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REDUCING UNDERGRADUATES SPEAKING ANXIETY THROUGH CLASS INTERACTIONS AND ORAL PRESENTATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Proficiency in speaking English is an essential requirement for undergraduates particularly in English as a Second Language (ESL) learning context. However, many ESL undergraduates encounter challenges while learning speaking skills due to anxiety. Therefore, this study investigates the influence of class interactions and oral presentations on reducing undergraduates' speaking anxiety. The study was conducted for a period of 12 weeks using a pre-post quasi-experimental research design. An intact class of 16 undergraduates in a stylistic class in north-eastern Nigeria was selected for the study. A questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were used to collect data for the study. Findings reveal that the students' anxiety levels significantly reduced in all the five levels of speaking anxiety, psychological anxiety, fear of making grammatical mistakes, fear of negative evaluation, English classroom speaking anxiety, social-environmental factors, and perception factor. The findings also show that the students' speaking anxiety is mostly due to fear of negative evaluation and social-environmental factor. The study makes some recommendations for teachers to help students to overcome speaking anxiety through classroom interactions and oral presentation.

Contribution/ Originality: This study contributes to the existing literature theoretically and pedagogically. It confirms the constructivism theory which suggests that learners achieve their learning goals through collaboration with peer and support of teachers. Also, the study provides ESL teachers with a method of reducing students' speaking anxiety.

1. INTRODUCTION

Proficiency in speaking English is an essential requirement for success, not only in academic but also in the labour market, especially in countries where English used as a second language (ESL). Students are expected to present and share their ideas. In the labour market, individuals are required to communicate effectively to groups or individuals. Generally, speaking involves complex mental operations which ensure its effective delivery (Salem and Al Dyiar, 2014). However, in a language learning process, these mental operations and potentially are affected by some factors which in turn influence learner's speaking proficiency and performance. One of such factors is anxiety. Many Nigerian undergraduates feel nervous and stress when speaking English in front of peers, teachers or strange people. Such nervousness and stress may impede their development or proficiency in speaking skills (Piechurska-

Kuciel, 2011; Peng, 2014). It has been observed by researchers that many students feel more anxious in foreign language classes than other classes (Horwitz *et al.*, 1986). Additionally, language anxiety has been described by many educators as an important factor that students' determines success and failure in foreign language classes (Krashen, 1985; Peng, 2014).

Anxiety is defined by many scholars. For instance, Battaglia and Ogliari (2005) defined as feelings of 'worry about future events' or fear as 'a reaction to current events' which result in physical symptoms such as increased heartbeat rate and body shaking. Anxiety is also viewed by other scholars "as a negative mood of apprehension which is accompanied with physiological characteristics" (Wooten, 2008) and as an emotional feeling of tension, worried thoughts, and physical changes (American Psychological Association, 2015). In language learning, anxiety is described as a kind of "nervous-system arousal" that happens when undertaking a task (Leaver *et al.*, 2005) as "the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with L2 contexts, including speaking, listening, and learning" (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1994). It has been observed that students' most concern is difficulty in speaking in a class (Horwitz *et al.*, 1986).

Speaking is a language skill which involves the production and conveying an aural/oral message/meaning through producing verbal utterances systematically (Bailey, 2008). It is described as a verbal use of language to communicate with others (Fulcher, 2003). Cheng (2007) highlighted that speaking is "a closed loop wherein the conversation can only occur where there are two individuals, the communicator, and recipient". Speaking is further defined by Hammad and Ghali (2015) "as a productive aural/oral process that consists of using grammatical rules, cohesive devices, lexical items, phonological rules for expressing one's thoughts and feelings in speech". Thus, speaking anxiety is seen as a specific social phobia or difficulty to speak in the group or before a group of people which may hinder one's studies or life in general (Samuelson, 2011). Horwitz *et al.* (1986) describe the difficulty students encounter while speaking to an individual or groups, or listening to or learning a spoken message, as any of the following: communication apprehension, oral communication anxiety, "stage fright" and speaking anxiety.

Speaking anxiety could be manifested in many ways such as catching a cold and getting confused (Ortega, 2009) blood pressure, hand trembling or other parts of the body, nervousness, failing to recall internalized information, and avoiding eye-contact (Hanna and Gibson, 1987) psychological disorder, extreme worry, overwhelming physical responses such as fatigue and headaches (Battaglia and Ogliari, 2005).

