

Overcoming Speaking Anxiety in Omani EFL Learners: Teacher Strategies and Students Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the main factors that influence speaking anxiety among Omani EFL learners, addressing the challenges in developing speaking skills in EFL contexts. It specially investigates the role of technology and teachers' practices in boosting students' speaking confidence. The study employed a qualitative research design using a semi-structured interview with 6 English language teachers (three males and three females) from different higher educational institutions (HEI) in Oman. The study found that fear of mistakes, low confidence, and language problems are the main causes of anxiety. However, gradual exposure to the target language, communicating with peers, engaging in activities, and constructive feedback are the ways through which students overcome these obstacles. This study suggests that teachers should create low-pressure speaking opportunities for the students to build confidence gradually; encourage Small Group Discussions. Also, giving feedback should be structured. Providing what's good followed by what's good for improvement. Moreover, the integration of technology, particularly AI based tools and recorded speaking practices, can help reduce anxiety by allowing students to rehearse in private before performing in public. Overall, the study highlights the developing of speaking fluency within Omani EFL learners by combining emotional support with practical strategies in a supportive classroom environment.

KEYWORDS

EFL learners, Feedback, Low-pressure classroom, Speaking Anxiety, Speaking AI

1. Introduction

Recent years have brought about several changes related to English language education in Oman and a strive to increase proficiency levels among the students. Nevertheless, Omani EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners continue to face the biggest challenge of speaking anxiety. Many students face problems in oral communication because, for example, they are afraid of making mistakes, and have no chance outside the classroom to be exposed to English, which influences their culture not to participate verbally. These persisting issues become a block to confidence which finally prevents them from bringing in fluency and effective communication skill set [1].

Despite being a common barrier to language acquisition among EFL learners, research indicates that speaking anxiety is a common issue among EFL learners in non-native English-speaking contexts. It is common among the students of Oman to feel embarrassed of their pronunciation, grammar, or accent which prevents them from doing any speaking activities. This challenge can be met by teachers, who should use strategies that enhance participation and emphasize with students, making them feel confident and comfortable while in the learning environment.

Communicative language teaching (CLT) and roleplaying are effective methods of teaching that can be used to help lessen the problem of speaking anxiety, as well as enhance proficiency in the target language [2].

1.1.Objectives

The following are the objectives of the study:

1. To identify the main factors that influence speaking anxiety among Omani EFL learners.
2. To analyze the effectiveness of various strategies that teachers use to combat speaking anxiety.
3. To determine the point of view concerning the role of teachers in boosting their confidence to speak.

1.2. Research Questions

Following are the research questions of the study

1. What are the important reasons for speaking anxiety among Omani EFL learners?
2. What tactics do teachers use to ease the students away from speaking anxiety?
3. Do the students perceive the effect of the above strategies with respect to the acquisition of speaking skills and confidence?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Challenges in Developing Speaking Skills in EFL Contexts

Especially in situations of EFL where students do not have many chances to speak at any other place except the classroom, speaking anxiety is one of the biggest hurdles in language acquisition. In 1986, Horwitz, and Cope introduced Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) as consisting of three main components: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation [3]. Because of these factors, students tend to avoid taking part in speaking activities which, in turn, just increases their lack of confidence and fluency.

The reason behind students' difficulty in oral communication in the Omani EFL context is their linguistic and psychological problems. According to a study, many Omani students have passive exposure to English learning and they depend on rote learning more than active speaking practice [2]. [4] points out that the complexity of English grammar, in comparison with Arabic, hinders the students from constructing the sentence with confidence; thereby, increasing the hesitation and the speaking anxiety. The second challenge is pronunciation, fear of how spoken words are pronounced also contributes to the students' hesitation in getting involved in spoken English activities [4].

