Analyzing the Factors Influencing English Language Speaking Anxiety of Sri Lankan Primary Students in Oman

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ABSTRACT

Background: This study was carried out to investigate the factors of speaking anxiety among Sri Lankan primary students who learn English as second language learners in Oman and aimed to shed light on the possible solutions to overcome the English-speaking anxiety. **Methods**: This study is done using a mixed method. Forty-six Sri Lankan students participated in a quantitative study, in which the sampling method was convenient sampling, and two teachers who teach Sri Lankan students participated in a qualitative study, in which the sampling method was purposeful sampling. The instruments of this study are a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. **Results**: The findings of quantitative research revealed that the major source of speaking anxiety in English learners in Sri Lanka is the fear of negative evaluation. **Conclusion**: The findings of qualitative research revealed that the effective solutions for overcoming the speaking anxiety of English learners in Sri Lanka living in Oman are a relaxed and friendly classroom environment, teachers using various techniques and approaches to boost confidence, and teachers encouraging the students to speak up.

Keywords: English; Negative Evaluation; Second Language; Speaking Anxiety

Background

Globalization has made people all around the world communicate with each other. The English language has been considered a lingua franca to facilitate communication among people all over the world. Because of the importance given to the English language, learning English has been vital in schools and colleges. But the basics of the English language are being taught to the students in the primary grades, and gradually the input is increased as the students go higher in grades.

Learning a foreign language is not at all easy when compared to learning a native language. Sadighi & Dastpak (2017) stated that there are so many challenges to be faced in foreign language classrooms. Some of them are tension, worries about tasks such as the production of speech, comprehending listening to

tasks, writing tasks, etc. According to Cagatay (2015), anxiety is one of the most dominant problems in a foreign language class, especially when speaking. Anxiety is defined as the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with foreign language contexts, including speaking, listening, and learning'' (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994, p. 284). Meanwhile, Rajitha & Alamelu (2020) defined second/foreign language anxiety as the uncomfortable feeling, nervousness, or some kind of fear caused by the individual's perception of learning or using a second or foreign language.

When we browse through the literature, we can identify two kinds of language anxieties. The first can be called 'situational anxiety, which is affected by situations (MacIntyre, 1995). It is the kind of language anxiety that can occur in any situation, like social and functional conditions in daily life. For example, this type of anxiety may occur when interviewing an important or influential person, during job interviews, participating in a show, etc. An individual can feel this anxiety in any situation in his or her life, not only during the learning process. In contrast, the second type of anxiety, called 'specific anxiety,' is limited to language learning situations (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). The anxiety that occurs in the second or foreign language classroom is known as ''specific anxiety (Rajitha & Alamelu, 2020). In other words, this type of anxiety is related to the problems and difficulties students face in the language learning process. The problems in a language classroom can be identified as the inability to understand the teacher's instructions, the inability to understand what a text means, the inability to produce language orally or in writing tasks, etc. When students face these problems in the language learning process, anxiety is inevitable.

It is obvious that FLA is more intensely displayed in situations where students attempt to produce spoken language (Woodrow, 2006). Furthermore, Worde (2003) found that anxiety is a unique factor in affecting a language learner's oral production. He further states that an anxious foreign language learner considers speaking to be the most terrifying skill. When those kinds of students happen to produce oral language in front of their class, they feel stressed. However, when the students hesitate to speak in the target language, the teachers find it difficult to classify them as they lack motivation to speak the target language or they feel anxious. When foreign language learners feel anxious, symptoms like sweating, worry, palpitations, difficulties in learning the language, and forgetfulness may arise in such students (Yalcin & Incecay, 2014).

