



Department of English
PSNA College of Engineering and Technology, Dindigul-624622
Tamilnadu, India

***NEW VISTAS IN ELT: EMPOWERING ENGINEERS FOR
EMPLOYMENT***

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Editors

Dr. Joseph Thomas, Ph.D.
G. Vijay, M.A., M.Phil.
Mrs. Shabnam Niher, M.A., M.Phil.

Second Language Anxiety – A Major Hurdle for Learners

A. Hajira Banu, M.A., M.Phil.

Abstract

High demand for communication skills is one of the factors that limit the employability of engineering graduates today. It may be due to the fact that proficiency in English tops the list of skills that are required to acquire and maintain their jobs, our students develop a kind of anxiety which is, to react in a nervous manner when it comes to speaking, listening, reading or writing in English. This paper aims at identifying the factors contributing to this anxiety and offering practical recommendations to overcome this issue. The paper goes on to highlight the

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collaborative role of teachers and learners in fighting to overcome the second language learner/performer anxiety successfully.

Keywords: Communication skills, proficiency in English, second language anxiety, nervous manner.

Introduction

There is a dearth of qualified professionals for the employers to select and there is a dearth of jobs for the engineering graduates, who have spent four years waiting for something to happen as they walk out of colleges, degrees in hand. This depressing situation is a result of a drastic skill gap in the country. In spite of becoming academic geniuses in their own subjects, the acquisition of an adequate level of proficiency in the English language is one of the biggest challenges for engineering graduates in India today. A survey conducted by The Times of India, Mumbai states that of 1.2 lakh candidates surveyed across multiple states, 73.63% lack English speaking and comprehension skills. Irrespective of the number of degrees one might have acquired, technical qualification, industrial experience and so forth, not being able to communicate effectively in English is one of the greatest barriers to career growth. Therefore, there is a definite need to equip the aspiring workforce with communication skills in the English language.

The high degree of importance accorded to English is supposed to create a very strong motivation for students to learn English. On the contrary, it leads to a kind of anxiety that hampers learning for many of the students.

Foreign Language Anxiety

Wikipedia (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foreign_language_anxiety) defines language anxiety as a feeling of unease, worry, nervousness and apprehension experienced when learning or using a second or foreign language. These feelings may stem from any second language context, whether associated with the productive skills of speaking and writing, or the receptive skills of reading and listening. However, it is often felt that speaking is the most anxiety-provoking aspect in second language learning. Giving a short talk, lecture or presentation in front of the class, or even a small group of men and women induces language anxiety.

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Symptoms of Anxiety

The symptoms of language anxiety include rubbing the palms, perspiration, staggered voice, reluctance, less enthusiasm or willingness to speak, sweaty palms, increased heart beat, less eye contact, reading from the script while presentation, either too fast or too slow speed of speech, and so on. This language anxiety has been found to have a detrimental effect on the student's confidence, self esteem and level of participation.

“...I like English but I don't want to take part in speaking activity... because my English is so bad and my friends will laugh at me if I make mistakes...”

This must be one of the most articulated sentences used by most of our students who are unwilling to take part in oral activities. This kind of anxiety stems from the fear of making mistakes, and negative evaluation by their teachers, fear of appearing awkward, foolish or incompetent in the eyes of peers, and negative perception of their own ability. This apprehension acts as a mental block hampering their involvement or participation in a situation in which they are expected to use English.

External Factors Causing Anxiety

Other external reasons leading to language anxiety might be due to the fact that most of the candidates did not grow up in an English speaking environment and the other fact that most of them are first generation college-goers. They have minimum or no exposure to English in their day to day life outside their classrooms. Moreover, English is taught as a subject and not as a language of communication. In spite of studying English right from their 6th year or so, they become nervous while using English. Studying it as a subject is not problematic for the learners, whereas using it as a language of communication continues to be a setback for them.

Effects of Anxiety

Anxiety levels of the students need to be brought down as there is an inherent link between anxiety and performance. Language anxiety is a result as well as a cause of insufficient command of the target language. It holds back the learning process. It leads to forgetfulness, avoidance of speaking the language, negative self image and feeling unsure of one's ability.

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Therefore, when they have to make any oral presentation, it is very common for the students to feel uncomfortable and they freeze and become unable to find words.

Some of the language teachers assume that the students lack motivation, or have an aversion to English or feel that the class is unimportant. At the teacher's end, understanding learner anxiety is important, in order to assist them in achieving the expected level of performance in English. It is the duty of the teachers to recognize that oral performance is a potentially stressful situation for some learners. They need to be sensitive to their fears and act as counselors in helping the anxious students to focus less on what they are doing wrong and more on what they are doing right. This should help them realize it is a widespread phenomenon, since many students find it tremendously helpful to know that their teacher acknowledges the reality of their anxiety.

Solutions to Reduce Anxiety

Teachers can help by creating a friendly and informal learning supportive environment for language learning, through helpful and cooperative behavior. Ample opportunities can be created for group work or pair work before going for individual performance. They should concentrate on communicative success rather than formal accuracy. They should give learners a feeling of success and satisfaction when using the language. Most importantly, error correction should be done in a patient and friendly way without humiliating the learners. Positive comments and helpful suggestions such as listening to radio broadcasts, becoming members in Toastmasters Clubs such as the ones in YMCAs, to improve speaking abilities in English, and also reading aloud passages from English books, should be given to the students – these would greatly help lowering the potency of the factors creating the anxiety.

Conclusion

Teaching, however powerful, cannot automatically lead to learning for the simple reason that learning is vastly controlled by the individual learner himself/herself. Hence the learners have to be encouraged to overcome the anxiety. First of all, it is important to know that they are not the only ones suffering from these feelings and it is reasonable to have such feelings. School teachers also have their part in this language learning of students, leading to good

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communication skills. The students must be given reading aloud exercises and pronunciation drills in class from their early years at school. Then college teachers can guide them to join speaking groups like the Toast Masters Club of the YMCA suggested earlier. Watching some good English movies would also help learning how to speak the language well. Listening to radio broadcasts in English would be of great help for a student who wants to communicate very well indeed. Elocution competitions and different activities of the Literary Clubs in colleges can help in developing their communication skills and thereby reduce anxiety levels. The students can also use some relaxation techniques like deep breathing before oral presentations which could make them feel less anxious during the activity. It is a good habit to form, and it does remain effective.

It is undoubtedly the collaborative role of teachers of English and the learners of English to fight this anxiety in order to achieve the desired level of proficiency in English. A few conscious and constructive steps such as informal talking activities, reading English books aloud in and out of the classroom can change the anxiety into deep interest. The process is quite challenging, but not impossible with honest and continued effort. Teachers can contribute their bit in making the engineering college community happy, efficient, employed and thriving.

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A. Hajira Banu, M.A., M.Phil.
Assistant Professor
Department of Science and Humanities
Christian College of Engineering and Technology
Oddanchatram 624619
Tamilnadu
India
hajiranowsath@gmail.com