An Exploration of Speaking Anxiety with Kurdish University EFL Learners

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Abstract

The issue of language learning anxiety has been widely researched and investigated in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings. However, there have been very few studies conducted on this issue in Kurdistan, specifically about speaking anxiety in English classes. This study, therefore, aims to investigate Kurdish students' perceptions about the sources contributing to English language speaking anxiety in the context of universities of Kurdistan. It then proposes possible learning and teaching strategies to overcome this problem or at least decrease it. The present study also provides fresh approaches and feasible pedagogic implications for foreign language instructors to create a safe and low anxiety environment in English classes. In this qualitative research, a survey strategy was applied by means of both semi structured interview and questionnaire methods for the purpose of data collection. For achieving the study purposes, thirty students were selected purposively who were studying English language at Soran University, Faculty of Arts**.**

Key words: Speaking anxiety, English as a foreign language (EFL), sources, strategies, Kurdish EFL learners

Introduction

Although there has been a continuous development in English curriculum and instruction teaching methods in the Kurdish universities, speaking anxiety still exists among Kurdish EFL learners. Presumably, speaking anxiety can have a negative repercussion on EFL learners as it may cause them to have negative self assessment, mental block and poor performance. This, consequently, prohibits students from gaining a good level of English proficiency, specifically fluency. In other words, high level anxiety learners in foreign language (FL) classes are less likely to improve their English speaking levels and achieve the expected learning outcomes (Ghorbandordinejad, 2015). It is, therefore, the teachers' responsibility to use useful strategies and materials in order to create a safe and supportive learning environment for students to decrease their unwillingness to communicate.

Anxiety in the process of language learning can be seen as a condition of apprehension and a vague fear (Scovel, 1978, p. 134). These feelings may exert a negative feeling and detrimental effects on learners when they come to communicate in the target language. Gregersen and Horwitz (2002, p. 562) claim that the students who experience anxiety "tend to sit passively in the classroom, withdraw from activities that could increase their language skills, and may even avoid class entirely". This means that anxious students avoid being called on to take part in the class and they are less likely to volunteer answers in spoken classes (Bekleyen, 2009). This oral exhibition is often considered as a negative factor in learning English as it is usually taken for granted that language learning mainly relies on the amount of exposure to use the target language (Debreli & Demirkan, 2015).

The purpose of this research is to investigate speaking anxiety with English learners in the context of Kurdish universities. It further aims to be a step to help Kurdish learners to decrease their speaking anxiety in the target language and improve their English performance. The study could also be a guide for the learners who have low motivation and suffer from lack of confidence for learning English. This paper starts by providing a literature regarding the speaking anxiety in EFL classes and overview of the related studies to the Kurdish context. It then gives a discussion of the research methodology, data collection instruments, sampling and procedure. Before the conclusion, the findings of the study will be presented according to the research questions.

Literature Review

Speaking anxiety is the most frequently cited concern by the foreign language learners which may negatively affect their performance and ability to process information in the target language (Mak, 2011; Liu, 2006). Anxiety can be seen as one of the main reasons that can prohibit students from gaining a good level of language proficiency (Alrabai, 2014). According to Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope (1986, p. 128), foreign 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". This means that language anxiety is a negative feeling and psychological tension that learners go through in learning a language or performing a task (Xiao &

Wong, 2014). Having said this, some people feel apprehension when they are demanded to speak publicly. Likewise, language anxiety may cause students to have uncomfortable feeling and reticent during English classes, specifically spoken ones (Thompson & Lee, 2014).

However, this does not mean that language anxiety only affects students to improve their English fluency, but also accuracy (Rassaei, 2015). Furthermore, speaking anxiety may change learners' output when they come to talk because of being worry about accuracy rather than the content of the message that they intend to covey (Mak, 2011).). Presumably, students' feelings can have a key impact on their motivation, performance and language proficiency. In other words, students may feel anxious in their speaking classes because of their negative self assessment which possibly results in being reticent and quiet. Similarly, sometimes students' fear of making mistakes and apprehension about others' evaluation could be the key sources of speaking anxiety in English classes (Hammad & Abu Ghali, 2015). It is, therefore, advisable to make sure that learner's psychological aspect is in a good and safe condition (Trang, Baldauf & Moni, 2013).

