problem¹

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Abstract

Experiencing anxiety is a major obstacle for language learners, especially in productive skills. Among these, speaking is considered to be generally the most challenging. Clearly, many students are affected by Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety (FLSA) and this negatively affects many aspects of their language learning experience, such as group work, speaking tests, presentations etc. Although many studies examine the causes of students' FLSA, there is a lack of focus on individual-specific causes. This qualitative multiple case study aimed to examine the phenomenon of FLSA, and explore the root causes of this problem, aiming at providing teachers with specific solutions to enable them to develop more effective ways to assist their students. Three preparatory class students participated in this study. The data was collected through the participants' diaries, semi-structured interviews and the researcher's informal participant observation over 6 weeks. The findings revealed that the causes of FLSA are highly personal and therefore, generally unpredictable. While certain causes have received much attention, others are practically invisible to teachers and therefore difficult to deal with effectively. The results emphasize the need for teachers to fully consult students before deciding on approaches to overcome FLSA.

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Introduction

Speaking is one of the most essential abilities in human life especially for communicating. Without speaking, being a part of a community may not be achieved easily. Evidently, being able to speak

is one of the main reasons why people want or required to learn a foreign language. To interact with communities, speaking a different language necessitates at least a basic level of competency in it.

However, as Levelt (1993) suggests, this ability is among the most challenging ones for people. Examined as a process, speaking activity proves itself to be a complicated action for including various capabilities. As a communicational action, speaking requires the ability to listen and understand the interlocutor besides producing speech, which makes it even more difficult (Widdowson, 1978). Brown and Abeywickrama (2019) mention that listening skill is an essential part of speaking. Furthermore, Hamid and Idrus's (2021) study revealed that the speaking and listening anxieties are related to each other, which proves their relation even better. Undoubtedly, to achieve verbal communication, one needs to put various language skills in use (Horwitz et al., 1986). Taking these into account, it is possible to deduce that it can be more arduous for people when performed in a different language.

In a language learning environment, it is evident that speaking skill is not equally easy to achieve for everybody. While easy for some, it can be quite challenging for others, which can create a lot of anxiety. It is common sense that anxiety, "the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system" (Horwitz et al., 1986, p. 125), is a big threat for a lot of language learners as it hinders their speaking abilities considerably.

As the fact that students suffer from FLSA is a shared view for both students and teachers, it has been the target of numerous studies. Most of these studies proved that anxiety has a negative effect on speaking (Horwitz & Steinberg, 1986; Phillips, 1992; Woodrow, 2006; Subaşı, 2010; He, 2013; Suleimenova, 2013; Karagöl & Başbay, 2018; Kasap & Power, 2019; Tekşan et al., 2019). Besides, knowing the reasons for FLSA has also been the aim or result of a lot of studies (Young, 1990; Tsiplakides & Keramida, 2009; Subaşı, 2010; Mak, 2011; Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2014; Debreli & Demirkan, 2016; Şener, 2018; Alnahidh & Altalhab, 2020; Topçu & Başbay, 2020; Yentürk & Dağdeviren Kırmızı, 2020) which revealed various answers for it. In most of these studies, generalisations have been the main data analysis medium for detecting and grouping under certain

titles the reasons for students FLSA. Some of the reasons for experiencing FLSA that have been revealed by the results of these studies

are having a foreign friend (Mede and Kararımak, 2017), talking to a native speaker (Woodrow, 2006; Mak, 2011; Yumru & Doyman, 2020; Yentürk & Dağveren Kırmızı, 2020), feeling inferior to peers (Tsiplakides & Keramida, 2009; Şener, 2018; Korucu Kış & Şanal, 2020; Yentürk & Dağdeviren Kırmızı, 2020), fear of making mistakes and humiliation (Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2014; Şener, 2018; Tekşan et al., 2019; Alnahidh & Altalhab, 2020; Topçu & Başbay, 2020; Yentürk & Dağdeviren Kırmızı, 2020), fear of being corrected (Mak, 2011; Şener, 2018; Topçu & Başbay, 2020) and the way of receiving feedback (Young, 1990; Aida, 1994; Mak, 2011; Şener, 2018; Alnahidh & Altalhab, 2020; Topçu & Başbay, 2020), perfectionist attitudes of the learners (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002), fear of bad pronunciation (Alnahidh & Altalhab, 2020), negative self-evaluation and lack of self-confidence studies (Foss & Reitzel, 1986; Dalkılıç, 2001; Subaşı, 2010; Mak, 2011; Ansari, 2015; Tridinanti, 2018; Tekşan et al., 2019; Korucu Kış & Şanal, 2020), speaking to crowd of peers (Young, 1990; Çubukçu, 2007; Mak, 2011; Suleimenova, 2013; Pei, 2021), negative judgement of the peers (Tsiplakides & Keramida, 2009; Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2014; Ansari, 2015; Topçu & Başbay, 2020), lack of practice and time for preparation (Horwitz et al., 1986; Mak, 2011; Tosun, 2018), unwillingness to take risks (Liu & Jackson, 2008), fears related to listening (Hamid & Idrus, 2021).

