

Revealing the impact of students' anxiety and fear during public speaking performances: A perspective from the theory of language development

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Abstract

This study explores students' experiences of anxiety and fear when engaging in public speaking and examines the impact of these emotions on language development. Despite the importance of public speaking in personal, academic, and professional domains, many students face challenges of anxiety and fear. Understanding how these emotions (affect) language development is crucial for teaching practices. Drawing on the theory of language development, this study aims to investigate students' anxiety and fear during public speaking and their language development processes. Through in-depth interviews and participant observations, the study seeks to capture students' perspectives and experiences in relation to their anxiety and fear. The qualitative analysis explored the nature and manifestations of the two, focusing on factors such as fear of judgment, self-consciousness, and performance anxiety. The research findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between anxiety, fear, and language development in the context of public speaking. This study provides valuable insights to inform possible instructional strategies. Recommendations based on the theory of language development highlight the importance of creating supportive and inclusive learning environments, implementing targeted interventions, and fostering students' self-confidence in public speaking contexts.

Keywords: Anxiety, Fear, Language Development, Public Speaking, Support

1. Introduction

Public speaking is an essential skill with broad applications in various aspects of life, including personal, academic, and professional domains. However, many students experience anxiety and fear when faced with the task of speaking in front of an audience (LeFebvre et al, 2018; Zheng et al, 2021; Zadorozhnyy & Lee, 2023). These emotional challenges can have significant effects on their performance and overall language development (Grieve et al, 2021). To effectively support students in overcoming these obstacles, it is crucial to understand the connection between their anxiety and fear during public speaking and the theory of language development.

The theory of language development offers a valuable framework for exploring the intricate relationship between emotional experiences and language acquisition. According to this theory,

language development is not solely a cognitive process but is also influenced by social interactions, emotional factors, and individual experiences (Hoff, 2006). The anxiety experienced by students during communication can negatively impact their language acquisition. This form of communication anxiety refers to an excessive physiological response and/or negative cognitive thoughts that occur in anticipation or during public speaking, as described by Daly et al (1997). It hampers their participation, restricts their opportunities for practice, and obstructs their linguistic development, as well as the act of refraining or retreating from engaging in communicative interactions, as explained by McCroskey and Beatty (1984) and Richmond et al. (2013).

Using qualitative research methods, such as interviews and observations, this study delves into the experiences of students as they navigate the challenges of public speaking. By exploring factors such as fear of judgment (Rattine-Flaherty, 2013), self-consciousness (Chen, 2022), and performance anxiety (Hook et al, 2013), a comprehensive understanding of the complexities of anxiety and fear in relation to language development will be attained. The findings of this research are expected to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on language development, specifically within the context of public speaking. By establishing a clear connection between students' anxiety and fear during public speaking performances and language development, educators and practitioners can gain insights into the importance of addressing these emotional factors in instructional practices. Furthermore, the research may uncover effective strategies and interventions to support students in managing their anxiety, building confidence, and enhancing their language skills during public speaking engagements.

2. Review of Literature

This section provides an overview of the existing body of literature examining the relationship between students' anxiety and fear during public speaking and the theory of language development. Through a thorough analysis of previous research studies and scholarly works, this review aims to gain a comprehensive understanding of the current knowledge landscape while identifying research gaps in this area of study.

2.1 The Theory of Language Development: From Behaviorism to Constructivism

The theory of language development provides a valuable theoretical framework for understanding the connection between students' anxiety and fear during public speaking and their language development processes.

2.1.1 Behaviorism

From the perspective of behaviorism, understanding the experience of anxiety in public speaking can be viewed as a learned response that arises from negative or unpleasant consequences associated with speaking situations (Burge, 2020). A person may develop anxiety in public speaking if s/he has previously faced situations where they experienced embarrassment, criticism, or other unfavorable outcomes while speaking. These negative experiences become linked to speaking scenarios, leading to a conditioned fear response. For instance, if a student has received harsh criticism or ridicule from peers during a speech, they may subsequently develop anxiety and fear when facing future public speaking engagements.