Another main reason, sometimes, that contributes to speaking anxiety could be learners' low linguistic abilities. This is confirmed by a study conducted by (Liu ,2006, p. 309) in China, stating that students' lack of linguistic knowledge in terms of vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar can cause them to have a high level of anxiety and low self-esteem in their language performance. It is, due to this, advisable for students to work hard, not only in the class but also outside the class in order to improve their language proficiency and overcome their communication apprehension.

Apart from the factors related to learners, there are some factors related to instructors such as the lack of teachers' support and personal attention for learners (Coa, 2011). Teachers may, for example, create a stressful classroom environment when they are unfriendly and unsympathetic with the students (Koçak, 2010). Along with this, sometimes teachers' inappropriate style of teaching and also lack of information about the new approaches of teaching English in a communicative way is a major source of students' speaking anxiety (Ibid).

Another major issue which is worthy consideration in Kurdish universities contexts is teacher centered approach. Having said this, teachers are the sole authority figure in the classroom and play a great role in the learning process. That is to say, the teachers are the key source of information and directing all the classroom activities. Sometimes, also, teachers directly correct students' language errors in speaking English classes and may create a stressful environment. This may cause learners' lack of desire and reticent in speaking English (Richards, 2006). Pedagogically, therefore, teachers should create a supportive learning environment for learners and tolerate their language mistakes in speaking activities (Davies and Pearse, 2000). This is basically because to motivate students in order to actively participate in the class and use a good amount of English language (Hedge, 2000).

Further reason which is likely to contribute in enhancing learners' speaking foreign language anxiety in the context of universities of Kurdistan is traditional learning style. In other words, students may study English formally which mainly focuses on improving accuracy rather than fluency. This may result in students being less willing to speak English in the class (Rao, 2002). Therefore, it is advisable for teachers to use useful materials and variety of speaking activities which are related to the learners' context in order to motivate students to talk freely in the class. Moreover, there may be inconsistency between students' assessment and aim of the class in which students are assessed based on their accuracy rather than fluency in spoken classes. This may demotivate students from willingly using English in the class (İnceçay & İnceçay, 2009). Thus, the Kurdish educational authorities should amend the program of education in the context of Kurdish universities and implement new approaches of language teaching to successfully meet the learners' needs and aims.

Rational of the Study

As already mentioned, the topic of foreign language anxiety has been widely investigated and researched in the field of language learning and pedagogy. However, there have been very few studies conducted in Kurdistan, specifically about learning and teaching strategies to decrease it. Consequently, this study should be seen as a necessary step to fill this gap and, perhaps, contribute to the development of the current English teaching policy at the universities of Kurdistan.

In the context of Kurdish universities, the problem of foreign language speaking anxiety considerably exists among students, even those who have a good level of English proficiency. This can negatively affect on students' learning English, specifically speaking. Therefore, it is necessary to undertake a research on this phenomenon in order to identify the actual sources of speaking anxiety among Kurdish students at universities and also propose possible solutions to decrease it.

Additionally, understanding students' needs and context can enable instructors to be in a better position to know how successfully use appropriate approach to teach students and achieve positive learning outcomes (Richards & Rodgers, 2014).

In order to carry out this analysis, this study aims to answer the following research questions;

1- What are the Factors that contribute to speaking foreign language anxiety in Kurdish universities students?

2- What are the learning strategies that would help decrease speaking anxiety?

3- What are the teaching strategies that would help decrease speaking anxiety?

Research Methodology

The investigation of this study used a qualitative approach because it dealt with a small scale study and looked at the students' perceptions and interpretations about the sources of speaking anxiety in EFL classes. The use of this approach was useful and practical in this study because it allowed the researcher to have an in-depth analysis of the data (Kumar, 2011, p.57). However, this does not mean that the data was manipulated through personal interpretation.

In this study, moreover, survey was used as a research strategy since it could produce data during a certain time about a particular phenomenon and provide more in-depth understanding to the research area (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). That is to say, survey was an effective strategy in undertaking this research to closely examine and diagnose this learning real world issue in order to provide better understanding and bring about feasible improvements in the area (Gray, 2009).

