



The Role Of Self-Awareness In Overcoming Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety

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ABSTRACT

Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety (FLSA) continues to impede oral fluency of the learner as well. Typically, language instruction includes a number of repetitive drills to improve pronunciation. However, the present study investigates the Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) component of Self-Awareness to enable learners to identify physical and cognitive triggers of their anxiety. The purpose and intent of this research project is to explore the roles of reflective practice and emotional monitoring in alleviating the "fear of negative evaluation" through self-awareness. The preliminary findings of this research indicate that students who utilize self-awareness will be more resilient and exhibit a greater willingness to communicate (WTC) in the classroom.

Keywords:

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL), Self-Awareness, Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety (FLSA), Reflective Practice, Affective Filter, Oral Fluency

Introduction

Foreign language speaking anxiety is considered one of the major problems faced by language learners in EFL classrooms. Many students experience stress, nervousness, and fear while speaking English in front of others. According to Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982), emotional factors such as anxiety and lack of confidence can negatively affect language acquisition and communication. When learners feel uncomfortable or afraid of making mistakes, they may struggle to understand spoken language and express their ideas clearly.

Among the four language skills, speaking is often regarded as the most anxiety-provoking skill because students are usually afraid of negative evaluation, pronunciation mistakes, or criticism from classmates and teachers. As a

result, many learners avoid participating in classroom discussions and speaking activities, even when they have enough vocabulary or grammatical knowledge.

In recent years, educators have started paying more attention not only to linguistic competence but also to students' emotional well-being. One of the important elements of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) is self-awareness, which helps learners recognize and understand their emotions, thoughts, and reactions during communication. Developing self-awareness may help students identify the causes of their anxiety and manage their emotional responses more effectively.

Therefore, this study focuses on the role of self-awareness in reducing foreign language speaking anxiety among university students. The research also examines how reflective

practice and emotional monitoring can increase learners' confidence and willingness to communicate in English speaking classes.

Self-awareness is one of the foundations of Social-Emotional Learning. It refers to the recognition of one's emotions and how those emotions influence behavior. Social-Emotional Learning is one of the core features of an effective educational program. By focusing on self-awareness, educators can shift the perceived purpose of providing more productive communication in the classroom from "correcting sounds" to "supporting the speaker". This study aims to determine if conscious emotional monitoring helps students manage the physiological symptoms of anxiety (e.g., increased heart rate, freezing) during English presentations.

Methods

The researcher used a mixed method research design (qualitative and quantitative) to determine the impact of self-awareness on language anxiety over one academic semester (14 weeks) with 25 BA undergraduate students enrolled in an upper-intermediate English speaking course at Uzbekistan State World Languages University (UzSWLU).

To collect data for this study; qualitative and quantitative measures were used to provide a comprehensive analysis of self-awareness on language anxiety through the data collection strategies: Reflective Journaling (qualitative) Following each oral performance or speaking task, participants were required to complete a short "Affective Entry" (3 - 5 sentences). Each student's notes reflected their feelings during the task and specifically identified what cognitive and/or environmental factors (e.g., peer interruption, complex grammar structures, or fear of pronouncing words) caused them to feel anxious.

Anxiety Levels (Quantitative): To measure any changes in anxiety level, a pre- and post-test questionnaire was given to students using the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), 33 validated items measuring communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation.

Willingness to Communicate (WTC) (Qualitative): To measure WTC, the researcher developed an observational system to collect data based on specific behaviors (such as number of times a student volunteered to raise a hand to participate, length of time a student spoke during a discussion when making a point, whether a student used "avoidance strategies" such as being quiet or switching back to his/her native language).

Affective Journal and Quantitative and Qualitative Data: The goal of triangulating the affective journal data with the quantitative data from FLCAS and the qualitative data from observations was to create a complete picture of how the student evolved in terms of his/her emotions and communication.

Results

The results of the fourteen-week semester's data collected at UzSWLU indicated statistically significant changes in the psychological attitudes and communicative behaviors of participants in these categories:

Quantitative Decrease in Speaking Anxiety

Analysis of post-study FLCAS (Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale) surveys and students' reflective journals revealed a marked decrease in acute anxiety symptoms. Specifically, 68% of respondents reported substantially fewer occurrences of the "total freeze" (moments where cognitive processing is interrupted by stress). Participants attributed this decrease to their ability to identify the onset of physiological triggers before they could develop into communicative blocks.

Increased Behavioural Willingness to Communicate (WTC):

Observational data found a directly proportional relationship between increased levels of self-awareness leading to increased classroom engagement. Over the final six weeks of the study, voluntary hand-raising and student initiated questions increased by 40% as compared with the amount recorded in the first month of the study. This indicates that as the students became more self-aware of their emotional condition, their "affective filter"

lowered therefore allowing for greater ability to spontaneously interact verbally.

