

Anxieties in English Language Learning Among Polytechnic Students - Telangana State in India

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Abstract

Polytechnic students graduate every year through private and government institutions in Telangana. The very purpose of Polytechnic education is to guarantee employment to degree holders. But in the present scenario, most of the diploma holders struggle to get through in a competitive world due to various factors, one of the reason being poor communication skills because of which they fail to perform well at interviews and even if they are placed in good posts, they are unable to communicate well at their workplace. This paper, investigates on how effectively polytechnic students learn the target language in and out of classroom and looks at speaking anxieties that polytechnic students face when trying to communicate in English. This paper also recommends strategies that may be employed to reduce anxieties related to speaking.

Keywords: Polytechnic students, Telangana, anxiety, English language learning

1 Introduction

Communication is very essential for humans. People communicate not by cryptograms but by using language. Since communication, language, and life cannot be separated, we use

language to gain and share information, express thoughts, and exchange opinions. Communication in a foreign language, especially English requires practice. In a world that is globalized, it is irrefutable that the attitude towards honing oral communication skills in English is popular in India and English is widely used as a medium of instruction across all educational institutions. English is an international language that is so remarkably associated with every profession, medical, engineering and business that it is necessary for students to be proficient in both oral and written English. “The emerging need for a good communication skill in the English language has created a huge worldwide demand for English among non-native speakers around the globe” (Mehmoodzadeh, 2012p. 466). There are four language skills *listening, reading, speaking, and writing*. Of all these four skills, writing and speaking are collaborative and productive tasks that require respective grammatical discourse patterns. Speaking is one of the most effective ways to communicate, which entails a long cognitive complex process and many students feel hesitant to talk when set oral communication tasks, when they come across this tunnel of learning process.

Today’s companies expect potential employees to be well trained and fluent in communication. Higher educational institutions and all polytechnic colleges emphasize communication skills as a prerequisite in the ESL curriculum. Among many streams of education, polytechnic is one which aims at enhancing employability skills, where students learn through hands-on experience. English is not just a language, but an essential skill for students. Students in polytechnic colleges have plenty of opportunities to be employed in different organizations, as soon as they have progressed to diploma, provided they possess soft skills and technical skills. They ultimately must compete with other graduates who have good communication skills in English. Good communication includes the ability to communicate confidently in English, to be able to express one self's freely, and to exchange views without fear. To meet the demands of globalization, all organizations tend to recruit employees who are fluent in English. Thus, technical institutions have a great responsibility in producing graduates and advanced diploma holders who are good at English.

Language has always been an effective instrument of communication and mastering any language needs a certain set of skills. Self-confidence and anxiety are two factors that influence second language learners in developing their speaking capabilities. Polytechnic students are no exception to this anxiety, worry; panic and low level of self-confidence hamper students to progress in their ability to learn English language. There is a correlation between Students' speaking anxiety, self-confidence, and their ability to acquire good oral proficiency. "Most of the learners express their uncertainties and a feeling of uneasiness against learning English as a foreign language" (Aida (1994).

In a polytechnic classroom setting, a majority of students encounter traumatic experiences with their poor performance in spoken English when they try to learn the language. Horwitz et al. (1986 p.66) emphasized that English language learners face devastating anxiety vis-a-vis oral communication skills in English language, when learning pronunciation, meaning, and grammar (Fielding et al., 2007). Each student faces different degrees of anxiety if they are asked to execute oral tasks in front of the class. Due to anxiety, most of the times students become nervous, feel very uncomfortable and prefer to be silent or reluctant to participate in any of the collaborative oral activities in the classroom. The whole learning process is negatively impacted if the student has language learning anxieties. There is an immediate requirement to address anxiety issues as they can curtail proficiency in language learning. The objective of this paper is to investigate common factors of causing speaking anxiety among polytechnic students and to identify strategies employed by learners to overcome their fear of speaking English.

2 Literature Review

Anxiety is not a bad thing; sometimes it makes the learners self-motivated to acquire the language. All target language learners confront this tendency to anxiety when it comes to learning a new language and polytechnic students are no exception, they experience two-fold anxiety at every stage of their learning the second language, which negatively affects their communication skills. There has been continuous research on measuring anxiety types when

learners attempt to communicate in a second/foreign language. This paper addresses anxiety related issues in the ESL Class room.