To address anxiety in public speaking, techniques such as systematic desensitization and positive reinforcement are utilized. Positive reinforcement involves providing rewards or positive consequences for engaging in public speaking behaviors and achieving desired outcomes (Akin, 2012; Jones et al, 2011; Rossi, 1989). This reinforcement helps individuals associate speaking

situations with positive experiences, gradually diminishing their anxiety and enhancing their motivation to speak in public.

2.1.2 Constructivism

Constructivist approaches aim to identify and challenge these negative beliefs, promote positive self-perceptions, and provide supportive learning experiences that enable individuals to construct new, more positive understandings of their speaking abilities. Students' anxiety in public speaking may arise from negative beliefs they hold about their own speaking skills (Hills, 2007; Saidavi & Mansor, 2012). If students perceive themselves as inadequate or anticipate negative evaluations or judgments from their audience, they are likely to experience heightened anxiety and fear when faced with public speaking situations. These negative self-perceptions and expectations significantly impact their confidence, engagement, and overall performance.

To address and manage anxiety in public speaking from a constructivist perspective, it is crucial to identify and challenge these negative beliefs and self-perceptions through the creation of supportive learning environments that foster positive self-beliefs, nurture a growth mindset, and encourage students to construct new and more positive understandings (Areepattamannil, 2010; Ozdemir, & Papi, 2021). By these, anxiety is expected to be reduced, and it may create a positive context for students to enhance their language and communication skills.

2.2 Fear and Anxiety as Psychological Factors Impeding the Success of Public Speaking

Many individuals experience stage fright and nervousness when speaking in front of an audience (Tsang, 2020, Adamson, 2022, Aryadoust, 2015; Tsang, 2018, Grieve et al, 2021, Nash et al, 2015). Researches indicate that these fears can be debilitating and impede the development of effective public speaking skills and should be investigated, for instance, the effect of anxiety while performing public speaking and the significant impact on students' lives. Tsang (2020) through his study, further claimed that there is a strong relationship between the delivery of oral presentations and public speaking anxiety, and he stated that investigating the delivery of oral presentations is particularly timely and important as communication skills have emerged as essential twenty-first-century competencies for students worldwide. In this case, the teacher needs to accommodate the problems by creating a supportive classroom environment, providing practice opportunities and feedback, and implementing relaxation techniques to help students overcome their fears and gain confidence (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991).

Building confidence is crucial for the development of public speaking skills. Students need to believe in their abilities to deliver impactful speeches. Research emphasizes the importance of fostering self-efficacy in public speaking education (Al Rubail & Elkhashab, 2018), stating that some strategies such as setting attainable goals, offering positive reinforcement, and providing constructive feedback, can help enhance students' confidence levels (McCroskey, 1992; Byrne & McIlroy, 2017).

Numerous studies have emphasized the prevalence of anxiety and fear experienced by students when engaging in public speaking activities ((Tsang, 2020, Adamson, 2022, Aryadoust, 2015; Tsang, 2018, Grieve et al, 2021, Nash et al, 2015). Research has consistently shown that public speaking anxiety is a common phenomenon that significantly impacts students' performance and overall communication skills. Scholars have identified several sources of anxiety and fear, including the fear of judgment, evaluation, or negative feedback, self-consciousness, and performance anxiety. These emotional experiences can manifest in various ways, such as physical symptoms, cognitive impairments, and negative self-perceptions. The current study fills the gap

by exploring the intersection between language development theories and anxiety in public speaking contexts. By bridging these two areas, this study seeks to uncover deeper insights into the underlying mechanisms that contribute to students' anxiety. This novel perspective not only addresses a significant gap in the literature but also has the potential to inform future empirical and theoretical studies in the field. By elucidating the connections between public speaking anxiety and language development theories, this research aims to provide a more holistic understanding of the factors influencing students' communicative abilities and pave the way for the development of certain possible interventions and strategies to lessen public speaking anxiety in educational settings.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach to investigate the experiences of students' anxiety and fear during public speaking and their relationship to language development. The qualitative methodology enables an in-depth exploration of participants' subjective perspectives, emotions, and behaviors.

