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An Investigation of Speaking Strategies used by University Learners to Cope with English Language Anxiety

Rabiah Rustam, M.Phil.

Abstract

This study aims to examine spoken English strategies used by a group of learners enrolled in first semester at the university level. During under graduate study at the university, these learners are asked to communicate using English language. This situation creates anxiety among the learners who speak Hindko, Pashto, Brushaski, Shina or Seraiki as their native languages. In order to overcome spoken English anxiety, the learners use number of strategies. This study will discuss the frequency of the speaking strategies used by ESL learners as well as learners' self awareness of different ways to overcome language anxiety.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Aim

This research paper aims to investigate speaking strategies used by a group of university ESL learners who feel anxious while speaking English language.

1.2 Background

ESL learners studying in the first semester at COMSATS Institute come from such backgrounds where English is not their first or second language. Most of the learners do not get opportunity to learn English language properly as their native languages are different. The native languages of the students are Hindko, Pashto, Brushaski, Shina and Seraiki.

During the school level or college level study there is hardly any emphasis given to spoken English. When these learners join universities where most of the communication takes place in English language, they find it difficult to communicate using English language and as a result develop language anxiety. As they are bound to speak English language at the university, with the passage of time they overcome language anxiety.

The researcher decided to conduct this study in order to find out the strategies used by the learners that help them overcome language anxiety. Understanding the speaking strategies would help to find out proper ways to support the learners in their efforts to speak English language effectively.

1.3 Research Questions

The research questions are:

- i. What is the frequency of the speaking strategies used by ESL learners to overcome language anxiety?
- ii. Are ESL learners aware of other strategies to overcome language anxiety apart from the strategies mentioned in the questionnaire?

2. Literature Review

According to Horwitz, et al. (1986) as mentioned by Meihua Liu and Wenhong Huang (2011), when the learners have to deal with the foreign language and the

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foreign culture, they face language anxiety that evokes negative reaction towards language learning. Horwitz et al. (1986) gave three components of language anxiety that include communicative apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety.

Renee von Worde (2003) conducted a study on students' foreign language anxiety and found that it casts negative impact on the language learning of the students. He emphasized that reducing anxiety helps to increase language acquisition, language retention and learner motivation.

Kondo and Ying-Ling (2004) as cited in Mortaza Yamini (2006) conducted research to develop a typology of the strategies used by language learners to cope with English language anxiety. They found seventy tactics used by learners to cope with language anxiety. These tactics were categorized into five types that are preparation, relaxation, positive thinking, peer seeking and resignation.

Ohata (2005) discussed the physical signs of anxiety among learners that include playing with their hair, avoidance of eye contact, sweaty palms, blushed faces, nervous facial expressions and shaky body movements.

Muhammad Tanveer (2007) investigated the factors that cause language anxiety for ESL/EFL learners in learning speaking skills and the influence anxiety casts on communication in the target language. He found that learning speaking skill in English language provokes more anxiety as compared to other skills. Speaking skill is a challenge to learners' communicative abilities.

Areti Keramida (2009) emphasized the role of teacher as a researcher in the classroom. He explained that the teachers need to know the learners, their attitudes towards spoken language and the factors behind learners' dissatisfactory performance and unwillingness to participate in speaking tasks. It can help students reduce anxiety, increase motivation and the rate of language acquisition.

3. Methodology

Survey method was used to find out the strategies used by the ESL learners.

3.1 Population

A population of 100 learners was selected who were studying English language in their first semester at COMSATS Institute of Information Technology

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Abbottabad, Pakistan. All of them included the learners who felt anxious while speaking English language.

3.2 Sampling

A random sample of 50 learners was selected out of 100 learners in order to collect data.

3.3 Tool for Data Collection

Questionnaires were used to collect data from the learners who had English language anxiety. The questionnaire was adapted from the research conducted by Muhammad Tanveer (2007). A scale of four values was selected to find out the frequency of the strategies mentioned in the questionnaire. Four-point scale was used that included following options:

- i. Always
- ii. Most of the time
- iii. Rarely
- iv. Never

An open ended question was given at the end of each questionnaire to find out the strategies used by the learners themselves apart from the strategies mentioned in the questionnaire.