To scrutinize the causes of speaking anxiety, Young (1990) developed an advanced survey with 135 students at the university level and he chose 109 students from school who were keen to learn the language. He discovered that students were very reluctant to speak in front of the teacher and classmate. Kitano (2001) investigated the sources of speaking anxiety among college-level American students who were learning Japanese as their second language. He used a self-rating scale of items prepared by Horwitz, et al. (1986), which showed that fear of negative evaluation and student's low perception towards learning the language determines their level of anxiety. Among the participants, students who had good self-perceived speaking ability encountered lower levels of anxiety compared with those who felt inferior and had low confidence. Kitano (2001) involved 212 Japanese learning students in America to attempt a trial test to answer the items in the scale prepared to test the anxiety level based on self-perception. The results revealed that participants' self-perceptions affected their anxiety level. Students with low self-perceived capability in speaking skills experienced more anxiety compared to those participants with higher self-perceived speaking ability. Liu and Jackson (2008) surveyed 547 first-year Japanese learners of English and identified the positive correlation between language learning anxiety and unwillingness to accomplish oral tasks. According to this survey, many students faced problems in interpersonal dialogues, balancing the fear of negative evaluation.

AL-lawati (1995) discovered that Omani polytechnic students face many difficulties when they speak English. He says that the teachers always concentrate on completion of syllabus instead of focusing on providing ample opportunities to enhance different language skills like vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation.

Brown (1993) holds that anxiety is always allied with feelings of uneasiness, self-doubt, apprehension when it must deal with second language learning. Mosaddaq Yahya (2013 pg 466), reported three domains of anxieties, these being

- i. Communicative anxieties
- ii. Negative feedback anxieties and
- iii. Test anxieties

His studies have shown how communicative anxiety and test anxiety affect learner's cognitive abilities leading to fear of negative feedback. He concludes his paper with the following recommendations:

- a) Students should have a cheerful atmosphere
- b) Teaching must be student-centered
- c) Teachers should understand student anxiety and accordingly modify teaching methods.

3 Problem Statement

Most of the students who join polytechnic courses have rural background and they do not have any exposure to any language other than their mother tongue, because of this, students are unable to speak English when they are required to use target language. The anxiety and low self-confidence adversely impact the ability to use English.

This paper addresses the following questions:

- a) What are the different factors leading to anxiety among polytechnic students?
- b) What are the strategies that can be used to alleviate anxiety in learning the English language?
- c) What are the challenges that the teachers face in teaching English?

4 Objectives of the Paper

This study intends to benefit polytechnic students to identify problems that they encounter when learning a second language, and to cope with anxieties when developing communication skills in the English language.

4.1 Sources of Anxiety in English Language Classroom Among Polytechnic Students in Developing Their Communication Skills

The demand for communication skills in the modern age has grown so much that every student is being encouraged to learn the English language. Apprehension and anxiety are both common in language learning process. Contemplating this issue of anxiety in the learning process in classrooms is deemed to be an essential challenge to help them develop their communication skills in the second language. Literature reviews show that English language is curriculum centered. Most of the time the opportunity to learn communication skills is given low importance. In most polytechnics, students find it difficult to speak because of limited exposure to English, poor grammar, lack of vocabulary, lack of pronunciation, and interlocutors' language deficiency. A list of common causes of language learning is discussed below.

i) Regional Medium Background

All polytechnic courses are treated as optional courses, and these courses are rarely opted by good rankers, only the underprivileged from rural areas with poor financial backgrounds choose a polytechnic course. Most of the students believe that English is an emblem of status, that those who are economically well off use English to share their scholarly ideas and so feel shy to express themselves in the English language. The very first problem that the polytechnic students specify is *Telugu as their medium of instruction till 10th standard*. Mother tongue influence on the target language is pronounced and they find it difficult to switch to English from Telugu.

ii) Lack of Vocabulary

The meaning of a word is context-based in the English, and lack of adequate vocabulary is a problem for anyone attempting to communicate. Polytechnic students face difficulty in understanding and using lexical patterns of English. They become anxious when they are unable to pick the right word for the right situation. As they have inadequate exposure to different sources of English language, they lack vocabulary. And students find it very

difficult to choose appropriate vocabulary for the right context in a conversation. They feel very nervous to express themselves.