Foreign language speaking anxiety is an important issue that teachers and students should be aware of because it is an unwelcome experience and it affects the learning process negatively (Jin, Dewaele, & MacIntyre, 2021) (Kelsen, 2019). Anxiety may make the students fearful, clumsy, and physically ill (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). The learners tend to memorize the speech content, totally avoid communication in the target language, avoid eye contact with teachers, choose the back of the class to hide themselves from teachers, etc. are some of the common behavioral reactions of students who have speaking anxiety in a foreign language classroom (Jin, Dewaele, & MacIntyre, 2021). Foreign language anxiety affects the learning process in many ways (Pérez Castillejo, 2019). It affects the student-teacher relationship because students lack the cognitive resources needed for information processing by paying attention to thoughts that are irrelevant to tasks (Castillejo, 2019). When foreign language anxiety prevails for the long term, it can affect the language learning process negatively (Jin, Dewaele, & MacIntyre, 2021).

Problem Statement
Due to speaking anxiety, English learners as a second language do not prefer speaking sessions because negative emotions like anxiety trigger avoidance behavior, which in turn stimulates the person to reduce their willingness to communicate (Zuniga & Simard, 2022). Students who feel anxious are less likely to answer the teacher's question and to participate in speaking tasks. They are afraid to talk in front of their

class; they fear making mistakes while they talk (Damayanti & Listyani, 2020). In addition to this, Sari (2017) states that students will feel threatened, uncomfortable, and unsafe speaking in front of their peers.

Furthermore, Damayanti & Listyani (2020) stated that even if the students have the ideas and required answers in their minds, they find it difficult to express them orally. This happens mostly due to being nervous, being confused about how to express themselves because they have a limited vocabulary, and being shy about opening up in front of others.

Speaking anxiety can range from being slightly nervous to being very fearful. The most common symptoms of speaking anxiety are fear, forgetfulness, handshaking, shivering, the feeling of butterflies in the stomach, sweating, dry mouth and throat, palpitation, and a squeaky voice (Rajitha & Alamelu, 2020). These symptoms affect the students' hearts and brains, which eventually make it difficult for them to concentrate and make them more anxious all the time. (Damayanti & Listyani, 2020). They further argue that students who have anxiety during the learning process get unsatisfactory grades. Additionally, Christie and Listyani (2018) reveal that the students with a lack of confidence and extreme anxiety could not reach their goal of improving their speaking skills. Similarly, Mobarak (2020) argues that anxiety has been identified as the alarming factor that hinders learners' performance in classrooms.

Despite the fact that the speaking anxiety plays a significant role in hindering the speaking skills of students who learn English as their second language, ESL teachers fail to identify students suffering from speaking anxiety. Even worse, there are chances in which teachers misconstrue the student's speaking anxiety as an inability to speak (Ansari, 2015).

English is not being spoken socially in Sri Lanka. Therefore, English learners in Sri Lanka aren't very exposed to spoken English, which in turn makes the students anxious when producing the language orally. Meanwhile, there are very few past studies conducted to investigate the factors causing English-language speaking anxiety in Sri Lanka, which doesn't help teachers or students be aware of speaking anxiety. Therefore, when the students have difficulties producing the English language orally, teachers cannot decide whether they lack the ability to speak or whether their speaking anxiety prohibits them from speaking.

Therefore, the aim of this research is to find out the causes of speaking anxiety among Sri Lankan students who learn English as a second language in Oman. Towards the end, this research attempts to find some teachers' opinions on how to overcome the second language speaking anxiety of those students and make sure they learn the language efficiently. The significance of this study extends beyond its immediate context to the field of Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL). Understanding and addressing language anxiety in the TESL field is of paramount importance. By exploring the factors influencing English-language anxiety among Sri Lankan students, this study contributes to the existing body of knowledge in TESL. It sheds light on the specific challenges faced by English language learners and provides insights into potential solutions.

Research Questions
This research focuses on two main questions. They are,
1. What are the main causes of second language speaking anxiety among Sri Lankan primary students in Oman?
2. What are teachers' opinions on how to overcome second language speaking anxiety among Sri Lankan primary students?

Literature Review

Anxiety in educational settings, particularly in language learning, can severely impact students' performance. Horwitz *et al.*, (1987) described language learning anxiety as stemming from self-perceptions, beliefs, and behaviors unique to classroom language learning. They identified three key components: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation.