However, the biggest cause for learners to experience anxiety about a foreign language is their own ideas regarding language learning (Young, 1991). Thus, students are the best people to define their feelings and experiences. Regarding that, the best way to clarify the roots of the reasons of FLSA is to consult students' own ideas without making generalisations about those reasons by asking them to students under ready-made titles in questionnaires. To examine the roots of those reasons, students should be free to verbalise the problems in their own words specifically and more importantly individually. Therefore, this qualitative multiple case study aims to examine the students who experience FLSA and explore the exact causes of this problem with the aim of providing clues for specific solutions.

Method

Research Design

This is a qualitative, multiple case study examining English language learners' FLSA by 'comparing and contrasting' various cases, instead of explaining a single one in detail (Heigham & Crocker, 2009). This study took place at English preparatory class of a foundation university in the western part of Türkiye. The participants of the study were 3 preparatory class students. To have a specific and elaborative clarification for the subject matter, the study is designed as a qualitative research (Creswell, 2013). Multiple cases serve for the examination of anxiety with its uniqueness for individuals.

Research Participants

This study took place with the participation of one female and two male preparatory class students at Intermediate level in the academic year 2022-2023. Case 1 is a 24 years-old male student who will study Architecture. This is his second year at preparatory class. He studied at a private high school prior to university. Case 2 is a 21 years-old male student who will study law. This is his first year at preparatory class. He studied at both state and private high schools prior to university. Case 3 is a 20 years-old female student who will study law. This is her first year at preparatory class. She studied at a state high school prior to university.

Research Instruments and Procedure

The data was collected through the participants' diaries, semi-structured interviews and informal participant observation during one of the three tracks of the academic year 2022-2023. The data collection started with the initial interviews with each participant conducted in the first or the second weeks of the 10-week track. Starting from the second week of the track, the diary entries were collected until the end of seventh week of the track. Each participant brought their weekly insights as either written document or voice record on every Friday. Additionally, two in-depth interviews were conducted by the researcher with each participant individually in the third and the sixth weeks of the study. Finally, throughout the whole process the researcher observed the students both in and outside the class including interview times.

Data Analysis

Data was analysed and interpreted for each case separately by following the six-phase thematic approach of Braun and Clarke (2012), through getting familiar with every aspect of the data by reviewing them for several times, through coding and putting the codes into theme, through examining the themes and writing the themes for each case. At the end of the process, each case is compared and contrasted and the results are interpreted by taking all the cases into account.

Results

Case 1

The themes that define the reasons for FLSA of case 1 are “fear of failure”, “the interlocutor” and “the overuse of self-monitoring”. First of all, Case 1 is a student extremely worried about making mistakes in English and thus, he has a fear of failure. He is generally concerned with being unable to achieve something for this reason he is so anxious about people’s thoughts about him. The fact reflects on his foreign language speaking experience as well. The possibility of failure makes him feel unwilling to speak. Besides, he is both afraid of making mistakes and possibility of failing in understanding a question addressed to him because both can make him feel humiliated and look less smart than actually he is, in front of people. In addition to that, this student believes his FLSA is also related to his lack of self-confidence and feeling more FLSA ruins his self-confidence more. For this reason, he also does not like to feel inferior to his peers. His anxiety rises when he tends to compare himself to his friends. Secondly, how close he is to the person he is in a conversation with matters a lot to him. He feels more comfortable when he gets to talk to someone he feels close to and that lessens the anxiety he feels. It is because he thinks the people whom he knows well may not judge him for his mistakes. Furthermore, he believes that the people at the same level of English with him are not a threat for him, whereas the people whose English level he assumes to be better than his gives him the feeling of anxiety. He believes speaking English moderately is unacceptable and for him, one has to speak faultless English. Therefore, he is more worried about talking to his teachers and receiving feedback from them rather than he does when he shares the same experiences with his peers. Finally, his worries make him observe himself carefully and he consults self-monitoring more than necessary, which gives him more anxiety and thus, he gets confused. He

cannot tolerate his mistakes and he confirms that when he does not follow his words while speaking, he is more fluent and confident.