iii) Teacher Centered Teaching

Teachers resort to a convenient way of teaching and end up doing the minimum to complete syllabus. They seldom provide an opportunity for students to have any task-based activities to develop oral communication skills. Another reason is that most of the students fear making mistakes when speaking before teachers and peer groups as they think such slip ups will eventually impact their end course grades. Teachers prefer lectures in the classroom without any kind of interaction with students and students are merely passive listeners, bored and rigid when they lack opportunities in the classrooms. For collaborative activities with fellow students, they need to interact actively with the teacher and their classmate.

iv) Fear of Making Mistakes

Most of the students are too conscious of making mistakes in sentence formation and very particular about common grammatical errors. Even when an opportunity is given, students show unwillingness to converse in English and they are afraid to make mistakes while speaking, especially when the teacher is trying to correct them. It's because most of the students feel very insecure with the way the teacher handles them, particularly when teachers humiliate students in the name of error correction.

v) Lack of Resources

Most of the polytechnic institutes are in remote areas where students hardly find an ambience that promotes learning a second language. Many of the institutions, lack effective resources such as libraries or digital aids. Students hardly find any classmates or groups they can communicate through English.

vi) Absence of Self-attentiveness

The polytechnic course aims at improving employability skills and it is designed to impart practical knowledge to students. Most students think that it is very important to gain subject knowledge and consider fluency in English an optional skill. Most students therefore lack self-motivation to speak or learn English. Self-motivation is a basic principle that determines a learner's aptitude on how much energy one can devote towards learning, and how long he preserves it. (Littlewood, 1984 p.57)

vii) Fear of Negative Evaluation

In a classroom, students feel apprehensive that the teachers and class mates are constantly noticing their errors, which silences them. When students are compared with their peers, they develop an inferiority complex. Their self-evaluation of their capabilities and competence leads to their inability to overcome the challenges of speaking English.

viii) Fear of Being Inferior

Students tend to believe that if they make any mistake, classmates mock them and this affects their self-esteem and identity. Most technical students lack self-motivation to speak or learn English. Self-motivation is a basic principle that determines a learner's aptitude on how much energy one can devote towards learning, and how long he preserves it. (Littlewood, 1984 p.57). Hashemi and Abbasi added that learners get nervous as they come across a high level of proficiency from their teachers, and encounter unequal foreign language competence between teacher and student.

English is essential for a polytechnic student's career. Students confront hurdles in acquiring fluency in English, despite having learnt it for 10 years in schools, even as their medium of instruction. It is observed among polytechnic students that teachers expect them to perform beyond their levels of competence. Students can never speak if they have not yet subconsciously acquired the language. They believe that they can never open their mouth until

they speak good English, So they prefer to avoid speaking most of the time. Indeed, there are many other individual challenges because of which they are reluctant to speak English.

Fig 1 shows how the whole process of communication is hampered by different kinds of anxieties. Most of the students are very good at understanding and reciprocating the encoded communication but by the time they deliver the message, they are anxiety-ridden and the process communication is badly affected.

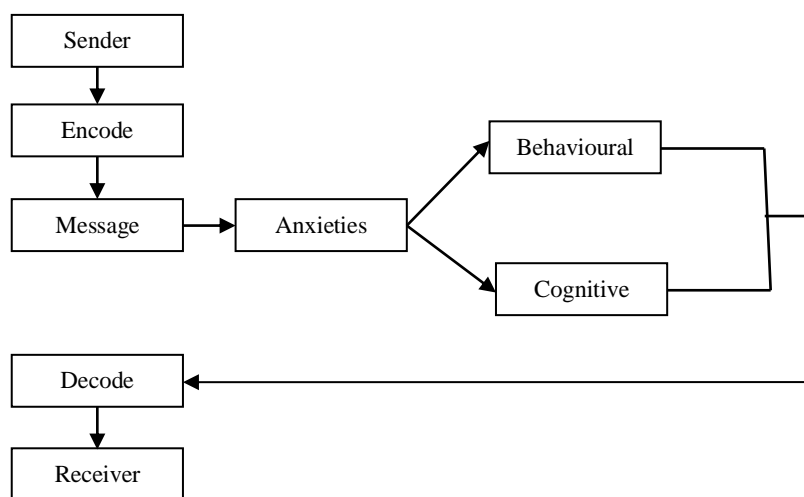


Fig 1: Anxiety hinders the process of Communication

5 Methodology

This paper investigated sources of anxiety among English language learners of polytechnic colleges and sheds some light on the strategies that may be used to combat speaking anxieties among students.