Questionnaire

In this study, questionnaire was used a research instrument for gathering data. This was basically because questionnaires can 'supply standardised answers' (Denscombe, 2007, p.169). This means that all participants were provided with the same questions in the same way, in which the collected data was less likely to be influenced by interpersonal factors (Punch, 2005). This method was, likewise, considered economic since it could gather a large amount of information for a relatively low cost in terms of time and money.

The questionnaires consisted of two parts; the first part aimed to gather information about participants' personal information including, age, gender, and their stage or class level. In the second part, 30 questions were employed in the nature of 'rating scales' or five-point-Likert Scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Furthermore, diverse questions have been used to best reflect the students' beliefs and elicit the required data as honestly as possible (Kumar, 2011).

Perhaps, most importantly, all the questions were constructed in a comprehensive language and they were free of loaded words in order to give the same meaning for the participants as they have for the researcher (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011).

Semi-structured Interviews

Another instrument which was used for the purpose of data collection in this study was semi-structured interview. This was because interview is an appropriate means of gathering information and it can deeply explore the participants' perceptions about the subject which is being researched (Dilley, 2000).

In addition to this, interview was considered as a useful method for collecting data since it could help to elicit "rich data on peoples' views, attitudes, and the meanings that underpin their lives and behaviours" (Gray, 2009, p.370). In other words, this method was helpful when recording the facial expressions and to understand what participants really meant beyond their actual words which could not be achieved through questionnaires alone.

As a result, using this research instrument in this study was practical since it produced a fairly good amount of information to successfully answer all the research questions. The interviews were formulated with predetermined questions. However, additional questions were asked based on the interviewees' responses in order to explore their ideas and attitudes in a more detailed way regarding the sources of speaking anxiety in EFL classes, teaching and learning strategies to overcome this phenomenon. All the interviews were held in the English language, then were recorded and transcribed for the purpose of data analysis.

Context and Participants

This study was undertaken at a Kurdish university named Soran, in Faculty of Arts and English Department where the medium of instruction is English. The participants were 30 second and third year students and they were selected purposively. They willingly took part in this study. The students were deliberately selected because they were suitable and interested for the purpose of this study. According to Denscombe (1998, p.15), purposive sampling ''is applied to those situations where the researcher already knows something about the specific people or events and deliberately selects particular ones because they are seen as instances that are likely to produce the most valuable data''. This means that, in this study, purposive sampling was feasible to access the

rich information within a particular context and in the limited time, which could not be achieved through other sampling designs (Guarte & Barrios, 2006).

The group consists of male and female students ranging between 18 to 23 years old, with pre- intermediate and intermediate levels of English. Studying English for them is a compulsory subject and they have been accepted in English department based on their scores in the high school. However, most of them have a good motivation for learning English. This is mainly because those students who can have a good level of English proficiency are considered better students, and even they are more likely to get good jobs outside the class or when they graduate from university.

Research Analysis Method

In this research, a thematic approach is used for the purpose of data analysis. Braun & Clarke (2006, p.79) defined a thematic approach as "a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data… it is a relatively straightforward form of qualitative analysis". Using this method is practical since this study is a qualitative research and it often depends on the interpretation of collected data. Another reason behind selecting this method is that this research is a small scale study which only includes 30 participants. In the process of data analysis also codes are used to identify the themes.

Procedures

This study was administrated during the school or university time of the academic year 2016. The questions of interviews and questionnaires were first piloted to ensure that they were comprehensive and also to enhance the validity of the research methods. After the consent forms were gained from the participants, the process of data collection started and participants were provided with clear instructions for how answering the questions. They had also a clear idea of how the collected data would be used in this study and they were given the right to withdraw their data at any time without giving any explanation.

The participants were provided with the good amount of time to fill the questionnaires and in the time which best suits to them. Additionally, the anonymity of participants and confidentiality have been ensured as their actual names and personal information did not appear anywhere in the study which could promote the validity of the research (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2008). After conducting questionnaires, five participants were invited to take part in the interviews in order to investigate the topic more deeply and achieve useful information to successfully meet the research questions. The interviews were hold in the comfortable environment and the participants were informed about recording the interviews. In this study, usable information has been collected to represent the real picture of the research topic.

