



UNVEILING THE NEXUS BETWEEN ENGLISH-SPEAKING ANXIETY AND CLASSROOM ENGAGEMENT AMONG UNDERGRADUATES IN ENUGU STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

English anxiety is a significant difficulty to the effective classroom communication in such circumstances where English is not the native talent like in Nigeria. The article speaks about English speaking anxiety and communication in classroom among the undergraduates in Enugu State, Nigeria and employs primary data collection method using mixed methods approach. According to the surveys and the discussions on anxiety during focus groups with 450 students in three universities, the study identifies the impacts of anxiety on participation and interaction as well as the performance of students in the English-medium classrooms. The findings indicate that, speaking anxiety causes low levels of involvement and engagement in the verbal activity with gender, academic discipline and an experience previously having had with English as a moderating factor. The analysis is sealing the holes in the local researches because the author focuses on the Nigerian context where the English language is the primary academic tool even though there are language disparities. Individualized pedagogic practices and institutional support to eliminate anxiety and ensure inclusive learning environments are implied. This paper assists in the understanding of the socio-psychological processes when language is administered in the institutions of education at the higher levels and offers a vantage point pragmatically to the teachers, as well as in the policy makers.

Keywords: English-Speaking Anxiety, Classroom Engagement, Undergraduates, Nigeria, Language Barriers, Higher Education, Mixed-Methods Research.

Introduction & Literature Review

Establishing the Environment to Knowledge of the Language and Learning Problems.

Success in classroom regarding academics depends on communicating with students, and to most of the students in non-english speaking countries, the fear of speaking English is their hindrance to success. In Nigeria where English is the official language of instruction in higher learning, undergraduates tend to be tense whenever they are forced to use English language particularly when speaking orally. It is the linguistic insecurity anxiety, cultural pressure and fear of being mocked that might inhibit the interaction in the classroom and may corrode student participation in discussions, group work, and presentations. To study this problem, the state of Enugu, the educational hub of southeastern Nigeria, is an excellent example of the situation, as the area of academic discourse is linguistically varied; the scholarly language is predominantly English.

The problem of English speaking anxiety could not be considered as just some linguistic problem, it is also social-psychological one, which concerns the self-confidence and the motivation of students, their general attitude to studying. Even though studies about language anxiety have been carried out around the world, very minimal research has been carried about the case of Nigeria where majority of the students speak English as a second or third language. The cultural and educational process of the local people such as Enugu is often overlooked by the existing literature; students are forced to batten with the complex contact between the native language, colonial heritage and the modern academic needs. The proposed study will fill this gap because it will attempt to investigate the effect of English speaking anxiety on classroom participation among



the undergraduates of Enugu State, conditions which contribute to the problem and interventions that can be implemented to ensure more students participate in the classroom. By employing the primary method of data collection, the research will bring out the experiences of learners who provide a very detailed account of the issue; as well as the potential to design inclusive learning environments.

Development of the Knowledge Foundation.

This is due to the fact that this phenomenon of language anxiety has been explored extensively ever since the works by Horwitz et al. (1986) when the concept of foreign language anxiety was proposed as a distinct psychological phenomenon. It is possible to describe this fear or fear of speaking a non-native language as anxiety and state it has physical (i.e. trembling), cognitive (i.e. lack of ability to concentrate properly), and behavioral (i.e. avoiding speaking activity) symptoms. In classroom setting, language phobia may hamper the process of taking classes, including active involvement of students, their emotional engagement, and mental involvement in the classroom setting (Fredricks et al., 2004).

Exploratory enquires in the initial findings indicated that affective filters are the genesis of discouraging language learning and display incorporating nervous sentiments (Krashen, 1982). The latter study has been preceded to the realization that high scores on speaking anxiety correlate with low oral participation, academic under-performance and low self-efficacy among students who do not speak English as a native language (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1994). In a college where oral communication such as seminars, presentations, and group work are important, anxiety may severely damage the ability of the students to demonstrate their knowledge, as well as converse with other students.