Case 2

The themes that define the reasons for FLSA of case 2 are “ADHD and Generalised Anxiety Disorder” and his fear of “judgements of others”. Case 2 is a student suffering from ADHD and Generalised Anxiety Disorder, which affects most aspects of his life especially his language learning. These two conditions make him think very fast and he sometimes gets confused and does not know what to say while speaking English. When he gets confused, he tends to switch back to Turkish from time to time. Additionally, he is affected by these two conditions physically too. He occasionally feels uneasy and has heart palpitations because of anxiety and gets more anxious about speaking. For compensation, he consumes caffeine which he believes may help him concentrate because he is distracted easily in any kind of activity including his English studies. As he is not eligible to use medicine for his problems, he believes caffeine is a solution and he is nearly addicted to it. Secondly, Case 2 is so worried about people’s ideas about him. Other people’s judgements are a big concern for him. He even abstains from attending the classroom activities because of that. When he makes mistakes while speaking English, he feels like he will be judged by his friends. Related to that, pronunciation mistakes are a big problem for him because he thinks people may laugh at him in case of a pronunciation mistake. Rather than teachers, friends may be more judgmental for him and that may lead to humiliation. Thus, friends’ expectations make him afraid. In addition to those, his father’s manners are anxiety provoking for Case 2. As his father is very fluent at English, he tends to criticise Case 2 for his pronunciation and that is a big burden for him while speaking. Related to that, he feels worried while he is speaking to his father’s foreign friends too. He thinks his FLSA would not change even if he had a chance to rehearse his words. Instead, she says that would raise his anxiety. Other than those, he says the presence of a foreign peer does not make him anxious, but he does not like being observed by his peers while speaking and he is even more nervous when he works in a big group.

Case 3

The themes that define the reasons for FLSA of case 3 are “judgements of others” and “overuse of self-monitoring”. Case 3’s biggest problem is fear of humiliation. In case of being teased by somebody, she feels resentment. She believes that her peers are so cruel in their judgements so she does not feel comfortable in communities including her peers. She feels shy and worried about their ideas. Regarding those, she feels uncomfortable in classroom and does not want to attend speaking activities. When she has to speak, she does it quickly and avoids people’s attention. She does not want to be remembered by her friends. Related to that, she feels worse when she works in bigger groups. As she fears humiliation, the presence of a foreign friend who is fluent at speaking gives anxiety to her. Additionally, she is afraid of not understanding a question addressed to her. Because she wants to speak perfectly, she feels shy when she does not understand a question. For this reason, she generally prefers not to take risk of humiliation and stays silent instead, without attending the speaking activities. As Case 3 has a bad experience about it, she is also very afraid of being misunderstood and sees such situations as a complete frustration. Additionally, she feels anxious about her teachers’ ideas about her, so this is another reason why she abstain from speaking sometimes. Furthermore, Case 3 is so afraid of making mistakes and being corrected about them. She says having correction from a peer is even more humiliating. Also, she believes she has no problem about generating ideas and does not need time to get prepared to speak. However, her problem is dependent on the moment she actually speaks. Another big problem she has about speaking is overuse of self-monitoring that she tends to do because of an excessive worry about her speaking. She says she makes good sentences in her mind, yet gets confused while saying those because of checking on her words. Also, she judges herself harshly and thinks about negative experiences in classroom again and again. Thinking too much about her frustrations in speaking creates more anxiety and she starts to judge herself more and have more difficulty.

Discussion

Results of the study indicated that the participants have some common and unique causes for their FLSA. While some of reasons of FLSA are common for the participant and parallel with the ones

that have been revealed by a lot of studies before, some other reasons that are mentioned by the participants are unique and unpredictable and have not been detected in the earlier studies.

For case 1, the main reasons for suffering from FLSA are “fear of failure”, “the interlocutor” and “the overuse of self-monitoring”. For case 2, the main reasons are participants’ ADHD and Generalised Anxiety Disorder, and his fear of “judgements of others”. For case 3, the main reasons for suffering from FLSA are “judgements of others” and “overuse of self-monitoring”.

As for common reasons, the theme “overuse of self-monitoring” was found to have an impact on both Case 1 and Case 3. These two students observe themselves very carefully, which makes them too careful about their words and as a result, their FLSA level raises. As Gregersen and Horwitz’s (2002) study also showed, the perfectionist attitudes of learners create anxiety in them. These two cases mention that they cannot tolerate mistakes and do not like having correction. They believe mistakes may lead humiliation as the same idea has been revealed in a lot of studies (Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2014; Şener, 2018; Tekşan et al., 2019; Alnahidh & Altalhab, 2020; Topçu & Başbay, 2020; Yentürk & Dağdeviren Kırmızı, 2020). Parallel to that, they do not like being corrected just like most of other students who have been a part of such studies (Mak, 2011; Şener, 2018; Topçu & Başbay, 2020). However, Case 1 is more positive about being corrected by his peers, while Case 3 finds it totally humiliating. Similar to the results of various studies (Young, 1990; Aida, 1994; Mak, 2011; Şener, 2018; Alnahidh & Altalhab, 2020; Topçu & Başbay, 2020), the way feedback is delivered matters for students. Such worries stated above make them use self-monitoring excessively and they both get confused while speaking. Case 1 mentions that he is more fluent when he does not follow his words consciously and similarly, Case 3 says she gets more confused when she checks on her words.