2.2. Strategies for Overcoming Speaking Anxiety

As a method of mitigating speaking anxiety, educators have employed several pedagogical strategies to create an engaging and supportive learning environment. It can be accepted that widely advocated communicative language teaching (CLT) is an effective method of developing speaking proficiency. CLT focuses more on authentic communication, fluency, and interaction between learners, rather than on perfecting the grammatical accuracy [2]. Teachers are using this

approach to promote students' language use in authentic contexts, and many students are feeling encouraged to use language more and are confident to so do.

Speaking anxiety is also reduced by role-playing and drama-based activities. [5] mentions that role-playing allows students to go into real communication situations and fight against the fear of doing a speech [5]. [6] discovered that drama techniques help to improve students' speaking abilities by inspiring creativity, minimizing self-consciousness, and stepping up students' commitment to the task [6]. According to [7], an Omani study found that drama-based instruction improved oral fluency and student willingness to engage in speaking tasks [7].

An example of another widely used strategy is peer collaboration and cooperative learning. Vygotsky (1978) explains his Sociocultural Theory by stressing social interaction in learning. Pair discussions and group projects are peer-based activities that lower students' stress levels and thus make them feel free enough to practice their speaking skills. It is suggested by studies that learners engaged in interaction with peers instead of teachers experience lower anxiety and a higher motivation to speak [8].

2.3. Technology Integration in Speaking Skill Development

It was revealed that integrating technology into EFL classrooms has proven to be an effective tool in the reduction of speaking anxiety. According to [9] the results indicate that most digital language-learning applications, speech recognition software, and virtual conversation partners help students bolster their speaking confidence. The advantages of platforms like Duolingo or xBBC Learning English or AI chatbots to practice speaking with reliable feedback are, that learners can practice a very low-pressure situation, and develop fluency gradually.

In the Omani educational context, [9] researched the effect of technology-supported speaking practice and discovered that students who practiced speaking with digital speaking tools became more involved in classroom discussions. Well, also, there are video recording activities that record the student's spoken responses and the response from a teacher that had improved the student's pronunciation and self-monitoring skills [9].

2.4. Best Practices in Reducing Speaking Anxiety

Several studies indicate best practices that have worked superbly in reducing speaking anxiety among EFL learners. This is necessary to push out the fear and bring out the participation. [10] stress the need to reduce the affective filter through the creation of an inviting social environment where students are not apprehensive to articulate their thoughts due to the concern of being criticized by others. It is also important to reduce anxiety, which can be achieved with teacher feedback. [10] prefers constructive feedback that is encouraging rather than error-correcting. Mistakes are best not overemphasized since they can discourage learners and instead, the focus should be on their strengths to increase their confidence with gentle corrections. According to [10] study, when students receive positive reinforcement from the teachers in a classroom, they are more likely to participate in speaking activities.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

This study involves 6 English language teachers (three males and three females) from different higher educational institutions (HEI) in Oman. These participants were chosen to reflect diversity in terms of years of experience (4-12 years), gender, and institutional background settings, allowing more understanding of the challenges and strategies for overcoming anxiety among EFL learners.

3.2. Data Collection

A semi-structured interview is the primary data collection method of this qualitative research approach. The interview is a set of open-ended questions adapted from the study [9]. Each one-on-one interview lasted approximately 20-30 minutes and was conducted both in person and online for those teachers who were far away. All of the interviews were recorded with the participant's consent and transcribed later for analysis.

3.3. Data Analysis

A manual thematic analysis was used to identify the patterns and analyze the themes. The analysis went through four stages. First, the interviews were transcribed. The second step was coding by classifying the responses based on emerging ideas related to the causes of speaking anxiety and teachers' strategies. The third step was identifying the themes by grouping the coded data into broad themes. There are three main themes of the data: the common causes of speaking anxiety among EFL learners, the teachers' strategies to overcome speaking anxiety, and the role of institutions in reducing anxiety. The last step was interpretation by analyzing the themes concerning the literature review and the frameworks of second language acquisition.

