Anxiety in English oral test performance

Erick Aravena

Juan Luis Castro

Oriana Gedda

Raquel Peñaloza

Abstract

The studies on anxiety have focused on different aspects of English students' behavior under a lot of pressure in an oral test performance, trying to see what factors affect the self-confidence of students and what their consequences are. In this case, the performance of students from English Linguistics and Literature program is going to be analyzed in an oral test to measure the level of anxiety and their accuracy in their production of EFL. The results will show the uncommon mistakes that can be made by a second language learner under these circumstances. Even though the number of participants is small, it was done as a rehearsal for future research.

Keywords: anxiety, oral performance, learner factors, EFL, self-confidence

Generally, research on anxiety has been based on the different causes and consequences related to language acquisition in classroom contexts. In that sense, language acquisition investigators such as Horwitz (1986), Stengal (1939), Rachel (1978) and Rosenfeld (1978), have considered important to distinguish between anxiety in broad terms and anxiety specifically in Language Learning context. Linguists' studies have set as its main objective to assess factors as: test results, writing skills, pronunciation, etc. They have also focused on problems that derive from the inability of getting good results in the factors mentioned above, for instance, language shock, hesitations, lack of self-confidence and lack of motivation. In this respect, McCroskey et al (1977) considered the importance of self-confidence in second language acquisition. Regarding the measurement of anxiety, Horwitz attempted to provide a scale to quantify it. Although the theory is well grounded, there are some aspects that need further inquiry. The main focus has been on the form rather than the meaning expressed in students' production, which can be explained by the fact that the study of language anxiety is relatively new. At this point, the study of anxiety is important in a language learning context because it can elucidate the cause of a latent problem in teaching strategies (Kouraogo; 1993). In addition, according to Tobias (as cited by Woodrow, 2001) one of the main problems that derive from anxiety is that it uses part of students' cognitive capacity when

worrying about a specific situation (which has been called the emotionality component), and this capacity could be better used if anxiety decreased.

According to the previously mentioned on the levels of anxiety and the different studies on this feeling in students, our research questions are: Does anxiety affect the oral test performance of first year students of English from this program? And does anxiety affect the students' grammar in oral performance?

Our study focuses on the effects of anxiety in oral performance, specifically, in oral examinations taken by first year students of the foreign language EFL in the English Linguistics and Literature program from the University of Chile. Since our study has a quantitative approach, we will use the FLCAS to measure the students' anxiety before an oral test. During the test we will use a rubric to test their performance concerning grammar, so we can establish a relation between language anxiety and their performance and what the most regular errors analysis could be, for example, third person singular, tense, etc.

Anxiety is a negative way of showing your feelings. This appears when you face something really complicated, especially under a lot of pressure. Anxiety can affect you in many ways, for instance, the way you think, the way you perform in public, the way you speak and the way you acquire new knowledge. Horwitz et al (1986) were the first authors that established a difference between anxiety as a general notion and Foreign Language Anxiety (1986). Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) refers to the situation in which a student is engaged to in the acquisition of a second language in a classroom context. Research has mainly centered in the case of English as a Foreign Language (EFL).

The process of learning a second language is not simple, neither is the moment in which learners are supposed to perform and demonstrate what they know. This situation generates a feeling of anxiety that could precisely affect in moments of high tension as, for instance, oral examinations or presentations in front of a whole class. As a matter of fact, the development of the student's skills may be frustrated and could even stop improving due to this phenomenon. Stengal (1939) makes reference to the term "language shock", which means that some students cannot express in the target language what they really want to say. As it has been said before, student's thoughts, knowledge and performance are blocked.

Causes and consequences of anxiety. Anxiety can be caused by several factors, for instance, by feelings of incompetence which means that students do not believe in themselves; they think that their knowledge is not enough to perform correctly. Another factor can be their fear of negative evaluation, (Horwitz et al 1986), which causes lack of participation. Anxiety prevents learners from developing their linguistic abilities properly because they tend to leave aside social interaction. Also, something that may provoke anxiety is to perceive language learning as a stressful experience. This can block the students' learning process, because the use of a new language can cause a sense of shame, that is felt mainly during tests or when you speak in front of your peers. However, it is important to notice that, as MacIntyre (1995) states: there is no clarity whether anxiety is the cause of a poor performance or if it is the consequence of a bad language learning/teaching.

Pedagogical implications. Several articles that we read define anxiety as a particular kind of issue that is present in classroom interaction between a teacher and a student. (Rachel et al. 1978); (Shufen Huang 2010); (Kun-huei Wu). When coming to this situation, they also define

different types of anxiety but generally it is acknowledged as a particular case which is neither possible to compare nor to classify.

