



The Enhancement of Speaking Opportunities Through Stress-Relief Strategies among EFL Elementary Adult Learners

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Article History

Received: 17 May, 2023

Revised: 10 July, 2023

Accepted: 17 July, 2023

Published: 25 July, 2023

How to Cite

Majid Pourmohammadi and Farkhondeh Farahnak. (2023). The Enhancement of Speaking Opportunities Through Stress-Relief Strategies among EFL Elementary Adult Learners. *Sumerianz Journal of Education, Linguistics and Literature*, 6(3): 47-53.

Abstract

This study investigated some psychological barriers like anxiety and stress due to which EFL adult learners hesitate to talk in their English classes. It also suggested some strategies to facilitate opportunities for learners to feel free and talk. A sample of 30 learners was selected out of a population of 90, in the age range of 20-45. They were learning English at Safir English Language Institute in Rasht, Iran. They were then divided into two groups: experimental and control. The results revealed that most of the participants in the control group suffered from stress and anxiety. In conclusion, English teachers were required to learn and use stress-relief strategies and facilitate speaking for EFL adult learners in order to lead them to a higher proficiency level in their oral performance, especially those who find having conversations embarrassing and try not to get involved in such interactions.

Keywords: Anxiety; Hesitation; Psychological barriers; Speaking; Stress.

1. Introduction

Speaking is considered a basic skill that language learners need to master with the other language skills. It is necessary for anyone who tends to learn English as a foreign language. This skill is measured by conversation between learners. It deserves more attention because it reflects people's thoughts and personalities. Speaking is one of the most important skills to be developed and enhanced as means of effective communication. Speaking skill is regarded one of the most difficult aspects of language learning (Nezhadmehr and Shahidy, 2014). Many language learners find it difficult to express themselves in spoken language. They are generally facing problems to use the foreign language to express their thoughts effectively. They stop talking because they face psychological obstacles or cannot find the suitable words and expressions (Leong and Ahmadi, 2017). Besides, English becomes an important language to learn; more than half a foreign language learners experienced some degree of anxiety. Anxiety in the language learning process has been one of the major obstacles over the language learning process by foreign language students. Language anxiety affects language acquisition, retention, and production; therefore, foreign language anxiety has a negative impact on the entire language learning process (Putri and Marlina, 2019).

Most students evaluate their success in language learning as well as the effectiveness of their English course on the basis of how much they feel they have improved in their speaking proficiency (Raya and Cabe, 2012). Moreover, some learners find this issue embarrassing and expressing their knowledge and information orally is overwhelming for them. Teachers of English may experience the same situation in which the students are unwilling to speak (Fariadian et al., 2014).

Anxiety and stress have important roles in creating emotionally an unsafe atmosphere among some adult learners. Feelings of anxiety and nervousness were prevalent among EFL learners. Anxiety, as an effective variable

was shown to negatively correlate with performance in learning a language as a foreign language (Alidoost *et al.*, 2013). This study focused on adult learners. As this group of learners usually hesitate to come up with interaction with their teachers or classmates, the English teachers should attach more importance and attention to this phenomenon in language classes in order to tackle these obstacles and help the students to cope with them. English teachers should allocate some methods and strategies through which they would be able to remove any psychological barrier which can cause stress and anxiety. As argued by many theorists, fear of mistake could be considered one of the main psychological deterrents to the learners that stops them talking easily within the classroom. Therefore, the teachers should convince the learners that making mistake is a part of learning and is not a disaster. It can even help them to learn from their mistakes. Adult learners are worried to receive negative evaluations. Provided that teachers create very serious and unfriendly atmosphere, the learners will find themselves in situations in which they feel truly ashamed, stressed and unsafe.

Obviously, the most important point to consider is how to prepare the learners to use the language in order to be able to participate in conversations. Learning English in the 21st century has mostly changed from being teacher-dependent into learner-centered. This paradigm shift has changed the teachers' role from a provider to become a resource person (Pour-Mohammadi *et al.*, 2012). This research aimed to identify the crucial psychological issues and the teachers' roles, as a mediator, supporter and encourager in terms of developing speaking skill and enhancing appropriate speaking opportunities among adult learners at elementary levels. In short, this study tried to answer the following question:

RQ: Does the enhancement of psychological speaking opportunities through stress-relief strategies have any statistically significant effect on EFL adult learners' anxiety and hesitation in English?