Very limited but on a growing trend is the research on the subject of language anxiety in the African context. Studies in South Africa and Kenya have established that anxiety in English as an obstacle to academic performance and this phenomenon occurs more frequently in multilingual settings where students receive exposure to either native language but are taught in English (Hyland, 2006; Ngugi, 2018). The situation in the language in Nigeria is particularly complex because over 500 indigenous speaking linguistic communities inhabit the Nigerian land with English, which is the official language of both school and politics (Adegbija, 2004). This language difference coupled with social pressure to acquire English so that they can qualify to ascend the social ladder causes anxiety among the students and more so, in the students who are rural or considered poor.

Despite such revelations, it still has some missing links. The majority of the studies that have been conducted were either on Western or Asia and little focus is given to sub-Saharan Africa and particularly Nigeria. Moreover, studies are greatly devoted to language achievement compared to the situation of the impact of anxiety on classroom activity in general. Cultural and institutional processes that are unique to the Nigerian universities such high class sizes, teacher centered pedagogies and discrepancies in English proficiency are poorly studied. The gaps in the paper are filled as the paper focuses on the undergraduates of the Enugu State and examines how anxiety affects the engagement of the students, and factors that surround them and enhance or diminish the outcomes of anxiety.



Designing the Inquiry Approach.

Since there was a necessity to examine the connection between English-speaking anxiety and classroom involvement, this study suggested a mixed-methodology method to an inquiry, thus a quantitative survey-qualitative focus group conversation. This design facilitated the deep understanding of experiences of students both through determining the trends which could be measured and subtle perceptions. The research was conducted in three state universities located in the state of Enugu in Nigeria within the University of Nigeria in Nsukka; Enugu State University of Science and Technology; and Godfrey Okoye University. The selection of these institutions was based on their types of academic programs and students populations and hence representative sample.

The test was on 450 of the undergraduate students who were randomly selected across the various faculties (sciences, humanities, social sciences etc.). The respondents were provided with the filling of the version of the scale of Foreign language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) of the Horwitz et al. (1986) scale to determine the level of anxiety of speaking English. The FLCAS had 33 questions which quantified the communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation and responses being rated on a 5-point Likert position. In addition, behavioural, emotional and cognitive participation was determined by a Classroom engagement Inventory that was developed on the basis of Fredricks et al. (2004). The validation of the survey tools involved a pilot test of 50 students with the reliability of the survey equal to 0.87 in cronbach alpha.

The six focus group discussions with 8-10 students were used as supplement to the quantitative data. The topics that were discussed during these sessions included perceptions about anxiety in students, its effects on classroom attendance and some of the coping mechanisms that students apply in tackling anxiety. The audiotaped transcripts were transcribed and thematically analyzed with NVivo software. The pinpoint was viewed as the ethical issues and informed consent of all the participants was obtained and anonymity was ensured through the use of pseudonyms.

Demographic Characteristics of the participants.

Table 1 shows the demographic of the participants where there is diversity in terms of gender, age, academic discipline, and year of study.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	220	48.9
	Female	230	51.1
Age	18-20	180	40.0
	21-23	200	44.4



	24+	70	15.6
Academic Discipline	Sciences	150	33.3
	Humanities	120	26.7
	Social Sciences	180	40.0
Year of Study	First Year	110	24.4
	Second Year	130	28.9
	Third Year	120	26.7
	Fourth Year	90	20.0

The analysis of the data was conducted in descriptive statistics and correlation analysis of the survey responses accomplished using SPSS software. The results of qualitative data were coded into common themes, including the fear of ridicule, cultural factors, and barriers to institutions. The combination between quantitative and qualitative results gave a sound insight to the research issue.

Disclosing the Insights Gained.

The findings illuminate the complex relation between the English speaking anxiety and the classroom interaction with the focus on the emphasis of both the statistical and individual stories. The quantitative analysis showed that the most prevalent dimension with a mean of 3.8 on FLCAS was that 62 percent of the respondents rated moderate or high levels of English-speaking anxiety and communication apprehension was the most prevalent dimension. The correlation analysis revealed that anxiety and the participation in the classroom have a strong negative relationship ($r = -0.67$, $p = 0.01$) meaning that the higher the level of anxiety the lower the level of participation and emotional investment by the individual.