The participants in this study consist of five English Department students of UIN KH Abdurrahman Wahid Pekalongan who have encountered anxiety and fear during public speaking. The research utilized open-ended questions to participants, allowing them to express their thoughts and experiences freely (Aldhaen, 2020). The interview questions primarily focused on understanding the participants' personal experiences connecting to their public speaking problems.

The interview data collected from the participants were transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006). The transcripts underwent a thorough review, with the aim of identifying recurring themes and patterns that emerged from the participants' experiences and viewpoints. These themes were then organized and categorized to establish a comprehensive understanding of the participants' perceptions of the applications.

Ethical guidelines were followed in the study, with measures taken to protect the participants' anonymity and secure their informed consent. Throughout the research process, strict confidentiality was maintained to safeguard the privacy of the individuals involved. Confidentiality and anonymity are important ethical principles that ensure the protection of personal information during data collection, analysis, and reporting. Confidentiality specifically refers to the practice of separating or modifying any personally identifiable information provided by participants within the collected data (Coffelt, 2017). To ensure the validity of the research findings, the study employs a participant validation process. This method involves consulting with the participants after data collection and preliminary analysis to verify whether the interpretations and conclusions accurately reflect their experiences and perspectives. Participants are given opportunities to review summaries or detailed accounts of the data attributed to them, providing them with a platform to confirm, correct, or elaborate on the information (Slettebø, 2020). This process helps ensure that the research findings are credible and accurately represent the participants' viewpoints, thereby maintaining the study's integrity and enhancing the validity of its conclusions.

4. Results and Discussion

The analysis of the data collected from interviews and observations yielded several key findings concerning students' anxiety and fear when engaging in public speaking and its effects on language development. Participants reported various sources and triggers of anxiety and fear

during public speaking, including the fear of judgment and evaluation, negative feedback, self-consciousness, and performance anxiety. Their concern about being negatively evaluated by peers and instructors significantly contributed to heightened anxiety and fear.

Students often experience a lack of self-assurance in their ability to convey their messages effectively, perceive potential negative judgment from their peers, and may feel socially isolated (Rattine-Flaherty, 2013). This is especially true for shy students or those with low self-esteem who already exhibit a reduced inclination to engage in communication activities. In the eye of behaviorism, these typical students try to stay away from the negative traumatic events. Thus, they do not want to repeat the same errors.

This can be seen from the following extracts of data

I want to speak English fluently because it's important for me. It's especially if I want to work in another country, because I must communicate with people in English. But I have trouble. It's speaking fluently. I don't know many words, so which one must I choose. Many problems like grammar, pronunciation make me down sometimes. That brings problem (Mawar, Interview, May 13th 2023).

I know it is important to control myself. And it is very important to control words. I ever made mistakes, and people laughed at me. So, I don't want to repeat the same mistake. But as I was too careful not to make mistakes, I lost my confidence. I feel confused and lost my vocabulary in front of people staring to me like saying you will make a mistake (Kemuning, Interview, May 13th 2023).

What happens to me if I speak is I am blank. People stare at me like saying, you can not speak well, or you must make mistakes. This overthinking disturbs me, but I can't control it (Seroja, Interview, May 13th 2023).

The provided excerpts depict the challenges and anxieties individuals face in their pursuit of speaking English fluently. Each interviewee expresses concerns about vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, making mistakes, and the fear of judgment.

Mawar, in the first interview, recognizes the significance of English fluency for international work but acknowledges her struggles in speaking fluently and having a limited vocabulary. This highlights her frustration and the pressure she experiences during her language-learning journey.

Kemuning, the second interviewee, shares her fear of making mistakes and being ridiculed, causing her to be overly cautious and avoid taking risks while speaking. This cautiousness hampers her confidence and ability to express herself effectively.