Communication apprehension involves fear of speaking and being evaluated, often due to limited language skills. It includes stage fright and discomfort in group discussions. Matsuda & Gobel (2004) suggested that group work could alleviate this anxiety. Test anxiety arises from fear of failure and the pressure to perform, especially during oral exams, causing students to view all classroom activities as tests.

Fear of negative evaluation involves anxiety about being judged for language errors during oral activities. Recent research has identified additional factors influencing speaking anxiety, including linguistic, psychological, physiological, and cultural elements. Major causes include fear of being mocked, lack of confidence, and self-consciousness. Studies have found that female students generally feel more anxious about speaking, and self-comparison increases competitive behaviors. Addressing these issues requires supportive classroom environments, varied teaching strategies, and positive teacher-student interactions.
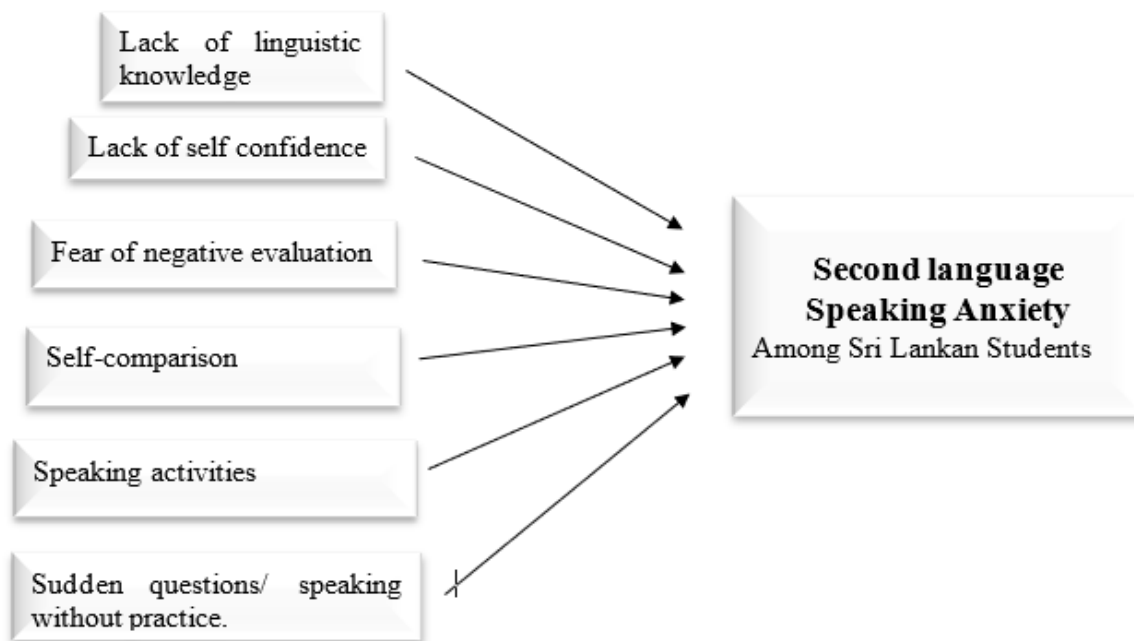
Methods

This research is done using a mixed method, which is comprised of both quantitative and qualitative methods. The first question of this research is done using the quantitative method because it is the best way to answer the first research question. The benefits of the quantitative research method are that it can be done using larger samples, is easy to analyze, and the results are objective and accurate.

The second question of this research is done using the qualitative method because it is the best way to answer the second question. The benefits of the qualitative research method are that it allows deeper understanding of experiences and context, helps to get broad answers and different perceptions, and helps to understand human experience.

Research Tool
The questionnaire that is used for this study is a revised version of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) by Horwitz *et al*., (1986). The questionnaire consists of six variables, where each variable consists of one question. In each question, the students selected the options that best matched their views. The questions were answered on a five-point Likert scale from ''strongly agree'' to ''strongly disagree''. The questionnaire was distributed among the students, and each question was explained to make sure the students chose the best answer (mother tongue was used when needed). The second research question is answered by the qualitative method using a semi-structured interview. The interview is done with two teachers who teach English as a second language for Sri Lankan students in Oman.

