English Language Anxiety in Verbal Communication among Secondary School Students in Yewa South Local Government Area, Ogun State

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Abstract

The study investigated English language anxiety in students' verbal communication skills among 500 public senior secondary schools in Yewa South Local Government Area, Ogun State. The survey research design was adopted. English Language Anxiety in Verbal Communication Questionnaire(r=0.97) and Factors Contributing to English Language Anxiety Questionnaire(r=0.89) were the instrumenst used for data collection. The results revealed a low English Language anxiety (mean of 2.34). The study concluded that opportunity to speak English in public should be given to students to reduce their English language anxiety.

Key words: Verbal communication, English language, Anxiety, Speech apprehension.

Introduction

Effective verbal communication is critical for education, social interaction, and professional success. It helps individuals express ideas, emotions, and knowledge while participating in discussions, presentations, and group activities. English, as the global lingua franca, is essential for academic and professional opportunities, intercultural communication, and accessing global resources (Selivanova, Gromova & Mashkin, 2018). In Nigeria, English serves as the primary medium of instruction from upper primary school to tertiary levels and acts as a unifying language among diverse ethnic groups (Oluga & Babalola, 2012). Despite its significance, many Nigerian learners struggle with spoken English due to linguistic interference from their first language (L1), limited practice, and anxiety, leading to low communicative competence (Awe & Ewata, 2020).

Language anxiety, defined as situation-specific fear or stress in second language (L2) contexts, stems from apprehensions about making mistakes, being judged, or feeling inadequate (Horwitz, 1986). It manifests in three forms: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation (Yasser, Julia & Luke, 2019). These anxieties significantly affect learners' academic performance, participation, and social interactions, often causing psychological barriers like excessive self-evaluation, worry about failure, and impaired cognitive performance (Wong, 2009; Horwitz, 2010).

Research highlights the reciprocal relationship between language anxiety and proficiency; high anxiety levels hinder students' ability to effectively express themselves verbally. For secondary school students, this anxiety often results in limited participation in class, poor performance in oral communication tasks, and a reluctance to engage in group activities, all of which are crucial for their academic and social development (Kralova, 2017).

Since the 1980s, researchers have recognized the importance of affective factors—such as anxiety, motivation, and self-efficacy—in language acquisition. Scholars like Stevick (1980) and Krashen (1982) argue that emotional states, relationships, and social interactions are as significant as linguistic techniques in determining success. Krashen's affective filter hypothesis posits that anxiety acts as an internal barrier that disrupts language acquisition. Similarly, Stern (1983) and Oxford (1994) emphasize that learners are not just cognitive beings but whole individuals whose social and emotional needs must be addressed.

In Nigeria, where English functions as a second language, fossilized errors from L1 and inadequate exposure to English exacerbate students' challenges. These issues are compounded during the critical senior secondary school (SSS) phase, where effective communication skills are essential for preparing students for higher education and careers (Awe & Ewata, 2020).

Speaking is widely regarded as the most challenging and important skill for ESL and EFL learners (Ur, 2002). Effective verbal communication requires fluency, pronunciation, appropriate vocabulary, and confidence, yet many students struggle due to nervousness, fear of mistakes, and limited practice opportunities (Alam & Ashrafuzzaman, 2018). According to Richards and Renandya (2002), most learners aim to develop fluency, but the psychological barriers caused by language anxiety often impede progress. Speaking is vital for building interpersonal relationships, negotiating, problem-solving, and engaging in meaningful social interactions (Kayi, 2006).

Despite receiving instruction in English throughout their education, many Nigerian students fail to attain fluency, particularly in spoken English. This challenge is further complicated by fossilized L1 errors that affect listening, speaking, reading, and writing abilities. As a result, students often

experience second language anxiety, a psychological factor that became a focus of research in the 1980s when educators began addressing learners' emotional needs (Oribhabor & Ewata, 2019).

Teachers play a pivotal role in addressing language anxiety and fostering students' confidence. Effective strategies include creating supportive learning environments, encouraging collaborative and interactive classroom activities, and emphasizing motivation and emotional well-being alongside linguistic skills (Boonkit, 2010). Teachers must also master verbal and nonverbal communication skills to model effective communication for their students (Abdikarimova et al., 2021).

The senior secondary school stage is a critical period for Nigerian students, requiring robust communication skills to prepare for higher education and future careers. However, language anxiety, compounded by L1 interference and inadequate practice, remains a significant barrier to achieving fluency. Recognizing and addressing the psychological, social, and linguistic dimensions of language learning can enhance verbal communication skills and foster success. Through effective teaching strategies and supportive classroom environments, educators can mitigate anxiety, boost confidence, and help students achieve communicative competence in English.

Statement of the Problem

Verbal communication is required or day to day human activities, including academic activities in schools by the students. Reports, however, have shown that many public senior secondary students in Yewa Local Government Area, Ogun State are poor in verbal communication owing to English language anxiety. While previous studies have focused on interventions, they have largely overlooked students' English language anxiety. This study, therefore, investigated English language anxiety in verbal communication among senior secondary school students in Yewa South, Ogun State.