3.4 Tool for Data Calculation

SPSS 14 was used to make the calculations.

4. Findings

The tables indicate the frequency of each strategy used by the learners.

Table 4.1: I use positive self-talk (I can do it; it doesn't matter if I make mistakes; others also make mistakes).

Scale	Percent
Always	30.0
Most of the time	50.0

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Rarely	20.0
Never	0.00
Total	100

The results indicate that out of 100% learners 30% learners always use positive self talk. 50% learners use it most of the time while 20% learners rarely use this strategy.

Table 4.2: Actively encourage myself to take risks in language learning, such as guessing meanings or trying to speak, even though I might make some mistakes.

Scale	Percent
Always	16.0
Most of the time	60.0
Rarely	24.0
Never	0.00
Total	100

The results indicate that 16% learners always actively encourage themselves while 60% learners encourage themselves most of the time and only 24% learners use this strategy rarely.

Table 4.3: Imagine that when I am speaking in front of others, it is just a friendly informal chat.

Scale	Percent
Always	30.0
Most of the time	36.0
Rarely	18.0
Never	16.0
Total	100

This table shows that 30% learners always use this strategy while 36% learners use it most of the time. 18% learners rarely use this strategy while 16% never use

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this strategy.

Table 4.4: Tell myself that when I speak, it won't take long.

Scale	Percent
Always	36.0
Most of the time	32.0
Rarely	24.0
Never	8.0
Total	100

This table indicates that 36% learners always make use of this strategy while 32% use it most of the time. 24% learners rarely do so and only 8% never use this strategy.

Table 4.5: Give myself a reward or treat when I do well.

Scale	Percent
Always	28.0
Most of the time	30.0
Rarely	20.0
Never	22.0
Total	100

The calculations indicate that out of 100% learners 28% learners always give themselves a reward. 30% learners give themselves a reward most of the time. 20% learners never do so while 22% never use this strategy.

Table 4.6: I try to be aware of physical signs of stress that might affect my language learning.

Scale	Percent
Always	20.0
Most of the time	38.0
Rarely	34.0
Never	8.0

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Total	100
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The results for this strategy indicate that 20% learners always try to be aware of the physical signs of stress. 38% learners use this strategy most of the time. 34% learners rarely use this strategy while 8% learners never use this strategy.

Table 4.7: Write down my feelings in a notebook.

Scale	Percent
Always	4.0
Most of the time	14.0
Rarely	20.0
Never	62.0
Total	100

The table indicates that 4% learners always write down their feelings of anxiety, 14% write down most of the time, 20% rarely write while 62% never write their feelings.

Table 4.8: Share my worries with other learners.

Scale	Percent
Always	14.0
Most of the time	36.0
Rarely	22.0
Never	28.0
Total	100

The calculations indicate that 14% learners always share their worries while 36% do so most of the time. 22% rarely share their worries while 28% never like to share their worries.

Table 4.9: I let my tutor know that I am anxious.

Scale	Percent
Always	26.0
Most of the time	26.0
Rarely	22.0
Never	26.0
Total	100

The table indicates that 26% learners always let their tutor know when they are anxious while 26% use this strategy most of the time. 22% rarely let their tutor know while 26% never let their tutor know when they are anxious.

Table 4.10: Use relaxation techniques e.g. deep breathing, consciously speaking more slowly, etc.

Scale	Percent
Always	24.0
Most of the time	32.0
Rarely	30.0
Never	14.0
Total	100

This table indicates that 24% learners use relaxation techniques always, 32% use these techniques most of the time. 30% learners rarely use this technique while 14% never use relaxation techniques.