4. Findings

4.1. Challenges in Language Skill Development

Several challenges that Omani EFL learners meet when acquiring the ability to speak in English were found in the interviews. The main problems are not being able to say something wrong, having little faith in themselves, not having all the words to say to express themselves, and not knowing how grammar works. Anxiety is likely to have afflicted several students due to negative experiences in the past, cultural aspects, and the pressure and public speaking. Moreover, the levels of proficiency are critical and lower proficiency students show higher speaking anxiety. Participants noted that speaking anxiety is often manifest in such student behaviours as staying mute, avoiding eye contact, and being reluctant to discuss during class. Another teacher pointed out that students with speaking anxiety: "may not talk; if they do, they may whisper or be nervous." "They like to stay hidden, but should not be chosen to speak loudly before their peers," another said. Other students reported physical symptoms of anxiety such as sweating, shaking, or a racing heartbeat that further discourages them from speaking in class.

4.2. Major Themes from the Qualitative Data Analysis

This analysis of the data located three big themes.

4.2.1 Causes of Speaking Anxiety

The most common reasons for having speaking anxiety include: First, participants mentioned that the students fear being judged by their peers for their mistakes. 'There are situations when students are afraid to make mistakes and they don't want to say anything,' one teacher said. Second, low self-confidence repeated itself, and this was related to past experiences. The key quote is from a participant who said, "Some students have had bad experiences before this, which makes them not want to speak at all." Third, language proficiency is limited, students face difficulties speaking because of the lack of vocabulary and grammar knowledge. "For instance," one interviewee spoke, "students are sometimes anxious because they do not have relevant subject knowledge and vocabulary." Fourth, cultural expectations sometimes can restrict students in higher education institutions—especially gender norms given that mixed-gender classrooms have increased anxiety.

4.2.2 Strategies to Reduce Speaking Anxiety

Several strategies were reported to help students overcome speaking anxiety by the participants. First, gradual speaking exposure: training students to speak in pairs and small groups, before speaking in the class. 'Make them start with their pair,' one teacher said, 'then a small group, and then publicly.' Second, several teachers underscored the need to establish a supportive, non-judgmental environment. One participant stated 'When I allow the classroom to be as amicably as possible, I should never allow judgmental remarks to be slung by myself as well as the students, they become at ease.' Third, role-playing and fun activities: Fun and engaging activities like role-playing, games, and storytelling often entice the students into taking part. According to one teacher, 'Fun activities also reduce stress and make speaking enjoyable.' Fourth, facilitating peer interaction as the students also get the opportunity to practice in a low-pressure situation. The definition of a drop-in case was a student making significant progress within one to two months while no longer made anxious to talk by another student. A teacher suggested, 'When students work together, they can encourage each other and decrease their fear of speaking.' Fifth, some teachers had found that using AI-based pronunciation tools to assist or even record speaking tasks gave the students feeling more confident to speak with others.

4.2.3 Perceived Effectiveness of These Strategies

After adopting these approaches, teachers also mentioned that they observed apparent advantages in students' self-esteem. Some teachers mentioned the case of students who actively 'hid' from talking by avoiding discussions and sitting in the corners of the classroom, only to see them later on become more contributing during class discussions. According to the program's facilitator: 'One participant explained a student who initially refused to participate became one of the most active participants in the class discussion.'" One teacher observed that students who were involved in participating in interactive activities were in voice exercises more willing to step up and speak about themselves, acquiring increased fluency and confidence.

5. Discussion

This study also confirms the findings of other studies related to speaking anxiety with EFL learners. The identified barriers such as fear of mistakes, lack of self-confidence, and linguistic limitations were also in agreement with other existing literature on language learning anxiety. Furthermore, it seems that cultural factors and gender differences are impacting the levels of speaking anxiety among Omani students as some of the teachers indicated that females face more difficulties than their male counterparts in mixed-gender situations.