It was discovered that gender differences was a key determinant. It was found that the female students experienced a slight greater anxiety (mean = 3.9) compared to male students (mean = 3.6) particularly, the fear of getting unfavourable assessment. This comes in accordance with earlier research that, women may be pressured on by social aspects to live up to linguistic standards (Tannen, 1990). Academic discipline was also aware of anxiety students in science were less anxious (mean = 3.4) than students in humanities (mean = 3.9) or the social science students (mean = 4.0). This is what can be addressed by sciences on technical material as opposed to verbal expression.

Qualitative findings were added to these findings. The members of the focus group mentioned the fear as a silent barrier that made them not willing to pose questions and initiate the conversation. One of the students who has commented on this, I know the answer, I am afraid my English will sound queer so I keep silent. The fear of being judged by their fellows and being criticized by the lecturers were also the most common issues, particularly when it came to the students who could be rural and had no prior experience in using English. The culture also complicated anxiety, such as the necessity of being reserved in some Igbo cultures, rather than being assertive.



The factors that contributed to this were also the institutional ones. The feeling of insecurity was exacerbated by big classrooms (the average student count was 80-100) and the fact that the opportunity of having a closer look at an individual child was not provided. Conversely, anxiety was noted to be reduced amongst lecturers who offered supportive contribution in terms of promoting attendance and providing positive feedback. The results reveal the role played by an individual, a culture, and a system in influencing the classroom experiences of students.

Table 2

Correlation Between English-Speaking Anxiety and Classroom Engagement Dimensions

Dimension	Correlation Coefficient (r)	p-value
Behavioral Engagement	-0.64	< 0.01
Emotional Engagement	-0.70	< 0.01
Cognitive Engagement	-0.58	< 0.01

Reflecting on the Broader Implications

The connotations of the research are related to the significance of higher education in Nigeria and other similar cases. Anxiety in English speaking is more of an institutional problem and pedagogical rather than just an individual problem. The anxiety can be reduced within the university so as to enhance the classroom interaction and initiate active learning and critical thinking, which are the required criteria of academic and career success.

One of the recommendations is the combination of language support programs which take into account the needs of the students. The anxiety can be overcome by empowering the learners to overcome the situation through oral communication skills, peer mentoring and confidence-building workshops. Pedagogical activities that enable safe practice space to be achieved may be small group discussions and low-stakes speaking assignments. This should impart the lecturers to detect signs of anxiety and accommodate inclusiveness in teaching such as allowing the students write answers or the different languages being explained to them in multi-lingual contexts.

Institutional reforms are also needed. Language development of students can be done by the decrease in the number of students in classes, the increase in language laboratories and the access of digital media like speech recognition software. Among the policymakers, the unfair access to secondary education would have to be prioritized and allow students to be better prepared towards meeting the demands of the university. The cultural barriers such as stereotypes related to proficiency in English must be solved with the participation of the community and awareness programs.

Such studies are missing a localized nature of the study due to the state of Enugu, but the results may be transferred to other multilingual regions. The longitudinal impacts of anxiety intervention may be further investigated in future studies or the urban and rural colleges may be compared to expose other situational factors. To add more to the knowledge of the dynamics of language in



higher education, the sample can be broadened to include of postgraduate students or even institutions, which are privately owned.

Concluding Thoughts

This issue of English speaking anxiety is common and underscores non engagement in classroom among the undergraduates in the state of Enugu in Nigeria. By combining both quantitative and qualitative knowledge, this paper shows the complexity of the problem since it is not only an individual but also a cultural and an institutional problem. The correlation between anxiety and engagement is negative, which accentuates the necessity to pay attention to removing such an impediment to create inclusive and participative learning environments. Students can be empowered by the universities to overcome anxiety and enjoy their academic experience using specific interventions like the language support programmes, inclusive pedagogies, and institutional changes, etc. This paper does not merely contribute to the discourse on the topic of language anxiety throughout the entire world but also offers viable answers on how the higher learning institution in the linguistically varied environment in Nigeria can improve. A future like this can be exploited by educators and policymakers, in which they should make the students feel confident in communicating in English, and students will prepare to make the future of their academic lives more equal and more active.

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