6 Research Design

The nature of this survey is both quantitative and qualitative and it deals with the subject's behavior, perception and motivation. This study is not affected by any of the previous assumptions but involves a direct identification of different types of anxieties that the participants undergo when speaking English.

7 Participants

The participants of this study were from government polytechnic college Kothagudem. 30 members of 4th-semester diploma students from different socio-economic backgrounds took part in the study.

8 Data Collection Procedure

Individual interviews for 10 minutes were conducted with each student. A questionnaire was designed for the data collection pertaining to speaking anxieties. The findings revealed the causes of anxiety (Table1).

9 Discussion and Results

Every learner has their respective individual experiences and personal anxieties in language learning. Lack of vocabulary and fear of negative evaluation are major factors of anxiety among polytechnic students. These are the following causes they came up with as factors which lead to anxiety.

1. Most students keep thinking that other students have better command of English
2. The more they try to put their oral skills to practice in the classroom, the more disappointed they get.
3. They worry about their pronunciation and accent.
4. They specified that they lack vocabulary due to limited contact with speakers of English and with English language.
5. They feel nervous since they sense their pronunciation is flawed. Added to this, lack of practice, lack of confidence and poor phonetics are the main causes for their anxiety.

10 Strategies to Reduce Speaking Anxiety

After determining the sources of anxieties some techniques that might be useful in the English language classrooms to improve speaking skills of students and to decrease the anxiety levels of polytechnic students are suggested. If they follow some of these strategies, students would improve their communication skills.

i) Prepare, Practice, and Present (PPP):

Without practice, one can never have a grip on the language. When there is thorough practice the anxiety levels of the students would inevitably diminish. Though the polytechnic students come from rural areas, they are somehow connected with English from childhood, based on this belief if they try to improve their English, in due course of time, students would be able to acquire some fluency in oral communication. There is no magic pill to acquire fluency in any language except practice. Before presenting something in the classroom in front of the whole class, if preparation is done beforehand, students won't experience so much anxiety.

No	Sources of anxiety	Parameter	The anxiety level in the students (100%)
1.	Application of grammar rules	Lack of vocabulary	90%
		Pronunciation	80%
		Fear of forming complete correct sentences	90%
2	Fear of negative evaluation	Strict and formal evaluation	90%
		Peer group evaluation	90%
3	Lack of good ambience	Family background	60%
		Inadequate resources	70%
		Low levels of self confidence	90%

Table 1: Causes of anxiety levels

ii) Expertise over vocabulary:

Learning new words to enhance one's vocabulary is a solution. Many students experience anxiety frequently when they need to pick words apt for the situations. Most of the time they don't find the right word to embellish their conversation with. When words are learned in groups, phrases, and chunks it becomes easy to master vocabulary and that results in reduction of anxiety when using target language.

iii) Think in English:

Previous research has revealed that students always tend to translate the conversation into their mother tongue and then re-translate it to their target languages: it takes a lot of efforts to think and talk naturally in the second language. It is suggested that if students can think and respond to conversations without translations, students would face no anxiety.

iv) Use of Technology:

Audio-visual aids play a vital role in helping students get a good grip over language and decrease anxiety levels. If students take the initiation to listen to English through news channels and other sources; if they can practice pronunciations, they get used to language so well that it slowly improves their spoken English. All that they need is interest and some time to spend in practicing language from online and offline sources that are available.

v) Self-talk:

If students are anxious to communicate in the classrooms in front of the teacher, the strategy of self-talks would work out. They should practice the whole presentation before a mirror until they are perfect with their speech, and they can identify their errors and correct themselves without fear of negative evaluation.

To improve communication skills and to reduce anxiety levels, students should seek out discrete ways of developing better communication skills and thus reduce levels of anxiety. Students should be communicative in classrooms when taking part in group discussions, Just a minute sessions, mock interviews and role plays to overcome their fear of anxiety. Students should realize that communication errors are a part of speaking which would be corrected in due course of time.

As shown in **fig 2**, students should employ different means to reduce their anxiety levels. Particularly, this study recommends that English language teachers of polytechnic support students to minimize their anxiety in the classroom by providing adequate time for different communicative activities, to build confidence among students. They should make the teaching context less anxiety-provoking. While a few teachers are strict in terms of accuracy and they believe in snubbing students on the spot, they need to curb this practice and instead assist students to perform well in second language classrooms. English teachers have a crucial role to motivate students to alleviate speaking anxiety among them and to ensure this, learners must be encouraged by teachers to perform well in terms of acquiring the language naturally. In this context, it is also necessary to shed some light on teacher's roles and challenges that they encounter while teaching English to polytechnic students.