Data Collection
The first research question is answered by quantitative research using a questionnaire as the research tool. The samples are Sri Lankan students who study English as a second language in a private school in Oman. The school consists of around two thousand students from different nationalities. Of those students, forty-six Sri Lankan students were chosen for this study; among them, thirty-eight students responded. The second research question is addressed through qualitative research using semi-structured interviews with two ESL teachers. Convenient sampling was used for quantitative research with Sri Lankan students in Oman, while purposeful sampling was employed for qualitative research, selecting participants based on their relevance and ability to provide insightful information.

Research Design
Finding out the causes of speaking anxiety and its solutions falls under the category of descriptive research as it attempts to obtain a better understanding of the contemporary problem. And this is primary research, where the required data were collected directly from the samples.

Data Analysis
Data Analysis for Quantitative Research
The technique used to evaluate the collected data from the questionnaire survey is Relatively Important Index (RII). The RII for each factor influencing foreign language-speaking anxiety was calculated using the following equation:

$$RII = \sum W / AN$$

Where,
W: Weighting to each factor by the respondent
A: The highest weighting
N: Total number in the responses

This equation was used to find the importance level of each factor. Based on this level of importance, all factors were ranked. A 1-5 scale was used to identify the level of importance, where 5 represents "strongly agree," 4 represents "agree," 3 stands for "neither agree nor disagree," 2 stands for "disagree" and 1 stands for "strongly disagree."
RII scores of not less than 0.8 were identified as the most significant factors in influencing foreign language-speaking anxiety. Microsoft Excel software was used to calculate the RII value in this analysis.

Data Analysis for Qualitative Research
The analysis used in this qualitative research is content analysis because the collected data is an interview with teachers. The researcher applied content analysis to analyze the qualitative data.

Results and Discussion

Results from the Quantitative Data Analysis

There are forty-six students, and each of them answered the questions very attentively. The class teacher instructed the guidelines to the students at the beginning; afterwards, the researcher explained each question using English and the mother tongue to assist the students in choosing the best answer that matched their views. Among forty-six students, only thirty-eight were considered valid responses. This is graphically illustrated below in Figure 1.
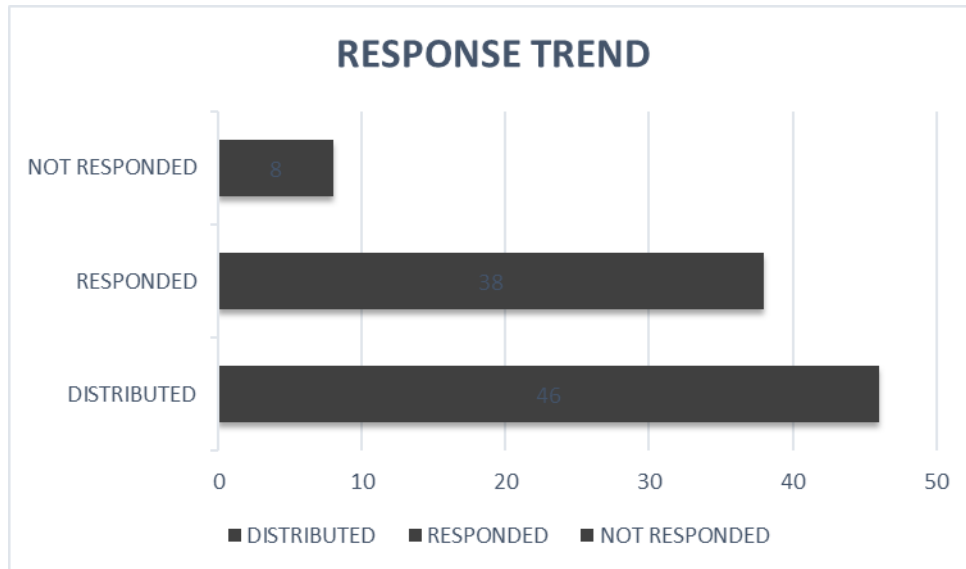

