

Exploring the Coping Strategies used by ESL Learners to Cope with Speaking Anxiety in Speaking English

Siti Nurfirdaus binti Mohd Nasir, Nik Intan Baizura binti Ramsa

General Studies Department, Politeknik Tuanku Syed Sirajuddin, Perlis, Malaysia

Email: sitinurfirdaus@ptss.edu.my, baizuraramsa@ptss.edu.my

Abstract—The anxiety of learning a foreign language could be a barrier or hindrance for learners in achieving their learning goals. In spite of extensive research that has been conducted on identifying educators' techniques and treatments to overcome speaking anxiety among English as a Second (ESL) learners, the issue remains eminent. A substitute to mitigate the issue is to identify effective coping strategies which learners can apply and practice in an actual situation. In this paper, researchers investigate the most common coping strategy used by ESL learners to cope with speaking anxiety and the coping mechanism preferred by the learners to overcome speaking anxiety. The descriptive analysis revealed that working in small groups is the most commonly used coping strategies by ESL learners and the importance of the educator's role as a mechanism to cope with second language speaking anxiety. Finally, there are several actions to be taken by the researchers mentioned in this research to reduce or control speaking anxiety by using the right coping strategies based on the results achieved in this research.

Keywords: Coping Strategies, Speaking Anxiety, ESL Learners

1. INTRODUCTION

The importance of English as a global language of information and communication is undeniable. Educators and learners keep on trying to find the best and the most appropriate method to learn the language. In order to accomplish that, there are four skills that should be mastered which are speaking, reading, listening and writing. Among all the four skills, speaking skill is considered as the most difficult aspect and challenging in learning a language because it requires multiple components including grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension which learners find difficult to express themselves verbally. Other than that, the first impression of mastery of a language is often determined based on the speaking performance in real life situations (Brown & Yule, 1983, as cited in Bahadorfar & Omidvar, 2014) which makes speaking skill crucial to all language learners to acquire. Despite the importance of acquiring speaking skill, most English as a second language (ESL) learners find it difficult and challenging to master the skill. According to Zhang (2009), speaking skill continues to be the most difficult skill to learn for most English language learners.

The reasons the problem happened are due to several factors. First, speaking requires learners to produce and respond to sentences on the spot which could be hard for them if they are not proficient, this usually impacting their ways of communication. ESL learners usually require more time to respond with appropriate grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation to make the message delivered. Second, most of the learners struggle with low self-confidence and fear of making mistakes or errors during speaking which eventually will just shut them off from expressing their thoughts or opinions. Third, ESL learners mostly limit their language practice in the language class only and do not use or practise the language outside the classroom which make the successful of acquiring the language almost impossible with a very limited exposure to the language as Krashen (1982) stated that language can also be acquired intuitively, unconsciously and informally.

English has become a medium of instruction in most higher institutions in Malaysia, including in polytechnics where most of the courses, reference books, examinations and assessments are in English. Therefore, students must possess a distinct level of competencies in all the four skills in English prominently in speaking skill. According to MacIntyre and Gardner (1994), foreign language anxiety is defined as "the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language contexts, including speaking, listening, and learning". Chin et al (2016) mentioned in their research that Malaysian university students experienced an alarming level of English language anxiety due to several factors including lack of motivation to attend English classes, communication apprehension, the embarrassment from test failure and fear of negative perception.

Yasuda and Nabei (2018) suggested two distinct perspectives of coping strategies for language anxiety in their research discussion: functional and effective. Functional perspective demonstrates that the recommended coping strategies chosen or used by students should be applied in real life situations. In other words, different strategies could be useful in different situations because language anxiety is a situation-specific concept. Illustrated by Yasuda and Nabei (2018), ESL learners in a language classroom with native speakers are prone to fear of negative evaluations by their peers, meanwhile EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners learning English with classmates who have the same degree of fluency are tend to worry more on negative judgments from their teacher or language instructor. Although both learners are learning English, both require various unique strategies to tackle their problems. Therefore, students should be adaptive and aware of the best coping strategy to employ in the particular occasion. As equally important, the second perspective is effectiveness. Yasuda and Nabei (2018), proposed that students should employ and practise using certain coping strategies consistently to overcome their speaking anxiety. However, the lack of empirical research on the effectiveness of the coping strategies resulted in the uncertainties to promote those strategies to ESL learners in reducing speaking anxiety.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

2.1 Focus of the Study

The aims of this study are to identify the most common strategy used by ESL learners to cope with speaking anxiety and to investigate the coping mechanism and strategy preferred by the learners to overcome speaking anxiety.