Various factors have been attributed to speaking anxiety (Zhang and Zhong, 2012) which include linguistic factors, teacher factor, teaching approach, class activity, psychological factors, and cultural factors, low self-confidence, shyness, fear of committing mistakes while speaking such as in wrong pronunciation, lack of preparation, fear of being laughed at and native speaker effect (Dalkiliç, 2001; Azher *et al.*, 2010).

Kojima (2007) observed that learners tend to have a high level of anxiety when they do not have sufficient linguistic knowledge such as grammar, pronunciation or lexis. In line with this, Kayaoglu and Saglamel (2013) revealed that the language anxiety level of 30 Turkish EFL students increased due to linguistic difficulties (vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation). For psychological factors, personality trait is found to be closely related to L2 learning. For instance, extroverts are observed to be happier and ready to communicate with other people (Kojima, 2007). On the other hand, perfectionists are also anxious learners as they worry most over errors because of their higher performance standards (Gregersen and Horwitz, 2002). Other factors such as afraid in communication with people especially new, fear of negative evaluation and worries over a fear of failure contribute to language anxiety (Horwitz *et al.*, 1986).

Additionally, the unfamiliarity of cultural backgrounds of the target language also increases anxiety level (Kojima, 2007). This has been confirmed by Tanveer (2007) who examined the causes of speaking anxiety among 20 EFL/ESL learners. He discovered that their language anxiety was mainly due to the differences between the learners' culture and that of the target language.

Classroom setting, engagement, inappropriate teaching contents and teaching method adopted by teachers also cause students' anxiety (Alrabai, 2014). For example, when students are not given class activities that would enable to use a target language, or when they are threatened, they become anxious. Corroborating this, Riasati (2011) uses qualitative interviews to obtain the perceptions of three Iranian EFL adult learners concerning the causes of causes of language anxiety. The students perceived a lack of preparation and the types of activities being implemented as the major causes of language anxiety.

2. PREVIOUS STUDIES ON ANXIETY

Various studies have been conducted on English speaking anxiety on students studying English many countries (both English and non-English speaking). They discovered both positive and negative effects of language anxiety on language learning. In other words, it can be either beneficial factor which can motivate learners by triggering action and excitement give a way for success, or debilitating factor, which could hinder the learners' performance (Gardner and MacIntyre (1993); Young, 1999 as cited in Zhang (2001); Çağatay (2015)). Other studies also confirmed that learners could perform better with appropriate tension and a little anxiety (Mahmoodzadeh, 2012; Chiu et al., 2016).

In contrast, other studies indicate that language anxiety can negatively affect learners' speaking ability/ fluency and learning in a general. Gardner and MacIntyre according to Çağatay (2015) posited that anxiety may reduce students' motivation to learn, especially students with high anxiety who have difficulty to relieve tension and stress from their speaking anxiety; they feel nervous more easily. Other scholars like Hou (2013 as cited in Chiu et al. (2016)) maintain that language anxiety causes students to get frustrated, lose confidence be unwilling to speak English (due to fear of mistake).

In a study, Melouah (2013) discovered that low language proficiency is among the sources of oral performance anxiety of 54 Algerian EFL university students. On the contrary, Mahmoodzadeh (2012) shows that lack of FL knowledge is not among the causes of EFL speaking anxiety of 74 Iranian students studying English in an institute. On this part, Mak (2011) reveals other causes of speaking anxiety among 313 Chinese ESL university students. These include fear of negative evaluation, negative self-evaluation, negative attitudes towards the English classroom, and failing to contribute to speaking in classes. In a similar study on the relationship between anxiety and English speaking, Azizifar et al. (2014) used The Foreign Language Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz et al. (1986). They found that the higher the FLCAS score, the low English speaking of 80 Iranian EFL learners.

Therefore, teachers need to create a non-threatening atmosphere of less or no anxiety. This may help students to overcome the apprehension of speaking an ESL classroom. Thus, this study employs class interactions and multiple oral presentations in order to increase the students' self-confidence and motivation which in turn decrease their speaking anxiety and improve their communication skills. Class interaction has its roots in the constructivist theory of learning. The theory postulate that through social interaction, active participation in a learning process, learners build new knowledge from their previous knowledge and experiences. This is because the interactions allow them to argue, critique, question, probe and convince one another (Jonassen, 2000). Teachers on their part help the students to construct their own interpretations of the world rather than putting knowledge into their minds in the interactions (Martin et al., 2006).

