

Chapter 1

Introduction to the study

1.0 Introduction

The worldwide expansion of English language has increased the demand to acquire good communication skills in English. However, the second language learners of English often express a feeling of stress, nervousness or anxiety while learning to speak and claim to have a ‘mental block’ against learning English (Tobias, 1986). This suggests that language anxiety possibly not just barricades the learners’ language learning, but makes them psychologically weak in the process of language learning and acquisition. As a result of which most of the anxious ESL learners either get reluctant or shy in the classroom or they just drop out from the mainstream education. Thus, considering the crucial role of language speaking anxiety while learning a second language, the present research study aims to investigate the problem of language speaking anxiety in the young adult ESL learners. The primary intent of this chapter is to provide an overview of the undertaken research study.

The present chapter begins with the background to the study. It then provides the statement of the problem and explains the purpose of the study. Later, it defines some of the key terms that would be used in this doctoral thesis. Following that, it elaborates on the rationale of the study and discusses the objectives and research questions of the study. Subsequently, it provides information about the research design and the context in which the research was carried out. Apart from that it also discusses the scope, limitations and

later provides the structure of the thesis. And finally, it concludes with the summary of the chapter.

1.1 Background to the study

Being an L2 learner as well as a practitioner of English language teaching, the researcher has not only experienced the problem of language-speaking anxiety but also has observed this phenomenon in his language classroom. In literature, there is a substantial research that supports the above-mentioned claim. For example, several researchers (Bailey, 1983; Gardner, 1985; Horwitz, et al., 1986; Ely, 1986; Young, 1986; Oxford, 1990) have found that speaking oriented activities in second / foreign language classrooms can be the most anxiety-provoking experience for the language learners. Furthermore, the research studies claim that higher degree of speaking anxiety may block communication initiative in the second language learners and hamper their production (Foss & Reitzel, 1988). They also reveal that anxiety may be responsible for a large proportion of the variability in the learner's ultimate language proficiency (Hembree, 1988). According to Young (1991), "the current proficiency-oriented approaches have a significant impact on learners' affective states in the classroom; consequently, they pose particularly great difficulties for the anxious learners".

All these arguments accentuate the fact that language speaking anxiety is one of the learner affective factors that pose many problems to the learners in learning to speak a second/foreign language. Therefore, most of the times, during the language class high anxious learners either keep quiet or avoid attending classes. As a result, teaching becomes a challenging job. It is primarily because, on the one hand, the management asks

teachers' to teach speaking skills and make learners proficient in speaking; on the other hand, due to the language speaking anxiety, learners do not participate in the speaking activities in the classes. Hence, to make teaching learning process successful in terms of speaking, it is very important to investigate the problem of language speaking anxiety in the ESL classroom. Similarly, since language anxiety is complex and multifaceted, there is a strong need to investigate this phenomenon from its various dimensions. Thus, if our ultimate goal, as language professionals, is the development of learners' communicative competence in a second/ foreign language, then investigation centering on learners anxiety related to speaking in the classroom seem to have great pedagogical implications.

1.2 Statement of the problem

Language anxiety is considered as one of the important affective factors in individual differences. According to Horwitz (2001), "language anxiety is a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process that often influences the success of language learning".

The subjects of this research study were young adult ESL learners pursuing their higher secondary education in a rural village in Maharashtra. Although these learners have been studying English for the past eleven years, their proficiency in speaking English remained very poor. Since the curriculum of the higher secondary education was task and activity oriented, making learners proficient in English was a gigantic challenge for the institutions functioning in the rural parts of Maharashtra. Furthermore, teachers teaching in these institutions often reported that these learners do not speak much in English and

whenever they speak, their body starts to shiver, and they mumble. Further, they state that most of the time many of the learners avoid classroom participation. According to these teachers, they have some kind of fear or anxiety in speaking English. The researcher has also experienced the same because he also comes from the same background.

Based on these arguments, it can be stated that most of the young adult ESL learners pursuing the higher secondary education in the rural parts of Maharashtra very frequently experience the problem of language speaking anxiety in their language classrooms. Thus, to solve this problem, the present research study, first conceptualized young adult ESL learners' problem of language speaking anxiety by measuring their levels of language speaking anxiety. Secondly, it examined various influential factors that caused language speaking anxiety in them. Thirdly, it investigated the activities that created language speaking anxiety in the ESL learners. And fourthly, based on the findings, to help them to reduce their language speaking anxiety and improve their spoken English, it provided and evaluated the usefulness of the intervention strategies through researcher intervention.