Accordingly, the following null hypothesis was formulated:

H₀: The enhancement of psychological speaking opportunities through stress-relief strategies does not have any statistically significant effect on EFL adult learners' anxiety and hesitation in English.

2. Literature Review

In close connection to the fact that, during the past few decades, globalization has grown significantly, more and more adults of different nationalities seek the help of English instructors because they want to find employment abroad, to communicate more effectively at work, to resort to overseas travels, or just to enjoy various types of social situations. In any of these cases, the English learners are highly motivated to study this particular subject. In recent decades, great attempts have been devoted to speaking skill due to its importance in the area of learning English (Cozma, 2015). Some researchers investigated the importance of language as interaction between humans known as input and interaction and also used the ways people make their conversations as a way to collect data for their studies (Fariadian *et al.*, 2014). Besides, with growing concern being devoted to foreign language learning, anxiety has been ranked to be a crucial challenge to language learners (Oteir and Al-Otaibi, 2019). In this regard, the students' feelings of stress, anxiety or nervousness may mostly impede their abilities in language learning and performance (Reyhan, 2013). Several approaches have been taken into consideration in terms of speaking in the language teaching area. Also, both first and second language researchers have recently paid considerable attention to attitude. Most of them have concluded that a student's attitude is an integral part of learning and it should, therefore, become an essential component of second or foreign language learning pedagogy (Getie, 2020; Scrivener, 2014). Furthermore, four basic skills of English contribute the students' improvement in the language use itself (Hasibuan and Irzawati, 2020). Therefore, it is very necessary to discover the barriers to foreign language production. Likewise, both teachers and students should consider foreign language anxiety in speaking as one of the elements in producing the language.

This section provides a total overview of what has been meant by the facilitation of speaking opportunities among EFL adult learners and the importance of exploring the negative feelings of learners such as stress, anxiety that can prevent talking freely.

2.1. Stress-Related Factors among Learners

In order to discuss the level of anxiety and such negative feelings, some internal and external factors are taken into consideration. Numerous internal factors can be considered and the most important ones are *age*, *attitude*, *motivation*, *personality* and *learning* strategies. For instance, a common myth in the field of education is that adult students are generally more ineffective as language learners than the traditional students, on the account that the younger people are, the more flexible their brains, and, consequently, the better their cognitive functions. Besides, along with the internal factors, some external factors are likely to influence the learners' level of anxiety and also the learning process. These factors are categorized as *social* and *educational* factors (Cozma, 2015).

Social context is a wide concept that totally refers to the situation in which the learning takes place. Therefore, the classroom or anywhere else that is used to teach or learn and also the social interaction among the learners can influence the real language learning.

It is worth mentioning that second language learning takes place in a social context. This social context shapes learning in two ways. Primarily, the social context leads to the learners' attitudes towards both the target language community and the learning situation. This leads to the development of motivation in learners. Secondly, both formal and informal learning opportunities are influenced by the social context (Gholami *et al.*, 2012).

Educational context is not separable from the social context. "In the context of L2 development, it is the educational context that shapes language policy, language planning and most importantly, the learning opportunities available to L2 learner". (Kumaravadeivelu, 2006)

2.2. Shyness

Many students, especially the adult learners, are not good at speaking at in EFL classes. It is seen in a lot of classes that this problem exists because of their shyness. Shyness is another important factor that should not be ignored by the teachers. In this regard it was stated that,

Learners in classroom situation are not the same, and different personality types such as, unmotivated, anxious, introverted, extroverted, and shy persons participate in the class. In an EFL classroom based on communication purposes in which students need to use English language as a tool for communication, shy students are at a great disadvantage. Speaking in front of the others is a difficult task for them. They have a negative picture about themselves that will affect their motivation to speak. (Ostovar et al., 2015)