Objectives

This study set out to achieve the following specific objectives:

1. To examine the level of students' English language anxiety
2. To investigate factors responsible for English language anxiety among students

Research Questions

This study answered the following research questions:

1. What is the level of students' English language anxiety?
2. What are the factors affecting students' verbal communication?

Methodology

The study adopted the descriptive survey research design to investigate Senior Secondary Two (SS2) students in Yewa South Local Government, Ogun State. A two-stage sampling technique was used, selecting 10 schools randomly and then 50 students from each school, resulting in a sample of 500 participants. Two instruments were utilized: the English Language Anxiety Questionnaire(r=0.97) and Factors Contributing to English Language Anxiety Questionnaire(r=0.89). Data analysis involved descriptive statistics and content analysis.

Results

Research Question 1: What is the level of students' English language anxiety?

Table 1: The Level of Students' English Language Anxiety

	ITEMS	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Mean	Std.
1	Signs of Nervousness or Discomfort during English Communication	27 (5.4%)	37 (7.4%)	133 (26.6%)	242 (48.4%)	61 (12.2%)	2.45	.98
2	Avoidance of Participating in English Communication Activities	22 (4.4%)	33 (6.6%)	57 (11.4%)	260 (52%)	128 (25.6%)	2.32	.79
3	Physical Symptoms (e.g., sweating, trembling) during Communication	14 (2.8%)	12 (2.4%)	156 (31.6%)	232 (46.4%)	84 (16.8%)	2.12	1.00
4	Frequent Self-Correction or Hesitation in English Communication	11 (2.2%)	29 (5.8%)	103 (20.6%)	271 (54.2%)	86 (17.2%)	2.28	.86
5	Limited Eye Contact during English Communication	18 (3.6%)	27 (5.4%)	172 (34.4%)	185 (37%)	98 (19.6%)	2.21	.87
6	Tendency to Withdraw or Stay Silent during English Communication	21 (4.2%)	46 (9.2%)	111 (22.2%)	159 (31.8%)	163 (32.6%)	2.37	.91
7	Expressing Anxiety or Fear about Speaking in English	14 (2.8%)	36 (7.2%)	250 (50%)	158 (31.6%)	42 (8.4%)	2.36	.97
8	Difficulty Initiating Conversations or Responding in English	9 (1.8%)	29 (5.8%)	158 (31.6%)	241 (48.2%)	63 (12.6%)	2.20	1.11
9	Overuse of Nonverbal Fillers (e.g., "um," "uh") during Communication	11 (2.2%)	37 (7.4%)	192 (38.4%)	225 (45%)	35 (7.0%)	2.65	.89
10	General Reluctance to Engage in English Communication	24 (4.8%)	28 (5.6%)	37 (7.4%)	164 (32.8%)	247 (49.4%)	2.44	2.08
		Weighted mean 2.34 and Threshold 2.50						

The analysis of students' English language anxiety revealed a weighted mean score of 2.34, which is below the threshold of 2.50, indicating that students exhibited low anxiety when communicating in English.

Research Question 2: What are the factors affecting students' verbal communication?