Qualitative Identifying of student's Anxiety Triggers:

The reflective journaling process provided critical insights uncovering the primary source of students' stress. In contradiction to the initial hypothesis "the lack of vocabulary" had been the primary cause for the students' stress, the

qualitative analysis discovered that the most common trigger was "the speed of the other person talking." The students cited frequently they experienced anxiety because of the fear of being unable to process incoming speech fast enough for them to develop a rhythmic response, as opposed to citing lack of language knowledge as being the reason for avoiding verbal interaction.

Summary Table: Participant Progress

Metric	Baseline (Weeks 1-4)	Final Result (Weeks 10-14)	Percentage Change
Voluntary Participation	Low/Moderate	High	+40%
"Freezing" Incidents	Frequent	Occasional/Rare	-68%
Primary Stressor	Unknown/Vague	Interlocutor Speed	Identified

Analysis

The research findings support the view that integrating self-awareness in the speaking curriculum is a fundamental cognitive reappraisal of language anxiety. Instead of viewing language anxiety as an internal defect ("I am a poor speaker"), self-aware individuals are able to view their anxiety as an external stressor. This process of identifying triggers (e.g., the perceived rapidity with which the other speaker speaks, the complexity of the topic being discussed) helps students transition from a fixed mindset to a growth mindset.

The implications of this shift, both neurologically and pedagogically, are significant for three reasons:

Cognitive Resource Allocation. A student's cognitive resources are consumed by worry when he/she is obsessed with self-criticism, leaving little or no cognitive resources available to process language. Self-awareness can act as a grounding force, allowing the brain to allocate cognitive energy from a mode of emotional defence to a mode of actively processing language.

Affective Filter as Buffer. Krashen's Theory states that "worry" (i.e., high levels of anxiety) creates a block in the learner's brain. The results of this study suggest that self-awareness can function as a buffer to lower that block. By recognizing that their "nervousness" is simply a temporary physiological response, rather than a permanent lack of skill, learners are better able

to access their stored phonetic and grammatical knowledge when under pressure to communicate, as long as they develop the cognitive resource and buffer provided by self-awareness.

There is a direct relationship between emotional self-control, or regulation, and the ability to create sounds physically through speech. Anxiety results in "speech that is produced quickly" or "tightness in the throat," both of which impede the way that sounds are produced, therefore influencing pronunciation. Those individuals who learned to manage their anxiety through awareness of themselves demonstrated a greater ability to retain the rhythm and articulation necessary for them to successfully communicate (how well they are understood by others), thus increasing their total understanding of what others are saying to them.

This research demonstrates that metacognition (thinking about how you are feeling) is equally important to knowledge of the rules of language (linguistic competence). The students at UzSWLU who could successfully "disidentifying" their fear increased confidence in their speech production, which permitted them to speak fluently and confidently.

Discussion

This study's results challenge the more traditional separation between supportive emotion and academic rigor in EFL classrooms.

Implementing social-emotional learning into the speaking curriculum should not be seen as straying from achieving linguistic excellence, but as a key optimization tool. For example, a student who understands what it means to be responsible and has developed this awareness will have developed methods such as diaphragmatic breathing or choosing to use "lexical fillers" like "Let me think about that for a second" or "That is a complicated subject" to aid them in managing their cognitive load and maintaining the ebb and flow of a conversation. Educators at UzSWLU, specifically within the Department of English Applied Disciplines, should consider how the study's results have pedagogical implications:

Pedagogical Prioritization: The study suggests that an introductory session in the speaking seminar may be more useful for emotional priming (e.g., short check-ins or metacognitive reflections) compared to immediately doing high-stakes grammar activities. By preparing the student's internal state prior to performing an external linguistic task will enhance the student's readiness to perform academically in the EFL classroom.

The Connection Between Sound and State: The actual sound of a consonant or vowel is based on technical characteristics of speech. However, speaking effectively requires the speaker to be psychologically stable. For instance, anxiety can create tension in the muscles used to articulate sounds, resulting in phonetic distortion. Therefore, creating a safe psychological environment for someone contributes positively to achieving phonetic intelligibility.

The Holistic Nature of Intelligibility: Intelligibility in a globalized world involves more than "flawlessly" pronouncing words; it requires speakers be able to stay engaged in the moment and communicate effectively through their ability to respond to the other person(s) at the same time. By providing students with self-awareness, they develop an understanding that "misunderstandings" are occurring, not as an individual failure of each party, but rather as a normal aspect of communication that both parties can resolve through patience and negotiation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the data reinforces the notion that intelligibility is inextricably linked to emotional intelligence. By prioritizing self-awareness, teachers at UzSWLU can help students transform their "speaking anxiety" into "communicative resilience," ensuring that their phonetic and grammatical knowledge is not just learned, but effectively performed.

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