2.3. Anxiety

Speaking in English for EFL classroom is not easy because students have to speak in a new language with high self-confidence. Speaking fluently can show that they get good proficiency in learning the foreign language. Commonly students feel nervous, not confident. This phenomenon is called foreign language anxiety. Another factor that has been a central concern of second/foreign language learning and can have a substantial role in the process of learning is *anxiety* (Asysfa et al., 2019). Anxiety can be the result of some items such as: not being taken into consideration by the teacher, the fear of losing self-identity, the fear of performing in pairs or groups, etc. (Oda, 2011). Teachers should understand their students' interests and feelings, improve their learners' self-confidence, and choose the best teaching method to keep their learners' involved in the speaking activity. Teachers should praise their students to speak English. They should build a friendly relationship with their students, make them feel very happy in the class and have a feeling of great enthusiasm and eagerness to study English in general and speak English in particular. This can only be achieved if teachers approach their students with an open mind. No wonder, being open-minded turned out to be the most frequently mentioned characteristic when the participants were asked about the elements of their personality and behavior that they found crucial in motivating their students (Leong and Ahmadi, 2017). Apart from being open-minded, the most common aspects included being friendly, empathetic, attentive, supportive, available, informal, accessible, enthusiastic, flexible, thorough, confident, competent, consistent, credible, punctual, tailor-made, and well-prepared (Csaba, 2018).

2.4. Lack of Confidence

Speaking anxiety is something that has a big influence on students' self-confidence because it often makes them experience failure when they are unable to speak and show what is known. This speaking anxiety makes learners have low-confidence to perform in front of other people, and because of that the learner cannot understand teacher's explanation well. Confidence is not an easy concept to be defined. It refers to a mental attitude that focuses on trust and reliance on oneself and often includes self-assurance and fearlessness. It can be linked to self-esteem, motivation, age, gender, etc. (Asysfa et al., 2019).

Commonly observed that students' lack of confidence usually appears when they realize that their conversation partners have not understood them or when they do not understand other speakers. In this situation they would keep silent while others do talk confidently. The lack of confidence can appear among the learners for different reasons and the most prevalent one is some adult learners have lower ability in oral communications than their classmates in English and they feel bad when they want to present something but they cannot do it well (Raya and Cabe, 2012).

3. Method

The objective of this study was to investigate how the negative feelings like stress, anxiety and shyness can influence the EFL elementary adult learners' speaking performance. This section provides a clear and detailed explanation of the design of the study, participants, materials and procedures for collecting and analyzing the data.

3.1. The Design of the Study

This research attempted to study the psychological factors, including shyness and anxiety. It was done through an oral interview with different students in person. Their voices were also recorded and their responses were translated into English afterwards. A questionnaire including 15 questions was also provided in order to use both qualitative and quantitative designs.

Thirty elementary EFL adult female learners studying at Safir English Language Institute in Rasht, Iran participated in this study. This study employed a quasi-experimental design. The participants with the same characteristics in terms of gender and level of English were considered and divided into two groups to be examined through an experimental and also a control design.

At first, the two groups were supposed to be similar in terms of their fluency and willingness to talk within the class time. Both groups received a five-session treatment. To do this, the strategies that this study emphasized in order to remove stress, anxiety and shyness among learners were used for the experimental group (group A). However, the control group (group B) got the advantage of the regular teaching process without the use of the mentioned tips and strategies of the study.

3.2. Participants

The study was conducted with a population of 90 learners and a sample of 30 elementary level EFL ones, in the 20-45 age range who were taking classes at Safir English Language Institute, in Rasht, Iran. These learners had been interviewed before registration for their classes and they had been placed at the elementary level. Some female learners were selected. Six classes of elementary learners were considered. Five learners of each class were chosen to be interviewed through a purposive sampling. In each class, five less-fluent learners who usually hesitated to talk were interviewed. These 30 learners were divided into two groups: *experimental* on which the stress-relief strategies were examined and *control* group that had the regular process of teaching.

3.3. Instruments

The required data of this study were collected according to both qualitative and quantitative designs. The main instruments in the current study were voice recorder, paper and pencil. In order to find clear answers to the research questions and to test out the hypothesis of this study, the following instruments were employed.

3.4. Data Collection Materials

At the outset, a homogeneity test in terms of the learners' proficiency in English was administered by the institute experts and the participants of this study were placed in elementary level through Oxford Quick Placement Test (QPT), at Safir English Language Institute. Specifically, the learners were comprised of female learners in the 20-40 age range. It is important to point out that the learners who were selected to be the participants of this study, were the ones who seemed to be less likely to talk and perform actively in their classes.

Thirty EFL learners have been selected from among a population of 90. All of them were studying at elementary level. Two elementary EFL classes were considered for choosing these 30 participants. Fifteen learners of a class were chosen due to their reluctance and unwillingness to speak in their class.

