

***Enabling Young Adult ESL Learners Overcome Speaking Anxiety  
in the Classroom***

**Abstract**

Language speaking anxiety is a multidimensional phenomenon that deals with learners' psychology in terms of their feelings, sense of worth, and confidence. Many second language theorists such as Gardner, 1993; Krashen, 1988; Ellis, 1985; Arnold, 2005, have recognized the vital role of anxiety in the language learning process. According to them, every second language learner suffers some form of anxiety regardless of their age, experience with the language, the type of language learning setting and location. While exploring the role of anxiety in language learning, Arnold (2005) stated that anxiety is quite possibly the affective factor that most pervasively obstructs the learning process. Further, he pointed out that it is associated with negative feelings such as uneasiness, frustration, self-doubt, apprehension, and tension.

Keeping the same argument, Eysenck (1979) explained that anxiety present in classrooms has a spiraling- down effect on the learners' language learning. It makes them nervous and afraid, and thus contributes to poor performance. According to him, the feelings of fear and nervousness are intimately connected to the cognitive side of anxiety.

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 the literature, there is substantial research that supports the existence of the language speaking anxiety. For example, several researchers (Bailey, 1983; Gardner, 1985; Horwitz, et al., 1986; Ely, 1986; Young, 1990;

Oxford, 1998) have found that speaking oriented activities in a second / foreign language can be the most anxiety-provoking experience for the language learner. Furthermore, the research claims that high degrees of learner anxiety about speaking a second language may block communication initiative in the second language and hamper further production (Foss & Reitzel, 1988). It also reveals that anxiety may be responsible for a large proportion of the variability in the learners' ultimate language proficiency (Oxford, 2005). According to Young (1990), 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 reveal that language speaking anxiety is one of the learner affective factors that pose many problems to the learner in learning to speak the second language. Thus, there is a strong need for a research, which identifies learners' levels of anxiety and provides them with the possible solutions to be effective language learners as well as users. Thus, if our ultimate goal, as language professionals is the development of learners' communicative competence in a second/ foreign language, then investigation centering on students' language speaking anxiety in the classroom may have great pedagogical implications.

In addition to the above points, the present nature of oral examination has given importance to the speaking proficiency. Thus, most of the institutions force learners to speak English with their current proficiency-oriented approaches. Therefore during their communication classes, these learners either keep quiet or avoid attending classes. As a result, on the teacher's part teaching becomes a challenging job. It is primarily because on the one hand management of the institutions asks teachers' to teach speaking skills in a short time and make students proficient in speaking, on the other hand, due to the

language speaking anxiety learners do not participate in communication classes. Hence, to make teaching learning process successful in terms of speaking, it is very important to investigate the problem of language speaking anxiety. Similarly, since language anxiety is a complex and multifaceted phenomena, there is a strong need to investigate the phenomenon and explore its various aspects.

So far, the research conducted in this field suggests that researchers have not been able to identify conclusive assertions and fill the gaps in exploring language anxiety. For instance firstly, some researchers (Horwitz, 1986; Phillips, 1992; Hewitt and Stephenson, 2012; Young, 1990) have found a negative correlation between language anxiety and speaking performance, yet quite a few other researchers like Ganschow and Sparks (1991) have found positive or no impact of language anxiety on the learners speaking performance. Secondly, by now researchers have explored various facets of language anxiety for example - factors or causes of language speaking anxiety (Horwitz, 1986; Lee, 1991; Mak, 2011; Bailey, Daley, & Onwuegbuzie, 1999;) but every time the list of factors responsible for language anxiety has been increasing and some of the researchers like Horwitz, 1986, Mak, 2011 are of the opinion that they will never end.

Thirdly, the majority of the researchers have explored language anxiety in the EFL context but there is a scarcity of research in second language context. Fourthly, the researchers in the field have come up with quite a few anxiety reducing intervention strategies but there are no any empirical evidences for them (Young, 1991; Christensen, 1975). None of the studies have properly documented and practically shown whether the strategies have actually worked. Thus, with the above assertions and gaps in the

background, the present study aims to explore ESL learners' language speaking anxiety by identifying the answers to 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?

To address the above four research questions, the present research study employed mixed methods research design by using the sequential explanatory strategy. The primary rationale for using the mixed methods research design was the complex nature of language anxiety. Since language anxiety is an intricate psychological phenomenon, it would be difficult to investigate it with either qualitative or quantitative research design. Thus, to gain the profound knowledge of the concept, it was considered that the mixed methods research design would be appropriate.

The study was conducted with 23 young adult ESL learners studying English in a junior college of Maharashtra in a rural area. By using the mixed methods research design, the study was mainly carried out in three phases – pre - intervention, intervention, and post -

intervention. While conducting the study, two quantitative tools – FLCAS and learner questionnaire and four qualitative tools – classroom observation, semi-structured interviews (teacher and learner), reflective journal, and the post-class interactions with the learners were used. The findings of the study revealed that young adult ESL learners experienced language speaking anxiety at three levels – high, moderate, and low. However, a close observation of the learners in each category indicated that the majority of the learners (62.5%) experienced high language speaking anxiety in their classroom. This implied that to a greater extent the young adult ESL learners experienced language speaking anxiety in the classroom and that's why they were unable to do well in the classroom speaking activities. Further investigations into the influential factors revealed that learners' irrational beliefs about speaking English, insufficient teacher support, inadequate learner involvement, anxiety-provoking classroom environment, test anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, communication apprehension, and learner pessimistic previous language learning experience strongly influenced learners' language speaking anxiety in the language classroom. After that the investigations into the activities that created high language speaking anxiety in the classroom and the possible measures to reduce language speaking anxiety revealed that giving oral presentations in the class, answering teacher questions in the class, and explaining the meaning of the paragraph or stanza in the class were the most anxiety-provoking activities for the learners.

After two months intervention, the following intervention strategies were found useful in reducing learners language speaking anxiety – making ground rules for English class, making learners aware of the futility of worrying about negative evaluation, helping them dispel their myths about language learning, providing comprehensible language inputs to

the learners, giving them systematic practice in using language, use of charts, posters, music, videos, and language games, offering learner friendly feedback to the learner, creating positive and learner friendly atmosphere in the class, providing learners' linguistic and psychological support, teaching techniques of deep breathing and positive self-talk.

Through this research, we are hopeful that the present research will contribute to the research on SLA (Second Language anxiety) and SLSA (Second Language Speaking Anxiety) and will have pedagogical implications for ESL teaching in Maharashtra and other settings with similar cultural and social milieus. With the help of causes of language speaking anxiety, the impact of anxiety, activities that create anxiety and intervention strategies identified in the study, the ESL teachers, and their learners may be sensitized to the debilitating effect of SLSA and the importance of applying intervention strategies to reduce their learners' classroom anxiety. With some strategy training or awareness raising, hopefully the learners' ESL proficiency in speaking will be enhanced in the long run.

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.

Keywords: Anxiety, Language anxiety, language speaking anxiety, intervention strategies.