2.2 Objective of the Study

2.2.1 General Objectives

The general objectives of this study are to identify the most common strategy used by ESL learners to cope with speaking anxiety and to investigate the coping mechanism and strategy preferred by the learners to overcome speaking anxiety.

2.2.2 Specific Objectives

- a. To identify the most common strategy used by ESL learners to cope with speaking anxiety.
- b. To investigate the coping mechanism and strategy preferred by the learners to overcome speaking anxiety.

2.3 Subject

The respondents of this study consisted of 55 ESL learners from Polytechnic Tuanku Syed Sirajuddin (PTSS) who enrolled in English for TVET offered in PTSS mainly for Foundation students. Foundation students were chosen to be the respondents for this study because they are required to sit for MUET (Malaysian University English Test) to further their study in the Bachelor Degree program in university. MUET covers all the four language components to be tested namely speaking, writing, reading and listening, thus they require more practice to master the language and excel in the test.

2.4 Research Methodology

In this study, researchers distributed a questionnaire consisting of 12 five-point Likert scale items to 55 respondents from PTSS in order to identify the most common strategy used by ESL learners to cope with speaking anxiety and to investigate the type of coping mechanism and strategy preferred by the learners to overcome speaking anxiety. The descriptive analysis is used in this study and the mean or the average was used to analyse the overall result. Furthermore, the 5-point Likert scale was used to describe the rating displayed in the result based on the followings:

Table 1. The 5-Point Likert Scale

Scale	Mean	Descriptive Equivalent
5	4.01-5.00	Strongly Agree
4	3.01-4.00	Agree
3	2.01-3.00	Neutral
2	1.01-2.00	Disagree
1	0.01-1.00	Strongly Disagree

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Findings and Discussion

The table shows the respondents most commonly used coping strategies and the type of coping mechanism and strategy preferred by them to overcome speaking anxiety.

Table 2. Coping Strategies Used By ESL Learners

Statements / Items	Mean	Descriptive Equivalent
Having classmates work in small groups helps reduce my nervousness when speaking English.	4.454	Strongly Agree
It helps reduce my nervousness to talk with other students about the fears in speaking English.	4.127	Strongly Agree
Participating in a supporting group or activity (e.g. English corner) helps reduce my fears in speaking that language.	3.963	Agree
Doing relaxation exercises (e.g. productive self-talk) helps reduce my fears in speaking that language.	4.272	Strongly Agree

Statements / Items	Mean	Descriptive Equivalent
If accuracy is not the focus, I will not be so nervous about speaking English.	4.055	Strongly Agree
I do not feel so anxious when speaking English in a friendly environment.	4.036	Strongly Agree
Teachers' encouragement makes me feel relaxed when speaking English.	4.218	Strongly Agree
A humorous teacher helps reduce my nervousness in speaking English.	4.363	Strongly Agree
A patient teacher helps reduce my nervousness in speaking English.	4.418	Strongly Agree
I feel relaxed about speaking English if I know that mistakes are part of the language learning process and made by everyone.	4.327	Strongly Agree
I feel relieved about speaking English if my teacher corrects my mistakes indirectly (e.g. just repeat the right form instead of saying that I am wrong)	4.127	Strongly Agree
Playing language games helps reduce my nervousness in speaking English.	4.345	Strongly Agree