When students are learning a second language, the feeling of anxiety is mainly found in the classroom, especially in the moment when they have to use the knowledge in their performance or in a written test. The problem of anxiety has been considered a teaching problem according to Rosenfeld (1978), where the instructor has to think of how to decrease the level of anxiety in the classroom. For that reason, many researchers have thought of different ways of decreasing the level of that feeling in written tests, starting from how to teach the language to how to ask questions (Foss et al. 1988).

It is also relevant to have a look at the ways anxiety has been measured. The scale formerly used was the Manual for the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (Spielberg, 1983) but before the distinction made by Horwitz between anxiety and anxiety in foreign language learning appeared, there was not a test to measure the latter. For this reason, the author designed a scale -which is the most widely used- called the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS).

However, there are some authors who underline certain gaps which should be relevant in second language acquisition studies. In that sense, Huang's study (2010) considers that research shows a preference from the subjects towards a 'communicative teaching approach' and not the 'grammar-translation teaching approach'. The first step that has been generally taken when learning a second language is to memorize things and not apply them into real life.

The teacher-centered model of teaching does not give enough confidence to the student. Also motivation is affected, which is essential in the language learning process. In this sense, anxiety is one of the main reasons of learner's 'reticence' (Ellis; 1994). However, this attitude depends on the culture; for example, in Oriental countries the individual opinion is not as valuable as the collective one. One of the major reasons for student's reticence is the lack of practice in the target language (Kouraogo; 1993). In relation to this issue, teachers need to fill the role of facilitators rather than instructors.

This study throws positive results towards the idea of a more communicative approach to teaching rather than memorizing rules. In other words, teaching strategies need to be focused more on the effectiveness of communication rather than in the form. Regarding this, the cause of anxiety could be related to the lack of practice. Those students that relate with English as a Foreign Language and not as a Second Language tend to avoid its use in daily life. In Wu's article (2010), poor performance and lack of tools to communicate are considered to be causes of anxiety.

Gaps

The teaching method should be student-centered and not teacher-centered. It is not about excluding the importance of form but including the communication factor. The reason for this major concern about learning and teaching strategies is related to the possible factors that originate students' anxiety, for example, the importance of the role of the teacher as the creator of a 'non-threatening atmosphere' and using the appropriate strategies in teaching a foreign language (Wu, 2010).

Some studies have centered in studying, in general terms, the phenomenon that is behind anxiety, for instance, anxiety in language learning, the feeling of incompetence, communication anxiety, behavior of the student or language competence, but not particularly the performance of

students or the errors that they tend to make in written exercises or oral tests. Oral test can be especially a problematic situation for learners because, besides the fact that they have to think what they are going to say, they have to express it aloud and in front of teachers who judge every utterance they make.

Anxiety has been generally understood as a negative factor that interferes in the learner performance. Nevertheless, Alper et al (1960) and Nishitani et al (2011) point out that anxiety does not have to be necessarily perceived in a negative manner. In fact, both of them state that a positive perception of failure can be a facilitative factor in learning because it may help the student to develop his/her own learning strategies. The capacity of appreciating failure is not present in every student and corresponds to a personal characteristic. On the contrary, Rosenfeld (1978) supports the idea that there is no possibility for anxiety to produce positive results in foreign language performance.

As it has been seen before, anxiety has been a broad topic chiefly treated on English learning in a classroom, where researchers have focused on: communication apprehension, feelings of incompetence and hesitation. Most of these factors have been analyzed in a regular classroom or English class, but just a few of these have centered on measuring the levels of Anxiety in English oral test performance, a particular stressful situation which has not been measured thoroughly.

A lot of researchers have tested the level of anxiety in the different stages of the English learning using the FLCAS by Horwitz, being the focal point aspects like performance, shame, feeling of incompetence, etc. Nevertheless, none of them have focused on the kind of language errors that apprehension may cause, for instance, grammatical errors like third person singular; phonological errors, first language interference or discourse mistakes like the use of connectors and bad translation from Spanish to English.

Methodology

This is going to be a quantitative study because questionnaires are going to be applied and also because a representative sample would only be achieved with at least 10 participants. We decided to center our study in grammatical mistakes, because even though phonology and vocabulary are important factors that permit to achieve proper communication, grammar is even more essential, because if someone modifies the syntax of a sentence, the meaning changes, and could even make an utterance unintelligible. Also, one factor that may affect the stressful way that an oral test is seen is to contrast it with a regular language class, which is usually carried out in a calm and relaxed environment.

