

Pairing up to Build Confidence: Strategies for Reducing Speaking Anxiety in EFL Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

This research paper aims to explore the causes of speaking anxiety in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms and suggest effective strategies for reducing it. The research paper uses semistructured interviews and questionnaires to collect qualitative data. The paper highlights the negative impact of anxiety on language learners' oral performance and overall language proficiency, with lower language skills often leading to higher levels of anxiety. In addition, the paper emphasizes the effectiveness of pair work activities in reducing anxiety and improving oral participation. Overall, the research paper sheds light on the importance of addressing anxiety through effective teaching strategies.

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1. INTRODUCTION

According to Richards (2008), speaking requires a talking performance that takes into consideration the speaker's ability to arrange information in a way that is simple to comprehend, as well as their use of discourse markers, repetition, emphasis, and other techniques. It implies that speakers in speaking activities must effectively communicate with others through oral language (Komariah et al., 2020).

For many students, speaking in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) class might be scary. Their ability to learn English effectively and confidently may be impacted by their anxiety about speaking in front of people. The most significant skill in learning English is considered oral communication, especially in the field of work. EFL teachers should be aware of this issue and prepare a variety of teaching strategies to increase students' confidence and reduce speaking anxiety in an EFL classroom considering the importance of oral communication skills in modern society.

Learning a foreign language is often a challenging task, especially when it comes to speaking skills. Many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners experience speaking anxiety, which significantly affects their oral performance. Anxiety can have a detrimental impact on language learners' oral performance and overall language proficiency. Studies suggest that a high level of speaking anxiety is found in the majority of language learners, including multilingual students. In this case, teaching spoken language is perceived as more difficult for teachers to achieve than other aspects of language teaching (Brown & Yule, 1999), and speaking is a highly anxious situation for students (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986).

Anxiety is a negative way to express human emotions. We feel jitter, worried, and scared when we are anxious. Our hearts beat quickly, and we struggle. We also tremble and perspire. In general, anxiety can be described as a complicated concept that depends not only on one's perceptions of one's own efficacy but also on assessments of potential and actual threats inherent in certain situations (Tobias, 1986). One of the most effective strategies for reducing speaking anxiety in EFL classrooms is through pair work activities. Pair work promotes interaction between students and provides a supportive environment to practice speaking skills. Having a pair can help worried students in managing their anxiety and understand one another, say Kondo and Ying-Ling (2004). It is acknowledged that "speaking-in-class anxiety" only manifests itself in specific speaking situations (Mak, 2011: p. 204). Many experts believe that state anxiety rather than situational anxiety is worst for students.

Considering the explanation above, this study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. How does anxiety affect language learners' oral performance?
2. What are the causes of speaking anxiety in EFL classrooms?

This research paper aims to explore the causes of speaking anxiety in EFL classrooms and suggest effective strategies for reducing it. In this paper, we will discuss how anxiety affects language learners' oral performance, identify the causes of speaking anxiety in EFL classrooms, and present various strategies that can be used to reduce speaking anxiety. By addressing this issue, we hope to help EFL teachers and students to better understand and manage speaking anxiety, thus improving their speaking skills and overall confidence in the language.

2. METHOD

This research was carried out by involving six students. Questionnaires have been distributed, and descriptive results are anticipated. The questionnaire had 10 questions that related to statements about speaking anxiety, the level of speaking anxiety was determined by analyzing the data from the questionnaire items. Additionally, two students were subjected to semi-structured interviews using a Whatsapp calling conversation, the interview lasted for 15 minutes. The researcher analyzed the facts based on the data from the interview. To avoid mistakes when collecting data, the researcher took notes, used a voice recorder to record everything in the section, and then transcribed based on the interview section.

In the case study, qualitative research methods were used since the research questions indicated the need for access to "a wealth of detailed information" (Patton, 2002:14) and to "processes and meanings" that are challenging to quantify (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994:4). Semistructured interviews and questionnaires were employed as the methods for collecting qualitative data.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

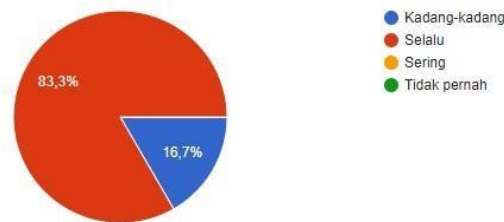
Findings.

The following is the student's response to the questionnaire to determine the level of speaking anxiety

How often do you feel nervous or anxious before giving a speech or presentation?
(Seberapa sering kamu merasa gugup atau cemas sebelum memberikan pidato atau presentasi?)

 Salin

6 jawaban



Only one student was identified as "relaxed" by the researcher based on the outcome of the first questionnaire that was given to the students. Five students are currently regarded as "very anxious" students.

Based on the interview, all participants acknowledged that the difficulty of pronouncing English terminology made them fearful of making mistakes when learning the language. Students may struggle in the learning process due to a fear of making mistakes and verbal errors, according to Jin (2007) and Young (1991). Additionally, according to Balem (2009), students are scared to communicate due to their lack of vocabulary and have difficulty pronouncing words.