Based on Table 1, almost all of the items have a mean score more than 4.01 which indicates they strongly agree with most of the statements in the questionnaire. The highest mean score with 4.454 is item 1 (Having classmates work in small groups helps reduce my nervousness when speaking English). Most of the respondents reacted positively and strongly agreed with the statement mainly because working in small groups helps them to feel more comfortable to use and practise English compared to working in large groups. For example, in the classroom, when the teacher asks for a response from the class on any topic of discussion, the shy or less confident learners will usually avoid responding and only the confident learners will participate. However, when a teacher asks students to work in a group of 3-4 (a small group), these shy and less confident learners will start to open up and participate in the activity more confidently. (Nagahashi, 2007 as cited in Maquidato, 2021) claimed that the cooperative learning strategies which involve learning situations like real-life situations, task-based activities and small-group activities were found to be an effective coping mechanism to reduce English language speaking anxiety as it transforms classroom from intimidating, threatening and apprehensive atmosphere into a positive, supportive and learning-friendly environment, therefore the possibility for learners to express their thoughts, opinions and feedbacks clearly in English could be possibly achieved when the safe space for them is provided.

Other than that, the second highest mean score with 4.418 is item no 9 (A patient teacher helps reduce my nervousness in speaking English) which indicates the importance of the teacher's role in reducing speaking anxiety among ESL learners. In a language setting classroom, teachers should be able to encourage students to feel comfortable to use the language by providing a conducive and non-threatening environment. Besides, a patient teacher who is able to provide constant support and motivation could have a favourable impact on the success of the language learning. Teaching English as a second language is definitely not an easy road due to the complexity of English language itself and the challenges to overcome the first language interference in learning English as a second language which requires an empathetic teacher who could be gentle and understanding towards student's emotions and needs in learning the language but at the same time capable to foster the authority as a teacher. Furthermore, positive feedback and evaluation from a teacher in a friendly manner to enhance student's performance in the future, for example, during an oral presentation would make a substantial improvement in the student's self-efficacy. (Villegas-Puyod et al. 2020). Additionally, Villegas-Puyod et al. (2020), also claimed that a positive correlation between teacher support and self-efficacy has a significant influence on the student's speaking anxiety; the higher self-efficacy of the students the lower the degree of speaking anxiety they had during oral presentations. Therefore, teachers play an important role in reducing speaking anxiety in students.

However, the least mean score with 3.963 is item no 3 (Participating in a supporting group or activity (e.g. English corner) helps reduce my fears in speaking that language). Despite the least mean score, most of the respondents reacted positively and agreed with the statement. The statement is the least favourable could be because of linguistic and psychological factors which make the students feel reluctant to participate in English speaking activity. For instance, students often feel their lack of vocabulary and poor pronunciation are the reasons they refuse to partake in English speaking activities to avoid embarrassments and failures. In Malaysian culture, speaking English is always regarded as someone with high social status and those who try to speak English with grammar, syntax and pronunciation errors would be laughed at and mocked which would definitely affect their motivation to learn the language better. Khinanti Giantari, Kurniawan, E., & Didi Suherdi. (2023) stated in their research that psychological factors such as lack of motivation and shyness is the primary reason causing the student's reluctance to communicate and interact in English. Thus, teachers should employ various efficient strategies to overcome the situation as a way to cultivate motivation for the students to keep learning and mastering the language.

Ultimately, from the result obtained, the preferred strategies and coping mechanisms mentioned above could be effective and beneficial for both the teachers and the students in ESL teaching and learning environment, hence by fully utilising the strategies and coping mechanisms could provide a necessary support and guidance to the students to reverse and remedy the situation.

3.2 Actions To Be Taken

Based on the analysis above, the researchers will take several actions in order to help students to overcome speaking anxiety by using the right strategies.

1. Incorporate interesting and variety of language games in class for example by playing poison box, charades, pictionary, board games and role play in order to encourage the students to work in small groups to enhance student's self-confidence and reduce speaking anxiety.
2. Execute problem solving tasks by assigning students into groups intentionally consisting of 3-4 persons based on the student's proficiency level and background to create more diverse and balanced groups and opportunities for students to work with new peers to practise the language in a better environment.
3. Administer a podcast channel as a safe platform for students to encourage them to express themselves better using English.