11 Challenges faced by English teachers in polytechnic classrooms

Learner's level of anxiety reduces, and they get motivated to learn English with the efforts of teacher. To reduce embarrassments to students, teachers should invest more of themselves in classroom settings inspite of the challenges they encounter. English language teachers face insurmountable challenges some of which figured below:

i. Inadequate teaching resources:

Not only English classrooms but any teaching would mostly depend on resources. English language teaching in most polytechnics is carried out with inadequate resources. Effective English language teaching is possible only when there are adequate resources like good

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infrastructure, digital devices, and audio-lingual aids. As we discussed above most of the government polytechnics are in rural areas, where not only the students but teachers have limited access to resources. Non-availability of technical support and lack of teaching aids are problems that teachers face.

ii. Bilingual classroom.

This is a universal challenge that all English teachers face. Most of the polytechnic students come from regional medium background. Generally, polytechnic students from urban areas face less difficulty during the process of learning the language, their home environment helps students to acquire and follow the language quickly while, for students from rural area polytechnics, bilingual method should be adopted to teach English. Students tend to learn English through translation mode so that they request English teachers to use bilingual method. This method contributes to real learning process as a whole. Though teachers encourage learners to speak in English they find it easy to communicate in their mother language. It is a difficult task for an English teacher to make learners communicate in English.

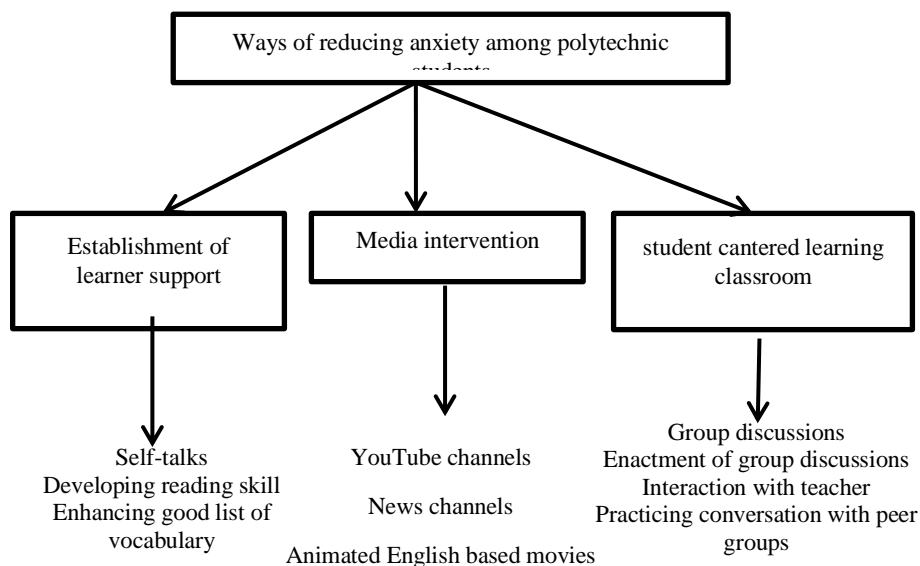


Fig 2: Ways of reducing anxiety among polytechnic students.

iii. Limited time for lecture to teach

Time is the most important tool in teaching language. Teachers hardly get two to three hours per week and the stipulated period is used to complete the syllabus and to meet the targets they have been assigned. Thus, there is not enough time for teachers to organize extra teaching activities. There are other constraints to such as a large number of students in the classrooms, lack of student's initiative to use English, etc. Though teachers face many impediment to teach English, it's their primary responsibility to involve students in the language learning process by creating a safe environment with plenty of interactive sessions, by teaching English through games, and different alternative methods and approaches that appeal to students.

12 Conclusion

Though from ages research is in progress with regard to learner anxieties in learning the second language, only a small segment has addressed anxiety among polytechnic learners. The findings have shown that polytechnic students encounter different types of anxieties when learning English language and acquiring better communication skills .

It is evident that speaking anxiety would adversely impact language learning. This study aims to guide polytechnic students to tackle issues of speaking anxieties in learning the target language. More efforts are needed to ensure that teachers create a stress-free and comfortable classroom environment. Further research should be initiated in this field to discover other factors that may be related to English speaking anxieties among polytechnic students. New and better strategies may be designed to teach speaking effectively.

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