1.3 Purpose of the study

Horwitz and her colleagues stated that second/ foreign language anxiety is a unique and complex anxiety and is very different from that of other types of anxieties (Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope, 1986). The second/foreign language speaking anxiety affects both ESL learners' attitude and language learning. Further, it has debilitating effects on their mind and psychology. In most of the English classrooms, ESL learners may have the feeling of being unable to express their own thoughts in a second/foreign language

classroom. Therefore, a profound investigation and detailed analysis of second/foreign language anxiety was essential and momentous.

The first purpose of this study was to investigate and measure ESL learners' language speaking anxiety levels in the classroom. The second purpose was to examine various influential factors of language speaking anxiety and figure out the activities that created high language speaking anxiety in the ESL learners. And the third purpose was to provide intervention to reduce their language speaking anxiety and encourage them to practice English so that they become proficient in speaking. Thus, the purpose of this research study was not only to provide a better foundation for understanding ESL learners' language anxiety in speaking, but also to help them in alleviating language anxiety to be effective language learners.

1.4 Defining key terms

There are basically four key terms (Young adult ESL learners, Anxiety, language anxiety, and second/foreign language speaking anxiety) that are associated with the present research. The present section is centered on defining these key terms.

1.4.1 Young adult ESL learners

The first important term in this research is *Young adult ESL learners*. Young adult ESL learners are the learners who study English as a second language between the age of 17 and 25. Thus, they are neither young nor fully adult learners, and hence, the term called young adult learners. The characteristic of these learners suggests that during this time they are in search for personal identity. Further, during this time, they require activities that meet their needs and learning expectations. In most of the cases, these

learners easily become disruptive when they lose interest in the lesson or feel bored. Moreover, these are the learners who need help and support from the teacher and to be provided with constructive feedback and if given the chance, such learners can draw upon a variety of resources in the learning setting, including personal experience, the local community, and the internet. So basically, these are the learners who need the teacher to build bridges between the syllabus and their world of interests and experiences.

Thus, for the purpose of the present study, the term young adult ESL learner is used to describe the learners learning English as a second language at the higher secondary level.

1.4.2 Anxiety

The second significant term in this research study is *anxiety*. In the field of social sciences, the term anxiety is defined as an emotion which often results from the notion of stress. Basically, it is considered as a normal reaction like joy and anger. The task of such emotion is to make the individual ready for actions in perilous situations. For the purpose of the present chapter, the term anxiety is broadly defined as “a socio-psycho-biologic phenomenon experienced as a foreboding dread or threat resulting from the individual’s appraisal of a situation and their capacity to deal with it” (Pekrun, 1992, p. 58-67).

Conceptually, the term is known as the general anxiety which everybody experiences in our day to day life. The term anxiety can be understood by its two-way distinction known as state vs. trait anxiety. The state anxiety denotes the subjective feeling of “tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the automatic nervous system” (Spielberger, 1983). In other words, it is a momentary state of unpleasant, consciously perceived feelings of tension, apprehension, and nervousness that

vary in intensity and fluctuate over time as a reaction to circumstances perceived as threatening (Novy & Nelson, 1995). However, trait anxiety is understood as an acquired behavioral disposition because of which a human being perceives a wide variety of objectively unthreatening situations as threatening, causing their disproportional overreaction to such situations (Spielberger, 1983). Thus, trait anxiety is viewed as an individual's predisposition to be anxious.

1.4.3 Language anxiety

The third major term in this research study is *language anxiety*. For the sake of describing affective processes in the field of second language acquisition (SLA), a kind of anxiety conceptually different from other anxiety types has been introduced as language anxiety. Horwitz, et al., (1986) defined Language anxiety as “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process” (p.125). On the whole, the term is known as the situation specific anxiety which arises while learning a second or foreign language in the classroom context. So far research scholars in the field have conceptualized the term in two ways: positive anxiety which is known as helpful anxiety (Kleinmann, 1977) and negative anxiety (Horwitz, et al., 1986; Young, 1990; Xiang, 2004) which is also known as harmful anxiety.

Those research scholars who conceptualized language anxiety in a negative manner are of the opinion that language anxiety hampers language learners' performance in numerous ways. For instance, it directly hampers learner language performance by reducing their classroom participation, creating the fear of negative evaluation in the learner's mind, and

creating an overt avoidance of the language. According to them, it also indirectly hampers the learner performance through worry and self-doubt. Thus, it can be stated that “language anxiety is a pervasive and prominent force in the language learning context, and any theoretical model that seeks to understand and interpret the language learning process must consider its effect” (Gardner, 1991, p. vii). However, those research scholars who conceptualized language anxiety in a positive manner are of the opinion that language anxiety assists language learners’ performance in positive ways. For instance, because of the anxiety, learners prepare well, they study hard as a result of which their language performance improves.