The findings indicate that talking anxiety is not only a cognitive problem but also an emotional as well as social phenomenon. The fear of negative evaluation from peers causes anxiety amongst many students resulting in their poor participation in oral activities. This is coherent with [9] Foreign Language Anxiety Theory which stresses how learners of a second language are confronted with the challenges of communication apprehensiveness, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation [11].

A second important insight from the evidence is a strategy that uses a stepwise approach: introduction of speaking in low-pressure situations (small groups), followed by open-ended speaking activities in low-pressure situations, followed by open-ended speaking activities in a more public speaking setting. This is associated with the Affective Filter Hypothesis of Krashen (1982) which maintains that students learn better with low anxiety levels [12]. This anxiety must be addressed in a supportive classroom environment where there is little or no fear of judgment and risk-taking is encouraged.

5.1. Cultural and Social Factors in Language Anxiety

Language anxiety among the students in Oman is taken to be part of the cultural environment that affects the language learning of the students. Modesty and politeness are highly regarded in

Omani society and students may feel embarrassed to speak out in case they sound arrogant or wrong. Moreover, gender roles play a crucial role in the participation of the students, and some of the female students do not feel comfortable speaking out in mixed-gender classrooms about what society expects of them. It is a major issue that requires remedying through the facilitation of equal opportunities for participation and the creation of inclusive settings in the classroom [1].

5.2. The Role of Teacher Strategies

It is in the instructional strategies of a teacher that the reduction of speaking anxiety averages out. Teachers who employ communicative teaching methods (e.g. role-playing, storytelling, peer discussions, group work, etc.) for language teaching help make the students feel relaxed while speaking in English. Constructive feedback rather than negative criticism also contributes to building student's confidence [5].

Technology in language learning was a notable strategy used by the teachers. In addition, some teachers have found ways of using AI-based pronunciation tools, recorded speaking tasks, and virtual speaking partners to enable students to practice on their own before talking to their classmates. Research indicates that such technological tools will foster the receipt of personalized feedback from those who would not feel judged by peers due to fear [10].

5.3 Implications for Language Education in Omani EFL classrooms

This study has several implications regarding language education in Oman. To lessen the speaking anxiety in EFL classrooms, HEI and educators should introduce a structured intervention. They encompass some key areas of focus, which are:

5.3.1. Teacher Training on Anxiety-Reducing Techniques:

Teachers should thus be offered professional development programs that will assist them in creating a supportive and engaging classroom setting. Methods of training, like scaffolding, positive reinforcement, and building speaking exposure, should be emphasized.

5.3.2. Curriculum Adjustments:

More communicative activities should be incorporated into the curriculum to help students build confidence gradually. Such assessment criteria should not be so penalizing in terms of speaking errors but should integrate fluency and communication over grammatical perfection.

5.3.3. Technological Integration:

Using speech recognition software, virtual reality simulations, and AI feedback tools can help the students practice speaking in low-pressure situations before they do it in real life.

5.3.4. Classroom Environment and Inclusivity:

Teachers need to focus on creating an inclusive environment, where all the students regardless of gender or proficiency level should feel free to speak. The peer support system is an effective way that encourage collaborative learning and ease anxiety.

6. Conclusion

This study looked at the reasons for the speaking anxiety among Omani EFL learners, the strategies that teachers employ to overcome it, and the effectiveness of these strategies in increasing students' speaking confidence. The study found that fear of mistakes, low confidence, and language problems are the main causes of anxiety, while being gradually

exposed to the language, communicating with peers, engaging in activities, and constructive feedback are the ways through which students overcome these obstacles.

The practical implications of the study are that teachers can carry out structured approaches to relieving speaking anxiety and improving communicative learning environment. Research for students speaking anxiety direct perceptions and testing the validity of employing technology based speaking solutions in Omani classrooms could be further researched.

Funding: This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies, commercial or not for profit sectors.

Conflict of interest: The author declares that she has no conflict of interest.

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