After the data was compiled, I was shocked to see that generally two of the student interviewed had anxiety when speaking in the English language because they fear being negatively evaluated by their classmates and believed they were less skilled than their peers. These students' statements offer strong confirmation that they avoided speaking assignments because they felt uncomfortable speaking in front of others. They worry that their classmates will speak negatively of them as a result. Put forward a point of view, a very anxious student said, *"I like English, but because I'm terrible at speaking, as a result, what I'm going to say is completely blank, the articulation is not clear, and I'm scared of my peers' judgment."* They initially started to feel nervous about being laughed at by their classmates. This allows for the conclusion that students are fearful of receiving negative feedback, whether it comes from the teacher or the outside environment. According to Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), students are very sensitive to evaluations, whether real or made up.

Based on the interview section, there are several tips that are effective for reducing speaking anxiety when speaking English, such as;

Maintaining memory, repeating, and carrying a small note

Some students admitted that they feel less nervous speaking English in class if they have a small note with them. They do it by writing the answers or pointing to what should be talked about on paper or with their hands. They will then quietly read the small note. Before performing the material in the classroom, they also go over it again and make sure they remember it.

Thinking positively and ignoring friends

Being optimistic about whatever will occur when they speak later is one of the things that students use to lessen their speaking anxiety. They also choose to smile in the face of any taunts from their buddies. This indicates that they are willing to take chances and speak despite their companions' indifference. They assume that all students are the same, that other students don't hear them when they speak, and that giving incorrect responses is normal.

Physical expressions of reactions

Some students kept themselves focused by performing physically unimportant duties to reduce their anxiety about speaking English. Physical expressive reactions are the unusual actions people engage in, including nail and lip biting, body shaking, drawing in books, fixing their veil, rolling the tip of their veil, tidying their uniform, laughing, stomping, shaking hands, holding hands and snapping their fingers, beating the table and chair, and moving around the classroom. These behaviors are used by the students to reduce their anxiety when speaking English in class.

Mixed-up codes

Students who struggle with public speaking often combine English and Indonesian. When speaking, it's common to switch between languages to avoid going silent when a word or phrase isn't known. According to Gregersen's (2005) concept, students who are extremely anxious when learning an unfamiliar language have the ability to limit or even avoid making direct eye contact with their teachers. Students fear that if they look at the teacher while speaking, all of their thoughts will disappear and their focus will be disturbed. Psychologically, someone who has anxiety will try to avoid it by not looking directly into the eyes of others (Schneier et al., 2011; Wieser et al., 2009).

Additionally, many students display physical expressive emotions when speaking English to reduce their speaking anxiety. These behaviors they display, whether intentionally or unintentionally, appear to be a direct outcome of their anxiety. When a student is afraid to speak English, their nonverbal communication responses are expressed physically (Zhiping, 2013). This nonverbal signal serves to reduce the anxiety individuals have when speaking in English. Therefore, students use this non-verbal communication to reduce their anxiety.

Providing and accepting the support of friends

Some students decide to tell their seatmates or other friends in advance what they will say in class because they have such high levels of nervousness when speaking in English. It matters slightly if the ideas or points they present are accurate or inaccurate. Some students rely on their seatmates for support when speaking in front of the class, in addition to sharing with friends. These students typically experience extreme nervousness when speaking in front of the class, which causes them to forget the information they already know. Then, in an attempt to reduce their anxiety, these students will frequently turn to their seatmates to find out about any speaking points that they might've forgotten while speaking in English. This may include studying their seatmates' nonverbal communication, including their facial expressions.

All participants acknowledged that their speaking anxiety was lower than it had been before receiving treatment after pair work was introduced to the class. The participants claimed that working in pairs helped them improve their vocabulary and correctly pronounce English words. The participants' knowledge and confidence were improved by their partners, which is consistent with Achmad and Yusuf's (2014) claim that students can improve their confidence through pair work.

Discussion

The research emphasizes the negative impact of anxiety on oral performance and overall language skills, with poor language skills frequently leading to increased anxiety. The study underlines the value of pair work activities in lowering fear and increasing oral involvement. Furthermore, the study emphasizes the potential for anxiety to induce communication problems, such as a refusal to talk and difficulties recalling grammar and vocabulary. The paper's discussion section acknowledges the study's limitations and recommends future research directions to further investigate the issue of language anxiety in various language learning environments. Overall, the study sheds light on the influence of anxiety on language learning and the need of managing it through effective instruction strategies.

4. CONCLUSION

This research paper aims to explore the causes of speaking anxiety in EFL classrooms and suggest effective strategies for reducing it. The study involved six students and involved questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The results showed that anxiety affects language learners' oral performance, and the most significant skill in learning English is oral communication. Anxiety can have a detrimental impact on language learners' oral performance and overall language proficiency. The study found that most students were very anxious when speaking in English, fearing making mistakes and verbal errors. They also believed they were less skilled than their peers and avoided speaking assignments due to fear of negative evaluation from their classmates.

Students can maintain memory, repeat, and carry small notes to reduce speaking anxiety. They can write the answers or point to what should be talked about on paper or with their hands, read the small note, and go over it again before performing the material in the classroom. They also think positively and ignore friends, smiling in the face of taunts from their buddies, and assume that all students are the same. Physical expressions of reactions, such as nail and lip biting, body shaking, drawing in books, fixing their veil, and rolling the tip of a hat, can help students stay focused and reduce their anxiety about speaking English.

To reduce their anxiety, they often turn to their seatmates for information about any forgotten speaking points. Pair work activities have been found to improve vocabulary, pronunciation, and student's knowledge and confidence. Teachers should incorporate pair-work activities into their language classes as a regular practice to help students build confidence and reduce anxiety.

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