In the Nigerian context, for example, teachers mostly employ the traditional teacher-centered approach where enough opportunities are hardly given students to interact and participate in the learning process. Also, in the northern part of the country, Hausa is predominantly spoken outside the classrooms. These may have an effect on the students' anxiety in speaking English.

In recent years, there is an increase in research on speaking anxiety, exploring sources, nature, effects and possible causes of L2 speaking anxiety. However, in the Nigerian context not much has been done to reduce

speaking anxiety among ESL undergraduates. In Nigeria, lecturers and teachers mostly adopt the traditional teacher-centered approach, largely due to various factors such a large number of students, lack awareness of new approaches. Therefore, this study aims at reducing students' speaking anxiety through class interactions and multiple oral presentations by establishing a low-threat learning environment in which English as a second language will be used.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research question was asked:

1. To what extent can class interactions and oral presentations reduce speaking anxiety among Nigerian undergraduates?
2. What are the causes of Nigerian ESL undergraduates' speaking anxiety?

4. METHODOLOGY

A quasi-experimental research design is adopted for the study to investigate the extent to which class interactions and oral presentation can reduce speaking anxiety among undergraduates. To answer the research questions of the study, both qualitative and quantitative data were collected through semi-structured pre- and post-interviews and pre-and post-questionnaires.

4.1. Participants

The participants of the study are 16 fourth year undergraduates in a local university in northeastern Nigeria. They are an intact class of English stylistics. They are of mixed-gender with ages range from 22-35 years old. The participants were informed by the researchers of the purpose, risks, benefits, and procedures of research. All participants agreed to take part in the study voluntarily.

4.2. Instruments

Two instruments were employed in the data collection of the study, a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. A speaking anxiety questionnaire designed on a five-point Likert scale was used to collect the quantitative data. The questionnaire is adopted from Hwa and Peck (2017) who established five factors that are associated with speaking anxiety and overall effects on oral communicative competence. These are:

1. Psychological anxiety (e.g. self-esteem in speaking English) – Items 1-2, 11-13, 16-18, 20 and 26;
2. Fear of negative evaluation (e.g. worrying about negative evaluations from their instructors or peers) – Items 10 and 14-15;
3. English classroom speaking anxiety (e.g. become anxious when participating in activities that require them to speak English) – Items 3-9 and 19-23;
4. Social-environmental factor (e.g. an unpleasant emotion experienced as a lack of opportunities to practice English in daily lives) – Items 27-32; and
5. Perception factor (e.g. perception of the ability to communicate in English which will affect graduate employability in recruitment) – Items 24-25.

The questionnaire was piloted and Cronbach alpha was calculated at 0.75. This value is acceptable as values greater than 0.7 are considered reliable (George and Mallery, 2003). On the other hand, semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to get in-depth information about the students' speaking anxiety. Seven students were interviewed when the data reached a saturation level with.

4.3. Research Procedure

As mentioned previously, the study was carried out in a Stylistic class which was conducted for twelve (12) weeks. In each week the class met once for three hours. The class was conducted in an interactive manner where every student was allowed to speak and share their ideas. The sitting arrangement was a round-table and there were multiple class presentations. An assignment was given weekly and each has to present his/her findings to the class in the subsequent week where each member shares his/her thoughts through interactions. Apart from the weekly class activities and interactions, each student was given a topic in week two to write a term paper and make a class oral presentation using power point in week 11. At the beginning of the class in week 1, the questionnaire was administered to the participants. After the class presentation, in week 12 the same questionnaire was also administered then followed by the semi-structured interviews.

4.4. Data Analysis

Descriptive statistical analysis was run on the quantitative data collected from the questionnaire Frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation were calculated by means of SPSS. The pre- and post-treatment mean scores were compared using the Wilcoxon signed-rank test due to the small number of sample.

On the other hand, the qualitative data, the interviews were analysed through transcription, coding and categorization based on emerging themes. To ensure the credibility of the interviews data, the students were allowed to review the coded data, and they agreed on more than 85% of the data. The following sections present the results from the questionnaire which was substantiated by the findings gathered from the semi-structured interview.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Results of the statistical analysis showed that there is an increase in the mean scores after the class interactions and oral presentation in all the aspects of anxiety tested in the questionnaire. The results, as shown in Table 1, indicate that the mean score for psychological anxiety is higher after the treatment (M = 46.21) than before the treatment (M = 35.63). Fear of negative evaluation also has a higher one after the treatment (M = 13.7) in comparison to the before treatment score (M = 8.3). the mean scores of English classroom speaking anxiety also increased after the treatment from (M =30.5) to (M =54.2). Also, Social-environmental factor increased from (M = 21.30) to (M = 28.4). Finally, Perception factor, increased in its mean scores from (M = 5.1) to (M = 8.5).