A questionnaire including 15 questions was provided. Being relevant to psychological barriers such as stress, anxiety and shyness, the questions were all focusing on such issues. They were asked different questions in terms of how negative feelings such as stress, anxiety and shyness could influence their oral skill and performance. The questions were also about what they expected the teachers to do to remove such obstacles. Due to the level of English language proficiency of the participants who were all at elementary level, the researchers preferred to prepare the questions in Persian (their mother tongue) in order to let them feel free to express what caused negative feelings such as stress, anxiety and shyness in them. Afterwards, the whole questionnaire was translated into English.

An effort was also made to have an oral interview with the participants. Because the questionnaire included only multiple choice and T/F questions, the oral interview provided an opportunity for them to explain the psychological obstacles which stopped them performing as sufficiently as enough. The interview was also done in Persian and the participants' voices were recorded.

Before registering at Safir English Language Institute, the learners took QPT through which they were homogenized. Consequently, they were placed at elementary level. With respect to their homogeneity, they were divided into two groups: the experimental and the control groups. A 5-session treatment was allocated to both groups. Each session lasted 90 minutes. The experimental group (A), received a treatment with the use of the stress-relief strategies that the present study emphasized and the control group (B) received a treatment with the lack of those ideas. After carrying out the treatment, the collected data from both groups were analyzed and compared.

4. Results

This section dealt with the results of the collected and analyzed data. The results were presented in two sections: the first section mostly dealt with the descriptive statistics and the second section covered the inferential statistics of the study concerning psychological factors including shyness and anxiety.

4.1. Data Analysis and Findings

Descriptive analysis of the data

Table 1 indicated the age distribution of the participants. Their age mean in the experimental group was lower than that of the control group. The high age limit for the experimental group was lower than that of the control group, but the low age limit for the experimental group was higher than that of the control group.

Table-1. Age Distribution of the Participants

| Group | Type | N | Range | Mean | Minimum | Maximum |
|---------|--------------|----|-------|------|---------|---------|
| Group A | Experimental | 15 | 17 | 26 | 22 | 39 |
| Group B | Control | 15 | 20 | 25 | 20 | 40 |

Inferential analysis of the data

Table 2 indicated the performance of control and experimental groups in the questionnaire. As it can be seen, the number participants in each group was 15. In addition, the mean for experimental group was more than that of control group, whereas the experimental group was a little more heterogeneous than the control group. Independent-samples t-test was run to compare the means of the two groups with regard to the learners' level of anxiety and stress and their hesitation in speaking.

Table-2. Performance of CG and EG in the Questionnaire

| Test Type | Group | Number | Mean | SD | SEM |
|---------------|-------|--------|-------|-------|-------|
| Questionnaire | CG | 15 | 10.37 | 3.732 | 0.681 |
| | EG | 15 | 13.82 | 3.785 | 0.358 |

Table 3 demonstrated the independent-samples t-test in the questionnaire. Levene’s test for equality of variances suggested that the variances of the questionnaire total were equal; therefore, the results of the first row of the table of independent-samples t-test should be used. The comparison of experimental group’s performance (mean = 13.82, SD = 3.785) and control groups’ performance (mean = 10.37, SD = 3.732) on the questionnaire (Sig. = 0.00, t = 70.13) suggested that, as learners’ level of anxiety and stress and their hesitation in speaking was concerned, the experimental group outperformed the control group. Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected.

Table-3. Independent-samples T-test in the Questionnaire

| | | Levene's Test for Equality of Variances | | t-test for Equality of Means | | | | | | |
|---------------|-----------------------------|---|-------|------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------------|---|---------|---------|
| | | Sig. | T | df | Sig. (2-tailed) | Mean Difference | Std. Error Difference | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | | |
| | | | | | | | | Lower | Upper | |
| Questionnaire | Equal variances assumed | 0.070 | 0.792 | -70.13 | 28 | 0.00 | -57.445 | 0.776 | -58.979 | -55.911 |
| | Equal variances not assumed | | | -74.652 | 46.268 | 0.00 | -57.445 | 0.770 | -58.994 | -55.897 |

Based on the results, it is clear that EFL elementary adult learners' level of anxiety and stress (last eight questions) had a statistically significant effect on their hesitation in speaking (first seven questions) in the experimental group. It is also clear that there was a causal relationship between EFL adult learners' level of anxiety and stress (last eight questions) and their hesitation in speaking (first seven questions) in the control group. Hence, there was a strong effect of EFL adult learners' level of anxiety and stress on their hesitation in speaking in the control group.