Instrument

The FLCAS (Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale) is the most popular test in measuring anxiety. It was created by Horwitz et al (1986) and it proposes a new focus in the study of anxiety. The author makes a distinction between anxiety in general terms and anxiety in a foreign language context. Although the test is very accurate, we had to make slight modifications in order to adapt it to oral examinations.

However, this test that we presented here has been designed to be taken before the oral examination. At this point, it is relevant to bear in mind, that we considered oral tests as a type of examination in which a student is asked to speak for about five minutes about a topic assigned to him/her just in that moment. During these five minutes, teachers do not intervene, nevertheless,

after that, they may ask a few questions. Generally, the marks given to students represent a high percentage of their final grade in the course.

After the anxiety tests are answered, we are going to score them. First, we are going to separate the negatively oriented questions from the positively oriented questions and score them differently. For a positively oriented question, the answer 'Strongly Disagree' would have 0 points, while for a negatively oriented question the same answer would score 4 points. Then, the participants who are more likely to become anxious in oral presentations should score higher. Besides, we created a rubric that would permit us to evaluate grammatical mistakes during the performance because, based on our experiences, those could be more frequent and could be responsible for students to be anxious. The scores for this rubric would be from 5 to 0, meaning ranging from 'Excellent' (5 points), Good enough (3 points) or 'Poorly done' (0 points). Then, we are going to make a graph with the results of both tests and see if there is a correlation between anxiety and a major number of mistakes.

Subjects

The participants were around 10 students from first year of our program. External factors as age, gender, studies abroad, private lessons taken, among others, are not going to be considered.

Results

Table 1

Amount of students per answer according to FLCAS

Question	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	no answer	Total
1	1	5	1	1	2	0	10
2	2	3	2	2	1	0	10
3	3	5	0	1	1	0	10
4	0	2	2	2	4	0	10
5	3	4	0	2	1	0	10
6	0	0	2	6	1	1	10
7	4	4	1	1	0	0	10
8	1	7	2	0	0	0	10
9	0	3	1	4	2	0	10
10	2	2	2	2	2	0	10
11	1	8	0	1	0	0	10
12	1	1	2	4	2	0	10
13	3	3	2	2	0	0	10
14	0	5	2	2	1	0	10
15	2	6	1	1	0	0	10
16	0	1	2	5	2	0	10
17	1	6	2	0	1	0	10
Scores	24	65	24	36	20	1	

Table 2

Subjects and their score according to FLCAS

SUBJECT	QUESTIONS 1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	TOTAL SCORE
1	3	3	1	3	1	2	3	2	3	1	1	3	1	1	3	3	1	35
2	1	2	3	0	3	1	1	1	1	3	1	3	3	1	1	1	2	28
3	4	4	4	2	4	1	2	2	3	4	3	4	3	2	2	2	2	48
4	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	4	0	0	0	10
5	3	1	1	0	1	2	0	1	0	2	1	2	1	2	1	1	1	20
6	2	1	0	1	0	1	1	1	3	4	1	4	0	1	1	2	1	24
7	0	2	1	2	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	3	0	0	1	16
8	1	1	1	3	1	x	0	1	1	1	1	3	2	1	1	1	1	20
9	1	3	1	0	3	1	1	1	2	3	1	3	2	3	1	1	4	31
9	3	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	1	0	1	2	0	1	1	1	1	14

Table 3

Subjects and their score according to the rubric to evaluate oral performance

SUBJECT	QUESTION 1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	TOTAL SCORE
1	3	5	5	3	X	5	5	5	5	3	5	44
2	3	5	X	X	X	5	5	5	3	3	0	29
3	5	5	X	X	5	5	5	5	5	X	3	38
4	0	3	X	X	3	3	3	0	3	X	3	18
5	0	3	x	x	x	5	3	0	3	0	3	17
6	0	0	x	x	x	3	3	3	3	3	3	18
7	0	x	x	x	0	0	x	0	x	0	0	0
8	3	5	X	X	X	5	X	X	X	X	X	13
9	5	5	X	X	3	3	3	5	5	5	5	39
10	5	3	X	X	X	5	3	3	3	0	3	25

First year students from English Linguistics and Literature have proven to experience a high degree of anxiety while taking an oral examination. According to the FLAS that students answered, they feel insecure of their own abilities. Most of the students get distracted and there is a high percentage that thinks their classmates are superior. Nervousness and confusion are present, making students sometimes forget things they know. Besides, many of the students worry about the consequences of a possible failure in spite of being prepared. Lack of confidence constantly appears and it becomes evident, for instance, when students have to answer questions they haven't previously prepared. We think that there is a correlation between anxiety and grammatical mistakes. There are a high number of grammatical errors; there is a higher probability for anxiety to appear. And, when a student has high levels of anxiety he/she would be more likely to make grammatical mistakes. So, the relationship between these two factors is going to be directly proportional. Therefore, the oral performance of first year students would be affected by anxiety.