Figure 1: Respond Trend

According to the analysis, there is only one factor beyond RII = 0.8. That is fear of negative evaluation (RII = 8053). Therefore, it is obvious that students fear speaking a second language in front of others. Apart from this, there are two factors influencing foreign language-speaking anxiety at a moderate level. They are self-comparison (RII = 0.7158) and sudden questions or speaking without practice (0.6211). The remaining three factors, which are lack of self-confidence, speaking activities, and lack of linguistic knowledge, influence foreign language speaking anxiety at a low level (RII<0.6). This is graphically illustrated below in Figure 2.
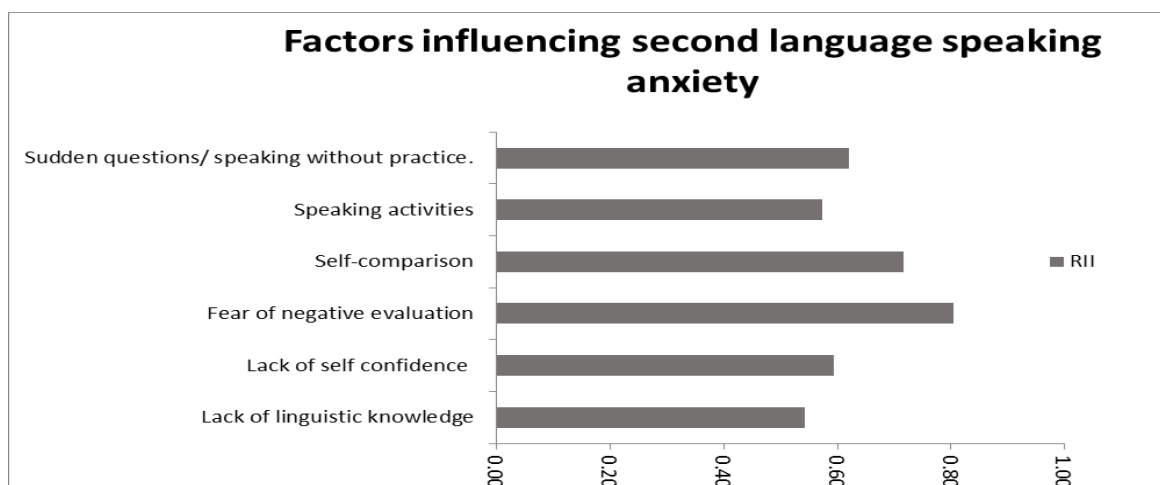

Figure 2: Factors Influencing Second Language Speaking Anxiety

Above all the factors, foreign language-speaking anxiety is highly influenced by fear of negative evaluation. The students feared speaking in front of others because they feared being evaluated and judged negatively. Although they showed great enthusiasm to learn English and took efforts to learn and write the language, they completed their written activities on time, but when it was time to answer teachers' questions or during speaking activities, many students just replied with one-word answers or remained silent.

This result aligns with many recent past research studies. Rajitha & Alamelu (2020) found out that peer factors influence speaking anxiety in a foreign language classroom. The students were afraid to talk in front of their peers in order to save them from making mistakes and being judged negatively. For most of the students, it's a matter of 'emotional conflict' or 'self-respect'. They chose to remain silent or to give one-word answers rather than to make mistakes while speaking and to be mocked by their peers. According to Mobarak (2020), the results highlighted that the dominant factors of English-speaking anxiety are fear of being mocked by classmates and comparison to their classmates.

Damayanti & Listyani (2020) state that students' anxiety comes from two causes. It may come from themselves or from their environment, like fellow students or teachers. Based on their findings, the reasons for the students being quiet in the class were: they underestimated their English speaking ability, lacked preparation, were afraid of making mistakes, and worried about being ashamed of their friends.