Secondly, the theme “judgements of others” was found to be common for both case 2 and case 3. In their observations and their diaries, these two students clearly emphasized that they are extremely worried about other people’s judgements about their speaking and that makes them very anxious while speaking English. Just like the results of many studies (Tsiplakides & Keramida, 2009; Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2014; Ansari, 2015; Topçu & Başbay, 2020), they both believe that their peers’ judgements can be harsh and thus they are afraid of them. Regarding that, they both dislike

having the attention in the class while speaking, so they prefer not to attend activities. Just like the results of Liu and Jackson's (2008) study, these two participants are also afraid of taking risks. If they have to attend activities, they prefer to work in smaller groups. Just like many other students (Young, 1990; Çubukçu, 2007; Mak, 2011; Suleimenova, 2013; Pei, 2021), they find talking to their peers threatening. For Case 2, pronunciation mistakes are a big concern just like it was found in Alnahidh and Altalhab's (2020) study. And finally, contrary to the results of some studies (Horwitz et al., 1986; Mak, 2011; Tosun, 2018), these two cases do not think that lack of time to get prepared to speak is a reason for their FLSA. To illustrate, Case 2 thinks that more time to get prepared might be more anxiety provoking and Case 3 believes that FLSA is directly related to the time of speech but not the time given to get prepared.

In addition to those, these three cases have their unique reasons for their FLSA as well. For case 1, his feelings about the interlocutor bears utmost importance directing his feelings towards speaking. For case 2, his biggest challenge that also directs his life in various other aspects is ADHD and generalised anxiety disorder. Besides, family pressure has an effect on his FLSA. For case 3, judging herself harshly is a point that is not shared by the other participant students. Among these reasons, closeness to interlocutor, ADHD & generalised anxiety disorder and family pressure are not the points that have been discussed in the previous studies about the matter, which proves the value of consulting students' idea to understand their FLSA because those reasons might be the ones that the researchers may not think of. Students' own voice is the best tool to reach those unique and individual reasons and their lead shapes the best path to the effective solutions.

Conclusion

This current study aimed at reaching the roots of the reasons why students as individuals experience FLSA. The data collected proves that while some of the reasons for having FLSA are common for a lot of students, as well as they are for the participants of this study, others are completely personal and unpredictable. Although teachers are capable of making valid assumptions about those reasons depending on their intuition and observation, some of those reasons which are unique to an individual are almost impossible to detect without direct interaction with students. It is undeniable that catering for students' needs well requires understanding the roots of their problems

thoroughly, which necessitates an effective collaboration between the parties. Knowing that plenty of students suffer from FLSA, teachers should be more sensitive about the issue and be in great effort of figuring out the true nature of the matter by talking to their students directly. Being influential in a lot of points such as speaking with friends, giving presentations, taking speaking tests, attending a class activity etc., FLSA well deserves a special attention. As Pei's (2021) study also revealed, the close interaction between learners and teachers is the best possible medium to lessen students' anxiety. Teachers can help their students effectively only when they have the exact notion of their problem. Therefore, students are the best source to lead teachers to the solutions for their FLSA. Thus, teachers should consult students' insight to unravel their actual problem and solve it.

Finally, the fact that anxiety is a common problem for a lot of students and an obstacle for language learning should be a concern for all teachers to feel the need for preventing it by taking precautions so that they can provide a better language learning experience and motivation for their students.

Recommendations

This study highlighted the value of consulting students' ideas for important matters regarding their educational experience, especially about FLSA. In order not to let anxiety be an influential stakeholder of a student's speaking performance, teachers may like to consider talking to their students directly about their needs and problems. Regarding that, institutions should consider the importance of training teachers about dealing with FLSA as it is a matter affecting a lot of language learners. As Young (1991) suggests, "helping teachers to recognise the signs of anxiety in language learners is an important step in responding to anxiety in the classroom" (p. 429). Beating FLSA necessitates institutions', teachers' and students' proper attention and their close collaboration.

Besides, this study was realised in a foundation university with the participation of three preparatory class students at Intermediate level in a 6-week time period. As this multiple case study specifically focuses on the uniqueness of the reasons for FLSA, more cases at different levels may be effective in finding out various specific reasons for experiencing FLSA. Also, as the time constraints required a limited period of time for this study, a similar one covering more than 6-

week period can be realised to have more insightful findings by giving the participants time to observe themselves in various situations.

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