Other strategies used by the learners themselves apart from those mentioned in the questionnaire:

An open ended question was given in the questionnaire to mention different strategies used by learners themselves to cope with anxiety apart from the strategies mentioned in the questionnaire. Following are the findings:

Table 4.11: Strategies used by learners themselves

S. No.	Strategies
i.	I try to imitate the speaking styles of the people having good command on English
ii.	Listeners may never remember what I said so I speak up
iii.	I try to improve grammar
iv.	I avoid eye contact with audience for some time
v.	I make arrangement of a sentence in mind before I talk
vi.	I do not copy British or American accents
vii.	I speak English every time with a friend
viii.	I try to have conversations with other people in English language
ix.	I try to calm down myself when anxious
x.	I go to language lab and interact only in English
xi.	I try to improve pronunciation
xii.	While speaking I think that other people are dumb and I am the only one who dares to speak
xiii.	I listen to the conversations in English carefully and try to improve spoken English
xiv.	I try to talk to my family in English

5. Discussion

This study involved 50 ESL learners who gave their views about the use of speaking strategies. The objectives of this study were to find out the frequencies of speaking strategies used by the learners and to find out how learners overcome language anxiety using their own ways. The first question was to find out the frequency of strategy use. The results of the study indicate that the following strategies are most frequently used by the learners:

- i. Use of positive self-talk
- ii. Actively encouragement to take risks in language leaning
- iii. Learners tell themselves that speaking English doesn't take much time
- iv. Learners try to be aware of physical signs of stress
- v. Use of relaxation techniques

The least used strategies are:

- i. Imagining that speaking in front of others is just a friendly, informal chat

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- ii. Giving one's self a reward for doing well
- iii. Writing down the feelings of anxiety
- iv. Sharing worries with other learners
- v. Informing the tutor about English language anxiety

The second research question was to find out speaking strategies used by learners themselves apart from those mentioned in the questionnaire. A total of fourteen strategies were found that have been mentioned in table 4.11.

The results indicate that ESL learners use multiple strategies themselves to overcome language anxiety. Learners think that pronunciation can be improved by listening to the speakers having good pronunciation. Improving English grammar is considered helpful by the learners as it is difficult for them to speak without being aware of grammar rules.

Another important point given by the learners is the avoidance to imitate British or American accents. It is quite difficult for non native speakers to imitate native speaker accent as the manners of articulation are different and cause language anxiety. Language labs provide best opportunity to improve speaking skills by providing audio visual aids. Continuous day to day conversations with friends and family can help learners cope with language anxiety.

The response given by the learners shows that they are aware of the fact that there are multiple ways they can use themselves to overcome language anxiety that are called language learning strategies by researchers.

6. Conclusion

This research helped to find out that learners use different strategies to overcome language anxiety. They prefer easier strategies to the complex ones. A wide range of speaking strategies is used by the ESL learners themselves. Learner autonomy in learning English language requires more research on speaking strategies used by learners themselves. There is a need to make learners aware of effective speaking strategies in order to facilitate them so that they can overcome spoken English anxiety.

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Appendix
English Language Anxiety Questionnaire

Dear Learners:

English language anxiety means feelings of stress or nervousness that causes problems in speaking English language. Most of the learners feel anxiety while speaking English language and use certain strategies to cope with the stressful situation.

You are requested to mark the strategies that apply to you according to the scale given.

1. I use positive self-talk (I can do it; it doesn't matter if I make mistakes; others also make mistakes).

Always **Most of the time** **Rarely** **Never**

2. Actively encourage myself to take risks in language learning, such as guessing meanings or trying to speak, even though I might make some mistakes.

Always **Most of the time** **Rarely** **Never**

3. Imagine that when I am speaking in front of others, it is just a friendly informal chat.

Always **Most of the time** **Rarely** **Never**

4. Tell myself that when I speak, it won't take long.

Always **Most of the time** **Rarely** **Never**

5. Give myself a reward or treat when I do well.

Always **Most of the time** **Rarely** **Never**

6. I try to be aware of physical signs of stress that might affect my language learning.

Always **Most of the time** **Rarely** **Never**

7. Write down my feelings in a notebook.

Always **Most of the time** **Rarely** **Never**

8. Share my worries with other learners.

Always **Most of the time** **Rarely** **Never**

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9. Let my tutor know that I am anxious.

Always Most of the time Rarely Never

10. Use relaxation techniques e.g. deep breathing, consciously speaking more slowly, etc.

Always Most of the time Rarely Never

11. Other strategies you use apart from those mentioned above-----

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