1.4.4 Second/foreign language speaking anxiety

The fourth important term in this research study is *second/foreign language speaking anxiety*. The term second/foreign language speaking anxiety is developed from the language anxiety and its development is still in the infancy mode. According to Deyuan (2011), the second/foreign language speaking anxiety can be defined as “an individual’s fear or nervousness associated with either real or anticipated oral communication in the second/foreign language with another person or persons” (p. 4). For the purpose of this chapter, the term is understood as the unique feelings of tension and apprehension experienced in the SLA process in the classroom context, arising from the necessity to learn and use a SL/FL that has not been fully mastered. This suggests that language speaking anxiety is a unique construct in language learning that obstructs learners’ language learning process and makes them pessimistic about their language achievements.

1.5 Rationale for the study

The rationale for this study primarily rests on the following seven reasons.

1. First, as Young (1991) asserts, the research that concentrates on determining the relationship between anxiety and the separate language skill (for example - Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing) may lead to a better understanding of the relationship between anxiety and language learning. Thus, by investigating the relationship between language anxiety and speaking skill, we hope that this study will contribute to the better understanding of the phenomenon.

2. Due to the incomplete development of the prefrontal cortex, which is the center for emotional stability most of the young adult ESL learners are generally vulnerable to stress and anxiety (Willis, 2006). According to Jensen and Snider (2013), this state of mind, often inhibits learners' performance by leading them towards anxiety. Subsequently, it makes them weak at risk management and coping skills (p.25). This suggests that to make the language learning successful the teacher has to teach them how to take control of their emotions such as anxiety, and how to take moderate risks for their language learning. Thus, by investigating the emotional aspect (that is language anxiety) of the learner, this study will be able to provide some useful suggestions for successful language learning.

3. The third reason is, most of the research (Bailey, 1983; Gardner, 1985; Horwitz, et al., 1986; Ely, 1986; Young, 1986; Oxford, 1993) done in this field primarily focuses on investigating the relationship between language anxiety and speaking. Almost all of these studies have given recommendations or models to diminish language anxiety from

learners mind but none of them have evaluated the usefulness of such techniques or models in a given context. Therefore, to ensure the validity of such techniques or models, the present study not only investigates the relationship between language anxiety and speaking skill but also provides empirically proven intervention strategies for diminishing language speaking anxiety from the ESL learners mind.

4. If our ultimate goal, as language professionals, is the development of students communicative competence in a second / foreign, then investigation centering on students' anxiety related to speaking in the second / foreign language class seem to have great pedagogical implications.

5. A lot of research on language anxiety and speaking performance has been done in the native context such as the UK and the US but there is the little research in the non-native context. Therefore it would be worthwhile to conduct studies in non-native context (Mak, 2011). Moreover, the growing demand for spoken English in the ESL context has intensified the problem of language speaking anxiety and it is very important to address this problem as early as possible. This is primarily because it has long-lasting effects on the learners' language learning. Therefore, the present study attempts to investigate the problem of language speaking anxiety in the ESL context.

6. According to the National Curriculum Framework (NCF), 2005, second language curriculum should accomplish the basic proficiency and overall development of the learners. However, in reality, negligible attention paid in accomplishing these goals not only decrease the worth of NCF as a fundamental policy document but also indicates that teachers and researchers need to explore these areas to achieve these aims. Therefore, by

studying the emotional aspect of the learners, that is language anxiety, and their speaking performance this study not only enables learners in developing their proficiency but also attempts to assist them in the overall development.

7. Although the findings of previous research studies have identified several potential sources and consequences of language anxiety, their reliance on the quantitative paradigm (questionnaires) does not allow for an examination of how anxiety interacts with learners or situational factors to influence language learning. Studies that encourage learner reflection through qualitative paradigm would seem to have a potential to yield a richer understanding of learners' perception of how anxiety functions in their language learning, which in turn, might lead to a clearer understanding of the general role of anxiety in language learning. Therefore, by putting a greater amount of emphasis on qualitative paradigm the present study tries to understand language anxiety.