According to the results obtained in this study, it is obvious that students feel anxious to speak English as a second language, especially in front of their peers. In a student's life, peers play an important role. According to Kang (2006), the term 'peers' refers to a small group of friends who have regular interactions and have close relationships with each other. Classmates come under peers too. In a classroom, whatever students do, the peers will be watching them, and each student will take great pain to prove himself or herself in front of the peers. Meanwhile, they will be very careful to avoid any mistakes to protect themselves from any ill judgment by their peers.

This fear eventually will turn into anxiety and will turn the student into a more reserved person, avoiding the attention of others, thinking he or she is safeguarding his or her 'good name', instead of making mistakes and ruining his or her reputation among peers. When it comes to English language classes, because of second language speaking anxiety, the students refrain from speaking English in front of their peers to safeguard their image. They avoid speaking, fearing making mistakes and falling into an embarrassing situation, and give one-word answers or remain silent.

Nine questions were designed to obtain teachers' opinions on overcoming the speaking anxiety of English learners in Sri Lanka. For this purpose, a semi-structured interview was conducted with two teachers who teach English to Sri Lankan students. Both the teachers gave their opinion on how to overcome the speaking anxiety of English learners in Sri Lanka. Both of them highlighted the fact that the classroom should be a relaxed environment to help the anxious students, use different kinds of activities and approaches to encourage the students to speak, and the teacher should try to boost the students' confidence using different techniques.

These opinions align with the solutions from the past studies. According to Mobarak (2020), he argues that the main solution for overcoming speaking anxiety will be making the classroom relaxing and turning it into a friendly and comfortable environment for the students. Additionally, Zulfikar (2022) states that teachers should be aware of the learners' anxiety towards learning and make sure to provide a low-stress, warm, and encouraging classroom environment. Rather than sticking to traditional approaches using only textbook contents, teachers should be able to use anxiety-relieving teaching techniques and approaches.

Moreover, speaking anxiety can be overcome by boosting students' self-confidence through teachers' encouragement (Sadighi & Dastpak, 2017).

Conclusion

The study highlights the prevalent issue of speaking anxiety in English classrooms and its implications for students and teachers. It emphasizes that recognizing and addressing speaking anxiety can significantly improve students' participation in language learning activities. Understanding the factors causing this anxiety and finding effective solutions can instill confidence in both teachers and students that the issue is manageable. One key takeaway is that students should be aware of anxiety triggers, such as fear of negative evaluation, which can impair their performance and grades. Accepting the existence of this anxiety and employing coping strategies is crucial. The study underscores the importance of fostering positive teacher-student interactions to make students feel that their mistakes are tolerated.

The study suggests three primary solutions to mitigate speaking anxiety: creating a relaxed classroom environment, employing diverse activities and approaches to encourage speaking, and using techniques to boost students' confidence. These findings are particularly relevant for teachers of Sri Lankan students, offering insights into the causes of speaking anxiety and practical solutions to address it. However, the study has limitations. It involved a small sample of forty-six primary school students, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, due to the students' young age, interviews were only conducted with two teachers, which might not fully capture the students' perspectives. The study was also conducted in an Omani context, which might differ from the Sri Lankan environment. The results might vary if conducted in Sri Lanka with students from different age groups and academic sectors.

The study recommends further research with a larger and more diverse group of English learners in Sri Lanka, including higher-grade students and more educators, to gain a comprehensive understanding of speaking anxiety and its solutions. This would provide a clearer view of the issue in the Sri Lankan context and help develop more targeted strategies to alleviate speaking anxiety in English classrooms. In conclusion, the study reveals that fear of negative evaluation, self-comparison, and lack of practice are primary factors contributing to speaking anxiety. It suggests that teachers and school administrations should create a supportive and relaxed classroom atmosphere, prioritize speaking tasks, and use innovative teaching strategies to help students overcome their anxiety and speak confidently.

Declarations

Ethics Approval & Consent to Participate: Not applicable.

Conflict of Interests: Not applicable.

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