Conclusion

The aforementioned results show us that anxiety can influence on students' performance, especially in the structure of text and grammar. Students tend to elide grammatical structures such as the third person singular and past tenses and, when they realize their mistakes, they become nervous and confused, affecting their oral production.

We think that there is a correlation between anxiety and grammatical mistakes. There are a high number of grammatical errors; there is a higher probability for anxiety to appear. And, when a student has high levels of anxiety he/she would be more likely to make grammatical mistakes. So, the relationship between these two factors is directly proportional. Therefore, the oral performance of first year students is affected by anxiety.

On the other hand, it is possible for us to consider that anxiety may influence positively in some students, taking into account that some of them were able to use communication strategies in order to clarify and/or support their ideas.

Appendix

Foreign Language Anxiety Scale

Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M. B., & Cope, J. (1986). Foreign language classroom anxiety scale. The Modern Language Journal, 70(2), 125-132.

The present test has been adapted to the oral examination context. Students would have around 20 minutes to answer this test. For a real application of this test a transcription would be needed. It is better to deal with this type of emotions in the mother tongue of the participants.

TEST

Instructions: Please choose the alternative you feel more identified with. Try to be honest.

1. I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking during an oral examination.
Strongly agree   Agree   Neither agree nor disagree   Disagree   Strongly disagree

2. During the oral examination, I find myself thinking about things that have nothing to do with the situation.
Strongly agree   Agree   Neither agree nor disagree   Disagree   Strongly disagree

3. I keep thinking that the other students are better at languages than I am.
Strongly agree   Agree   Neither agree nor disagree   Disagree   Strongly disagree

4. I am usually at ease during oral examinations.
Strongly agree   Agree   Neither agree nor disagree   Disagree   Strongly disagree

5. I worry about the consequences of failing my foreign language class.
Strongly agree   Agree   Neither agree nor disagree   Disagree   Strongly disagree

6. I don't understand why some people get so upset over oral examinations.
Strongly   agree   Agree   Neither   agree   nor disagree   Disagree   Strongly disagree

7. In oral examinations, I can get so nervous I forget things I know.
Strongly agree   Agree   Neither agree nor disagree   Disagree   Strongly disagree

8. Even if I am well prepared for my oral exam, I feel anxious about it.
Strongly agree   Agree   Neither agree nor disagree   Disagree   Strongly disagree

9. I feel confident when I speak in oral examinations.
Strongly agree   Agree   Neither agree nor disagree   Disagree   Strongly disagree

10. I am afraid that my language teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make.
Strongly agree   Agree   Neither agree nor disagree   Disagree   Strongly disagree

11. I can feel my heart pounding when I'm going to start the oral examination.
Strongly agree   Agree   Neither agree nor disagree   Disagree   Strongly disagree

12. The more I study for an oral test, the more confused I get.
Strongly agree   Agree   Neither agree nor disagree   Disagree   Strongly disagree

13. I always feel that the other students speak the foreign language better than I do.
Strongly agree   Agree   Neither agree nor disagree   Disagree   Strongly disagree

14. I feel very self-conscious about speaking the foreign language in front of the teacher.
Strongly agree   Agree   Neither agree nor disagree   Disagree   Strongly disagree

15. I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my oral test.
Strongly agree   Agree   Neither agree nor disagree   Disagree   Strongly disagree

16. When I'm on my way to the oral examination, I feel very sure and relaxed.
Strongly agree   Agree   Neither agree nor disagree   Disagree   Strongly disagree

17. I get nervous when the language teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance.
Strongly agree   Agree   Neither agree nor disagree   Disagree   Strongly disagree

RUBRIC TO EVALUATE ORAL PERFORMANCE

1.-Does she/he use third person singular correctly?

2.-Does she/he use past simple past correctly?

3.-Does she/he use past continuous properly?

4.-Does she/he use past participle correctly?

5.-Does she/he use present continuous correctly?

6.-Does she/he use present simple correctly?

7.-Does she/he mark the plural forms correctly?

8.-Does he/she make the distinction between possessives and subjects? Its v/s It is.

9.-Does he/she use prepositions correctly?

10.-Does he/she use the pronoun 'It' when needed?

11.-Does she/he respect grammatical categories? i.e.: 'I have a beauty sister' instead of 'I have a beautiful sister'.

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