To address the first research question on the extent to which of the class interactions and oral presentations reduce undergraduates' speaking anxiety, Wilcoxon signed-rank test analysis was conducted. The results revealed a significant difference between the mean scores of the questionnaire before and after the class interactions in all the components of speaking anxiety. This shows that the interactions and class presentations help to significantly reduce the students' speaking anxiety. The following are the results: Psychological anxiety (z = -3.81, p = .000), Fear of negative evaluation (z =-3.53, p = .000), English classroom speaking anxiety (z =-3.95, p = .000); Social-environmental factor (z =-3.59, p = .000), and Perception factor (z =-3.61, p = .000). Table 1 presents the result summary.

Table-1. Wilcoxon signed-rank test for pre- and post-treatment scores (n=16)

Speaking Anxiety Components	Before-tr. Mean	After-tr. Mean	Mean Diff.	Z-value	Sig. (2 tailed)
Psychological anxiety	35.63	46.21	10.53	-3.81	.000
Fear of negative evaluation	8.3	13.7	5.40	-3.53	.000
English classroom speaking anxiety	30.5	54.2	23.7	-3.95	.000
Social-environmental factor	21.3	28.4	7.10	-3.59	.000
Perception factor	5.1	8.5	3.40	-3.61	.000

p value= .05

The results of the analysis show that the class interactions and oral presentations significantly reduced the participants' speaking anxiety. The findings further show that the class interactions prompt the participants to speak thereby reducing their anxiety. The findings could also guide teachers in designing their classroom activities.

To substantiate the findings of the quantitative data, and also to know how class interactions and oral presentation reduce the participants' speaking anxiety, semi-structured interviews were conducted after the treatment. Based on the participants' responses to the interviews, two major causes of speaking anxiety were identified. These are fear of negative evaluation (e.g. worrying about negative evaluations from their instructors or peers) and Social-environmental factor (e.g. an unpleasant emotion experienced as a lack of opportunities to practice English in daily lives). However, after the treatment, the participants revealed that the anxiety vamoosed. This has confirmed the constructivist theory the interactions facilitate positive learning.

5.1. Fear of Negative Evaluation

The participants explained that prior to the treatment they were worried about the negative evaluation they might get from the course lecturer they were not familiar with him. Some of them also were afraid of making mistakes before their peers especially the opposite gender. For instance, one of the participants, Joy explained that she was uncomfortable speaking before her boyfriends because they may laugh at her mistakes after the class. These findings corroborate the findings of Hwa and Peck (2017) which revealed that female students are more worried about negative evaluation and experience more psychological anxiety in the ESL classroom. The findings agree with the findings of Hammad and Ghali (2015) which discovered a fear of negative evaluation as one of the causes of speaking anxiety among Gaza EFL pre-service teachers. Fear of negative evaluation was also found to be a major cause of communication apprehension among EFL international postgraduate students in a Malaysian university by Zhiping and Paramasivam (2013).

5.2. Social-Environmental Factor

Some of the participants complained that they feel nervous whenever they were asked to speak in a classroom. Simply because they were not used to speaking English in public. In the northern Nigerian context, English is rarely spoken outside classrooms. Even in the classrooms, enough opportunity is not given to students to speak due to their large number in a class.

6. CONCLUSION

The study aims at reducing students' speaking anxiety through class interactions and oral presentations. Findings reveal that the students' anxiety levels significantly reduced in all the five levels of speaking anxiety, Psychological anxiety, Fear of negative evaluation, English classroom speaking anxiety, Social-environmental factor and Perception factor. The findings also show that the students' speaking anxiety is mostly due to fear of negative evaluation and Social-environmental factor. Despite the positive findings, there are some limitations to the study which may affect its generalizability. A larger sample can be used for further studies. Period of the treatment can also be prolonged. The findings could be of some help to instructors/ lecturers teaching the ESL speaking courses, especially, it has provided them with a less anxiety-inducing atmosphere in the classroom. Therefore, the study recommends that teachers should help students to overcome speaking anxiety by creating a conducive and friendly learning environment where students will freely interact with one another. The students should also be given more opportunity to speak in the classrooms.

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