1.6 Objectives of the study

To investigate the problem of language speaking anxiety, the study aims to achieve the following objectives:

- To observe and analyze language speaking anxiety levels in the young adult ESL learners.
- To understand the influential factors that contribute to the young adult ESL learners'

language speaking anxiety.

- To identify the classroom activities that creates high language speaking anxiety in the young adult ESL learners.
- To propose various intervention strategies that diminishes language speaking anxiety in the young adult ESL learners.

1.7 Research questions of the study

In the light of above objectives, the research study investigates the following four research questions:

1. To what extent do the young adult ESL learners' experience language speaking anxiety in the classroom?
2. Which factors of language anxiety have a strong influence on the young adult ESL learners' classroom speaking anxiety?
3. Which classroom activities create high language speaking anxiety in the young adult ESL learners?
4. What measures can be taken by the teacher to help these learners' overcome their language speaking anxiety?

1.8 Research design and data collection procedures

The present research study was mainly carried out with the help of mixed methods research design. The study was conducted with 23 high anxious young adult Marathi ESL learners pursuing their higher secondary education in the rural parts of Maharashtra. To

carry out this study, we mainly used two quantitative tools – Foreign language classroom anxiety scale (FLCAS) and learner questionnaire; and three qualitative tools - classroom observations, learner, and teacher semi- structured interviews, and the reflective journal with post-class interactions with the learners. The data collection procedure happened at three stages - pre-intervention, intervention, and post-intervention. The chief aim of the intervention and post-intervention stage was to determine the effectiveness of the intervention in diminishing young adult ESL learners' language speaking anxiety and help them use the language and participate in the classroom activities so that they improve their spoken English.

1.9 Limitations of the study

The findings of the study especially, the influencing factors of language speaking anxiety and the intervention strategies of language speaking anxiety are believed to be contributed significantly to the second language anxiety research. The implications offered through this research are also a noteworthy contribution to the field of second language anxiety. However, regardless of these reasonably robust findings and contributions, the study has several limitations.

Time being the constraint, this study made an attempt to investigate only high anxious learners' language speaking anxiety. The moderate and low anxious learners were not included in the study.

Another limitation of the study was that the study was conducted with the young adult ESL learners. The findings obtained from the study cannot possibly have implications for

the young or adult ESL learners. However, the study can be replicated with these groups of ESL learners to see the success of results.

1.10 Structure of the thesis

The present thesis is organized into five chapters. The first chapter *introduction* has provided an overview of the research problem and its rationale. It began by providing the background to the study. After that, it described the research problem in great detail. Then, it provided the purpose of the study and defined the key terms associated with the research. Later, it illustrated the rationale, objectives, and the research questions of the study. Subsequently, it discussed the research design and the data collection procedures of the study. And finally, it concluded with the limitations, and the structure of the thesis respectively.

The second chapter consists of a review of the published work and the survey of the research work in the areas related to the study such as defining language anxiety, conceptual understanding of the language anxiety in terms of state vs trait, facilitative vs debilitating, language anxiety and theories of second language acquisition. Both the review and the survey help in identifying the gaps in the previous research and establishing the importance of the present study as an extension of the previous research.

The third chapter, *Research Methodology* provides a detailed account of the research approach used in the study. Further, it justifies the rationale for using such research approach in the study. Then, it sheds light on the research questions, participants and the context of the study. After that, it provides a detailed description of the tools and

instruments used in the research study. And finally, it explains the data collection and data analysis procedures used in the present study.

The fourth chapter, *Results* reports the findings obtained from the data analysis and simultaneously discusses the data analysis techniques used for the analysis. Subsequently, a detailed description of the information related to the intervention also forms the crux of the fourth chapter. The main aim of intervention sections is to inform the readers about the planning and implementation of the intervention. The intervention section presents this information into four major sub-sections like tasks, activities, and instructions planned for the intervention, methodology used in the intervention, intervention strategies used during the intervention and the findings from the reflective journal and post-class interactions with the learners.

And finally, the last chapter, *Discussion and conclusions*, discusses the findings of the study and states the possible contributions of the study to the literature. Further, it elaborates upon the implications of the study followed by limitations and recommendations for further research. And finally, the chapter concludes by summarizing the thesis.

1.11 Conclusion

In this chapter, we have discussed the background to the study. After that, we described the research problem in great detail. Then, we have talked about the purpose of the study and defined the key terms associated with the research. Later, we illustrated the rationale of the study. This was followed by the objectives and the research questions of the study.

Subsequently, we discussed the research design and the data collection procedures of the study. And finally, we concluded with limitations and the structure of the thesis respectively.