Seroja, in the third interview, describes experiencing overthinking and feeling at a loss for words when speaking English. The fear of judgment and making mistakes overwhelms *Seroja*, making it challenging to control her thoughts and focus on effective communication.

These interviews emphasize the impact of anxiety on language learning and the negative cycle it can create. Fear of making mistakes, being judged, or falling short of expectations leads to self-doubt, diminished confidence, and difficulties in fluent expression. According to the theory of language development, anxiety and fear can significantly hinder language acquisition and proficiency, and they relate to previous experience, for instance, trauma while performing public speaking. Hook et al (2013) mentioned that performance anxiety (PA) is specifically linked to

concerns about how others evaluate us, while interaction anxiety (IA) is associated with concerns about our self-evaluation. This relates to behaviorism and constructivism, about how someone perceives his/her competence and how others' image affects the anxiety. The perception affects the language output of how individuals' anxieties about vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, making mistakes, and being judged create barriers to the participants' language development.

Participants also described experiencing both physical and cognitive manifestations of anxiety and fear during public speaking. Physically, they reported symptoms such as increased heart rate, sweating, trembling, and dry mouth. Cognitively, they encountered negative thoughts, difficulty organizing ideas, and a fear of forgetting their speech or making mistakes. This can be seen from the following extract:

If I am nervous, it's difficult to control my mind. I actually want to say a sentence, but it makes me mess up. What comes up is different. The bad thing is, when I am nervous, I sweetened much and panicked (Dahlia, Interview, May 13th 2023).

My problem when speaking in front of the public is that I am nervous. So I become stutter. My sentences don't appear fluently. Sometimes, it's wrong, mispronounced. Words come to my mouth just scrambled, like messy. Even worse, my mouth is trembling (Melati, Interview, May 13th 2023).

The interview excerpts shed light on the difficulties individuals encounter when feeling nervous while speaking in public. Both *Dahlia* and *Melati* express challenges in controlling their thoughts and experiencing physical manifestations of anxiety.

Dahlia explains that when she is nervous, she struggles to control her mind, leading to difficulties in articulating intended sentences. This illustrates how anxiety disrupts her thought processes, causing her to become flustered and lose track of her message. Additionally, she experiences physical symptoms like excessive sweating and panic, highlighting the overall impact of anxiety on her during public speaking. *Melati*, on the other hand, specifically mentions stuttering as a consequence of her nervousness while addressing an audience. She describes her sentences as lacking fluency, occasionally mispronouncing words, and experiencing a sense of disarray in her speech. She also notes trembling in her mouth, a physical manifestation of her nervous state.

The interviews provide evidence of how anxiety can affect language production and performance in public speaking, as seen from both behaviorist and constructivist perspectives. From a behaviorist standpoint, anxiety disorders primarily arise from conditioning processes, observational learning, or specific experiences that trigger their development, as seen in the case of specific phobias. In this case, people who suffer from anxiety exhibit feelings of unease and engage in behaviors aimed at avoiding certain situations, which can significantly impact their performance in various aspects of life (Skinner, 1957; Bandura, 1997). In this case, it is speaking in front of public. The experiences of *Dahlia* and *Melati* reflect the conditioned fear response triggered in public speaking situations, leading to difficulties in concentration, speech disruptions, and physical tension.

From a constructivist perspective (Vygotsky, 1978), Vygotsky's theories are relevant to understanding anxiety because he emphasized the sociocultural nature of development and the importance of social interactions in shaping cognitive processes. Vygotsky viewed learning and development as occurring within the context of social interactions and cultural influences. Anxiety, being a complex psychological phenomenon, is not solely an individual issue but is deeply

embedded within social and cultural contexts. According to Vygotsky, anxiety can be influenced by previous experiences, cultural expectations, and social interactions. He believed that individuals acquire their beliefs, values, and ways of thinking through socialization and interactions with others. Therefore, anxiety can be shaped and influenced by the social and cultural environment in which individuals are situated.