Discussion and Findings

The findings of this study will be discussed and presented according to the research questions. The findings resulting from both methods questionnaire and semi-structured interview will be also combined and presented together to present a clear picture of data and discover new themes in the study. What is more, in order to precisely and concisely present the results, and also for the sake of avoiding repetition, only the significant themes of the collected data in the questionnaires will be presented in a table. Another point which is worthy to be mentioned is that Likert scale questions were used in this study and the options for the five possible answers were strongly agree, agree, neither, disagree, strongly disagree. Therefore, to reduce complication and repetition in the data analysis, the responses "strongly agree" and "agree" were combined to at least one category of "agree". The responses of "disagree" and "strongly disagree" were also combined to one type of "disagree".

Table 1: This table represents the significant statements which are related to the research questions.

Items & Questions	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Strongly disagree
3- I feel very self-conscious when the class environment is restrict and formal	14	12	3	1	0
7- I am afraid that my English teacher will correct every mistake I make	12	14	0	3	1
11. I worry about the consequences of failing my English class	11	15	2	2	0
13. I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak English	15	12	2	1	0
15. I get upset whenever I encounter unknown grammar when speaking English	12	14	3	1	0
17. I am satisfied with the level of speaking ability in English that I have achieved so far	1	4	0	16	9
22. The more I talk in the class, the more confident I get	9	15	3	2	1
25. I think learning English in a group is more fun than learning on my own	10	17	0	2	1
26. I prefer to say what I want in English without worrying about the small details of grammar	8	16	2	4	0
27. I don't like trying to express complicated ideas in English in class	11	15	0	3	1
28 I like to wait until I know exactly how to use an English word before using it	10	17	1	2	0
29. I feel more tense and nervous when speaking in front of the class without preparation.	8	16	3	2	1

The sources of Speaking Anxiety in EFL Classes (Research Question 1)

According to the collected data from both instruments semi-structured interviews and questionnaires, nearly all of the participants have suffered from anxiety while speaking English. However, the degree of anxiety was different from a learner to another. When students were asked about their perceptions of sources speaking anxiety, they stated many interrelated reasons that lead students to feel anxious in speaking English classes. Having said this, twenty six participants reported that they feel anxious in speaking and worry about the consequences of failing their English class (item 11). This is basically because of being afraid about the other students' negative evaluation and also being ridiculed by them (item 13). This is also verified with the results of interview as one of the participants stated "when we speak, we feel fear because of other students' negative evaluation, they may think we have lack of language ability in English" (Interviewee A).

Indeed, another reason that was strongly highlighted by the participants in this study is being worry about making language mistakes (items 15 & 28). This could be because of they are not satisfied with the level of speaking proficiency that they have achieved so far (item 17). From this we can infer that, the students who have low linguistic ability are more likely to feel reluctant in speaking and withdraw from class participation. In addition to this, they want to monitor their grammatical errors and to make themselves aware that they are using the language accurately (Hedge, 2000).

This example is also explained by Krashen's affective filter hypothesis in which the learners who have a high level of affective filter are conscious of making mistakes in speaking, they tend to be anxious and not very successful in the process of communication (Krashen, 1982, P.30). Therefore, they are less likely to volunteer the answers and actively take part in the class discussion (Ellis, 2008).

"When I speak, it is so hard for me to continue because I see students in front of me, I feel all of them focus on me........... I feel fear of making mistakes when I talk in English because I want to speak perfectly and I cannot do that. Therefore, I try to get way from speaking" (Interviewee C)

Another speaking anxiety-provoking source was students' lack of preparation in advance (item 29). This may result in students' low self-esteem and making them less talk in the classroom. The above results are consistent with with the study which was conducted by Mak (2011) in China where similar conditions to Kurdistan exist,

stating that students' negative evaluation, lack of self- confidence, making language mistakes and lack of preparation in advance are the main sources of speaking anxiety in English classes.