The planned actions will be conducted in 5 weeks and the observation will be done in 2 weeks.

Step 1:

The planned action 1 will be conducted by the lecturer during the English lesson for 2 weeks. The class lecturer should plan the lessons and the activities carefully and creatively to incorporate interesting language games which meet the student's needs to explore and practise English language comfortably. The objective of using language games in class is to encourage collaborative learning because students learn better in small groups (preferably 3-5 members in a group is considered ideal). By using language games in class, students will feel more relaxed and less nervous when they have to use English to speak. For example, playing a charade game is very interesting and effective to allow students to practise the language with their friends without having to constantly worry of making errors or fear of evaluation when speaking in English. Moreover, most of the language games are done in small groups or in pairs to reduce the speaking anxiety and enhance the learning.

Step 2:

The planned action 2 will be conducted within 1 week. First, the lecturer will assign the students into groups intentionally consisting of 3-4 persons based on the student's proficiency level and background to create more diverse and balanced groups and opportunities for students to work with new peers to practise the language in a better environment. Then, they will be given a problem / situation where students need to discuss in their groups and produce possible solutions to solve the problems. Problem solving activities require students to communicate information to each other where the focus is on expressing ideas and opinions and not simply repeating phrases. In many ways, problem-solving activities replicate 'real' speaking in that people have a need to speak. Problem-solving activities can also be an effective way of practising language items that have been taught, i.e. both grammar and vocabulary. They are also a great way of developing students' cognitive abilities helping them to process language in a meaningful way. Other than that, problem solving activities could also promote cooperative learning among students. Examples of fun problem-solving activities that can be done in class are Spaghetti Tower and Murderous Dinner Party (role play to solve a crime).

Step 3:

The planned action 3 will be conducted within 2 weeks. The lecturer will provide a platform for students to produce their own podcast channels in small groups. By integrating technology in the lesson, such as podcast it could be a great tool to enhance student's speaking skills because students are allowed to plan, redo and rehearse before they record and upload the podcast to their channels which is also beneficial for them to develop their presentation skills. To make it better, the lecturer can make it a contest to boost their spirits to strive and deliver the best as an extrinsic motivation. Thus, producing a podcast could improve student's communication skills with the goal to have meaningful communication.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings and the discussions of the study, the researchers conclude that the most commonly used coping strategy to cope with speaking anxiety among ESL learners is by doing activities in small groups. Working in small groups allows students to feel more comfortable to use the language which reduces their speaking anxiety. Teachers should equip themselves with the latest use of technology in teaching and learning English and explore more engaging and creative activities for students to avoid repetitive lessons which could lead to boredom. Additionally, it is clear that another important coping strategy and mechanism involves a teacher's positive attitude. Students demand a patient teacher to assist them in their journey to master the language with constant motivation and dedication to assure the success of learning the language. Moreover, a patient teacher frequently creates a safe space and environment for the students to not be afraid to make mistakes because making mistakes is part of the learning process. Patient is a virtue that plays a crucial role in creating a positive and effective learning environment

and at the same time promoting resilience and perseverance in students. By modelling and embracing patience, the teacher portrays as an example that setbacks and disappointments are normal which could foster students' engagement, improve learning outcomes and build a positive teacher-student relationship. Thus, providing students with a safe, healthy and non-judgmental learning environment to learn English which could significantly reduce the level of their speaking anxiety and boost their self-efficacy is definitely vital prior to their transformative period. It is highly recommended for future research to adapt this study to assess the effectiveness of each strategy and the mechanism used by the students to cope with speaking anxiety and to include other variables related to the students that are not included in this study. Finally, this research study presents the most commonly used coping strategy and mechanism preferred by the students to overcome their speaking anxiety in speaking English that could possibly be employed and adopted by the teacher in language teaching. Eventually, the efforts from both parties; the teacher and the students are essential to lower down the level of second language speaking anxiety in students to become efficient and effective second language speakers.

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