Table 2: Factors Affecting Students Verbal Communication

S/N	Items on behaviours, beliefs, feelings and perceptions	SA	A	D	SD	UD	Mean	Std.
1	I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in a language class.	24 (4.8%)	28 (5.6%)	37 (7.4%)	164 (32.8%)	247 (49.4%)	1.83	1.09
2	I worry about making mistakes in a language class.	27 (5.4%)	37 (7.4%)	133 (26.6%)	242 (48.4%)	61 (12.2%)	1.96	1.04
3	I tremble when I know that I'm going to be called on in language class.	2 (0.4%)	24 (4.8%)	181 (36.2%)	221 (44.2%)	72 (14.4%)	1.60	.49
4	It bothers me to take more English language class.	22 (4.4%)	33 (6.6%)	57 (11.4%)	260 (52%)	128 (25.6%)	1.70	.45
5	I keep thinking that the other students are better at language than I am.	22 (4.4%)	33 (6.6%)	57 (11.4%)	260 (52%)	128 (25.6%)	2.32	.79
6	I am usually not at ease during tests in my language class.	14 (2.8%)	12 (2.4%)	156 (31.6%)	232 (46.4%)	84 (16.8%)	2.12	1.00
7	I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in language class.	11 (2.2%)	29 (5.8%)	103 (20.6%)	271 (54.2%)	86 (17.2%)	2.28	.86
8	I worry about the consequences of failing English language class.	18 (3.6%)	27 (5.4%)	172 (34.4%)	185 (37%)	98 (19.6%)	2.21	.87
9	I get nervous when the language teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance.	21 (4.2%)	46 (9.2%)	111 (22.2%)	159 (31.8%)	163 (32.6%)	2.37	.91
10	In language class, I can get so nervous I forget things I know.	14 (2.8%)	36 (7.2%)	250 (50%)	158 (31.6%)	42 (8.4%)	2.36	.97
11	It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my language class.	9 (1.8%)	29 (5.8%)	158 (31.6%)	241 (48.2%)	63 (12.6%)	2.20	1.11
12	I get upset when I don't understand what the teacher is saying.	11 (2.2%)	37 (7.4%)	192 (38.4%)	225 (45%)	35 (7.0%)	2.65	.89
13	Even if I am well prepared in my language class, I feel anxious about it.	24 (4.8%)	28 (5.6%)	37 (7.4%)	164 (32.8%)	247 (49.4%)	2.44	2.08
14	I often feel like not going to my language class.	48 (9.6%)	56 (11.2%)	76 (15.2%)	180 (36%)	140 (28%)	2.38	1.26
15	I don't feel confident when I speak in English language class.	24 (4.8%)	28 (5.6%)	52 (10.4%)	215 (43%)	181 (36.2%)	1.99	1.06
16	I am afraid that my language teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make.	24 (4.8%)	28 (5.6%)	132 (26.4%)	52 (10.4%	264 (52.8%)	1.83	1.12
17	The more I study for a language test, the more confused I get.	24 (4.8%)	28 (5.6%)	37 (7.4%)	164 (32.8%)	247 (49.4%)	1.83	1.09
18	I feel pressured to prepare very well for language class.	27 (5.4%)	37 (7.4%)	133 (26.6%)	242 (48.4%)	61 (12.2%)	1.96	1.04
19	I always feel that the other students speak the language better than I do.	2 (0.4%)	24 (4.8%)	181 (36.2%)	221 (44.2%)	72 (14.4%)	1.60	.48
20	I feel very self-conscious about speaking English language in front of other students.	22 (4.4%)	33 (6.6%)	57 (11.4%)	260 (52%)	128 (25.6%)	1.70	.45
21	Language class moves so quickly that I worry about getting left behind.	27 (5.4%)	37 (7.4%)	133 (26.6%)	242 (48.4%)	61 (12.2%)	2.45	.98
22	When I'm on my way to language class, I don't feel very sure and relaxed.	22 (4.4%)	33 (6.6%)	57 (11.4%)	260 (52%)	128 (25.6%)	2.32	.79
23	I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak English language.	14 (2.8%)	12 (2.4%)	156 (31.6%)	232 (46.4%)	84 (16.8%)	2.12	1.00
25	I feel drained by the number of rules you have to learn to speak English language.	11 (2.2%)	29 (5.8%)	103 (20.6%)	271 (54.2%)	86 (17.2%)	2.28	.86
	Weighted mean 1.77 and Threshold 2.50							

Table 2. highlights factors contributing to students' anxiety in English language classes, using a 5- point Likert scale where scores above 2.50 indicate significant issues. The specific factors causing anxiety were fear of making mistakes, test anxiety, and feelings of unpreparedness, as well as peer comparisons and a lack of confidence in speaking English.

Discussion of Findings

The Level of Students' English language Anxiety

The study highlights key aspects of English language anxiety among respondents, noting signs of nervousness, avoidance of communication activities, occasional physical symptoms, and hesitation or self-correction. Limited eye contact, withdrawal, fear of speaking, and difficulty initiating or responding in English were observed, with trends suggesting these behaviors may increase. Nonverbal filler use occurs sometimes, with a potential decrease noted. These findings emphasize the importance of addressing English language anxiety to improve students' confidence and communication skills. Prior research supports these findings, with studies by Fajobi and Ngwudike (2020), Adewale (2012), Ekanem (2014), and Okechukwu (2018) linking anxiety to negative impacts on speaking proficiency, participation, and overall communication competence. Strategies to reduce anxiety and enhance fluency, grammar, and participation are recommended to mitigate these challenges.

Factors affecting Students Verbal Communication

The analysis identifies significant challenges affecting students' verbal communication skills in language classes, with low confidence emerging as a common issue. Students' fear of making mistakes, being corrected, and forgetting information creates barriers to open expression and active participation. Anxiety and nervousness, particularly in unprepared speaking scenarios and test situations, further hinder verbal communication. Negative self-perceptions, fear of peer judgment, and experiences of embarrassment discourage students from engaging in verbal activities. Stress related to language tests also disrupts performance, compounding the problem. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that includes boosting confidence, fostering a supportive learning environment, and employing effective teaching strategies to alleviate anxiety. Studies by Adedoyin (2013), Ekanem (2014), and Egbokhare (2007) corroborate these findings, highlighting factors like large class sizes, limited speaking opportunities, and anxiety as key obstacles to spoken English proficiency.

Conclusion

The study stressed that anxiety is present in every human situation and that there is positive and negative anxiety. It also emphasized that, anxiety is a pronounced factor in the education sector in general especially in the aspect of verbal communication. Based on the findings, it was concluded that English language anxiety is one of the prominent factors that affect the quality of verbal communication among students.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations were made:

1. To foster a more confident learning environment, the study recommends that teachers create classrooms free from anxiety-provoking elements.
2. Provision should be made for English language laboratory for teaching in each of the secondary schools in Ogun State. This will improve the verbal communication of students in Ogun State.
3. Teachers should instill self-confidence in their students by avoiding derisive and sarcastic remarks about students' mistake in verbal communication.

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