4.2. Results of Hypothesis Testing

The findings indicated that the effect of the two variables was strong, which was in line with the results of the abovementioned studies. Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected. Additionally, by comparing the results for the two groups, it could be understood that the learners in the experimental group outperformed those in the control group. Having analyzed the related data, it became clear that almost most of the learners were experiencing English language speaking anxiety resulting from (a) fear of negative evaluation from their peers, (b) perception of low ability in relation to their peers, (c) fear of negative feedbacks from teacher and peers, and (d) lack of preparation to speak fluently, etc.

Most participants in the control group, in contrast with those in the experimental one, had fear of negative evaluation from their classmates and teachers. When those in the control group were asked to participate in speaking tasks with the teacher only, without their fellow learners listening to them, these anxious learners were markedly more willing to participate.

5. Discussion

As mentioned earlier, the findings of this study showed the strong correlation of the effect of the two variables and confirmed the results of the previous studies. The findings also went along with the results of several research regarding the influential roles of negative psychological feelings such as stress and anxiety in adult learners’ hesitation in speaking. For instance, in one study, learners’ performance was much influenced by their fear of being laughed at by others or being criticized by the teacher (Raya and Cabe, 2012). These learners’ low ability in their oral performance in many cases caused anxious feeling among others. By the way, it was observed and proved that some anxious learners were markedly more willing to participate and experiment with language and they were confident and motivated enough, but on the other hand, they were fearful of making mistakes. Obviously, the most important point to consider is how to prepare the learners to use language in order to be able to participate in conversations. This research tried to identify the crucial psychological issues and the teachers' roles, as a mediator, supporter and encourager in terms of developing speaking skill and enhancing appropriate speaking opportunities among adult learners at elementary levels.

Confirming the results of the present study, another study also highlighted the peer anxiety and indicated that half of the interviewees of the study showed the fear of negative evaluation from their classmates (Rafada and Madini, 2017). Its findings also indicated that the teacher played a vital role in raising or reducing speaking anxiety among learners. Some participants of that study expressed their fear of making mistakes and some of them claimed not to be encouraged by the teachers to be confident. Half of the interviewees of her study showed fear of negative

evaluation from their classmates. Additionally, negative judgments towards English classroom and insufficient wait-time would influence language learners' level of anxiety (Subaşı, 2010). It is believed that teachers should give their learners more opportunities to speak English through using some speaking tasks that help them to speak and urge them to take part in speaking activities. In addition, teachers should know when and how to correct their learners' mistakes so that they are not afraid of making mistakes (Leong and Ahmadi, 2017). All in all, the findings of this study indicated that nearly most of the hesitant learners were experiencing English language anxiety and they did not participate in speaking because they believed they were not good at speaking and were afraid of making mistakes and getting negative feedback.

6. Conclusion

This study attempted to examine the effectiveness of psychological issues that can create negative feelings like stress and anxiety among the EFL adult elementary learners and also how teachers can help the learners cope with such negative feelings through using some stress-relief strategies. Based on the results of this study, the experimental group on which stress-relief strategies were examined, got a better result in tackling their negative feelings. In other words, the control group that had the regular process of teaching, experienced having negative feelings like stress and anxiety much more than the experimental group. Hence, the null hypothesis proposed at the beginning of the study was rejected.

In short, the findings gained in this study led to some pedagogical implications which are beneficial for teachers and consequently for learners whose performance in oral skills is not efficient enough. This would highlight the role of the teachers as they are the classroom managers. With regard to the results of present study, learners should be assured that they would not get negative feedback if they make mistakes and they would not lose their social image, either. The current results can also make the learners attach more importance to paying attention to their peers when they are in cooperative activities.

As a conclusion, this study suggested applying some useful stress-relief strategies based on the learners' psychological requirements. Doing so, the English teachers can help the learners acquire more proficiency in their oral skill and deal with the negative feelings that can make them hesitate in speaking English within the classroom. It also required the teachers to facilitate speaking for EFL adult learners and enhance such an opportunity for them to improve and make a progress in their performance.

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