Anxiety and fear during public speaking noticeably impacted participants' language production. They experienced hesitation, limited vocabulary use, and disrupted fluency in their speech. The fear of negative judgment hindered their ability to express themselves confidently and effectively. They can be traced from the following extracts:

What I feel when in front of people? I am afraid of making mistakes, so I speak carefully. But this blocks my mind to think, so I tend to speak not fluently (Mawar, Interview, May 13th 2023).

I am afraid of being mocked and laughed. My friend ever experienced this. It makes me afraid. I control my vocabulary, but it makes my performance weird. My sentences don't appear fluent, and the words are repetitive (Seroja, Interview, May 13th 2023).

Based on the excerpts from the interviews, they provide insights into the experiences of students when speaking in front of others and highlight the role of anxiety in language development. Both *Mawar* and *Seroja* express their fears and concerns related to making mistakes, being mocked, and not speaking fluently.

From the perspective of anxiety and language development, these excerpts reflect the impact of anxiety on language production and performance. Anxiety can lead to heightened self-consciousness and fear of negative evaluation, causing individuals to speak carefully and become mentally blocked, which hinders their fluency (Tsang, 2020). The fear of being mocked and laughed at, as mentioned by *Seroja*, further contributes to anxiety and affects one's ability to communicate effectively. From a behaviorist perspective. The fear of making mistakes and the desire to avoid negative outcomes lead individuals to adopt cautious and inhibited speech behaviors, ultimately impacting their fluency. While from a constructivist perspective, anxiety in language development can stem from negative self-perceptions, fear of judgment, and the anticipation of making mistakes (Grieve, et al, 2021). These negative beliefs and anxieties can hinder language learning and impede one's ability to engage in meaningful social interactions.

Both behaviorism and constructivism highlight the importance of creating supportive learning environments to address anxiety in language development. Providing opportunities for gradual exposure, positive reinforcement, and building self-efficacy can help individuals overcome their anxieties and improve their language skills (Zheng, et al, 2021; Bolivar-Cruz, et al, 2018). This link to the way to address the problems. Self-perceptions, and cognitive processes in language learning will be able to address the fear of making mistakes or being laughed at, as expressed by the interviewees, reflecting the social aspect of language development and how it can affect individuals' confidence and willingness to engage in verbal communication. To cope this, based on social constructivism (Hills, 2007), there is a strong point on the importance of creating supportive and non-judgmental learning environments. The interviewees' experiences of feeling pressured, cautious, and overwhelmed by negative thoughts align with the theory's emphasis on the role of the environment in shaping language development. By addressing the anxieties and

providing a conducive learning environment, individuals can gradually overcome their fears, build their confidence, and develop their language skills more effectively (Bodie, 2010; Rattine-Flaherty, 2013).

5. Conclusion

This current study has provided valuable insights into the experiences of students' anxiety and fear during public speaking and their impact on language development. The findings reveal that students commonly experience anxiety and fear in public speaking situations due to the fear of judgment, negative evaluation, and performance expectations. These emotional challenges manifest in physical symptoms and cognitive impairments, leading to difficulties in language production and cognitive processes.

Undergrounded from behaviorism and constructivism, the study highlights the influence of emotional factors on linguistic abilities. This underscores the need for educators and practitioners to create supportive and inclusive learning environments that foster students' confidence, manage anxiety, and promote engagement in public speaking activities. Strategies such as gradual exposure, systematic desensitization, and constructive feedback may help students overcome anxiety and improve their language skills. However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the study, including the qualitative approach and the specific sample used (in this current study, there are five participants), which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research should consider exploring the experiences of students from diverse cultural backgrounds and evaluating the effectiveness of specific interventions in addressing public speaking anxiety.

To sum up, this study deepens our understanding of the challenges students face in public speaking and provides practical implications for educators and practitioners. By recognizing and addressing students' anxiety and fear, educators can better support their language development and cultivate successful public speaking abilities. This research contributes to bridging the gap between theory and practice, ultimately enhancing instructional approaches in public speaking education.

6. References

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