Learning Strategies to Decrease Speaking Anxiety (Research Question 2)

When the participant were asked about the learning strategies to overcome speaking anxiety, they findings revealed that students' preparation and practice in advance can be seen as a good strategy to decrease their speaking anxiety (item 29). This may give them more confidence and produce a greater amount of language in the class. Interviewee B, as an example, stated "we need to prepare so well and collect information about the topic before going to the class in order to be able to feel confident and talk very well and control our anxiety".

This is also accordance with a study by (Kuchuk, 2016) in Turkey, stating that it is important for the learners to be well-prepared to speak in the target language since they may have insufficient language proficiency level and they may need to think what to say first before speaking up in order to feel safe and avoid making language mistakes.

However, making language errors should be considered as a natural part of the process of learning. Taking item 26 as an example, it would be helpful for learners to communicate without being worry about small details of grammar. The interview information also asserted that learners should not be worry about making language errors in speaking in order to be able communicate meaningfully and fluently (interviewees D& E). Based on the data in this study, similarly, it has been suggested that learners should focus on the content of message and express their ideas in a simplest way to decrease their speaking anxiety and use English to a great extent (item 27). This infers that the more students talk in the class, the more confident they have in the class (item 22).

Teaching Strategies to Decrease Speaking Anxiety (Research Question 3)

All the participants of this study clearly revealed their interest in using group working to reduce speaking foreign language anxiety in the context of universities in Kurdistan (item 25). Having stated this, using group working seems to be a good strategy to boost students' confidence and create a learning classroom community which allows students to focus on communication, rather than accuracy. In the group discussion, consequently, students can feel more secure to use English at a very personal level with their peers, and also be responsible for their own learning (Richards & Rodgers, 2014).

This is supported by other studies such as (Tsiplakides & Keramida, 2009, p. 41) in Greece, stating that learners in group activities are less concerned with language errors and the consequences of Failing English class, it can, therefore, reduce the effect of perceptions of low ability in the target language, as learners divide the anxiety level down to the group and bear it as a whole rather than individually.

From the collected data in this study, as already discussed in literature review, the majority of participants asserted that there are some teacher related speaking anxiety sources (item 3). In other words, lack of teacher's support, personal attention and unsympathetic personality can cause students to have a high level of anxiety during speaking classes. Pedagogically, thus, it is advisable for teachers to play the role of facilitator in the classrooms and create supportive learning environment in order to encourage students' participation in the speaking activities and and have a greater degree of autonomy (Knight, 2001, p.158).

During fluency based activities, additionally, teachers should tolerate students' language errors until they have completed the communicative activities and then implicitly correct them (item 7), in order for students to use a greater amount of language in the classroom (Richards, 2006). This is consistent with the study by (Hammad & Abu Ghali, 2015, p. 61) in Palestine. The study claimed that EFL instructors should not interrupt students while speaking and they should convince learners that making language errors in speaking is necessary for acquiring a language. This suggests that teachers should have a clear knowledge about the new approaches of teaching language and also consider students' psychological needs in order to decrease their foreign language speaking anxiety and establish the likely condition of promoting learning outcomes (Hedge, 2000, p. 62; Yousofi & Ashtarian, 2015, p. 123).

Conclusion

Throughout this study, it has become clear that the issue of speaking foreign language anxiety considerably exists among Kurdish learners, which may negatively affect on them to achieve a good level of English proficiency. This paper has investigated the key sources contributing to speaking anxiety among Kurdish university EFL learners.

In relation to this, the findings indicated that the main reasons make students anxious are students negative evaluation, making language mistakes, lack of linguistic ability, lack of preparation in advance and lack of

teacher's support and personal attention. The results of this study can be also seen as a great contribution to the state of knowledge about the useful strategies to overcome speaking anxiety, especially in non English contexts.

Having said this, learners should attempt to be well prepared before coming to the class and they should not focus on their accuracy or being worry about making language mistakes while speaking in order to boost their confidence and fluency. In addition, teachers should not practice too much error correction unless the focus of the class is on accuracy. This is due to the fact that too much error correction may discourage learners from actively participating in speaking activities (Davies & Pearse, 2000). Using group work strategy, likewise, can be very practical to reduce students speaking anxiety and also create a supportive learning environment.

Acknowledgment

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