Fear of Making Mistakes and EFL Speaking Anxiety

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Menu

Introduction
The Problem
The Solutions
Conclusion
References

Introduction

When learning a new language, students develop varying levels of speaking anxiety due to a fear of making mistakes in the classroom. This is an issue that is often seen in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, and it has a negative impact on the development of productive language skills. For example, "Second language researchers and theorists have long been aware that anxiety is often associated with language learning" (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986, p.125). As an educator, it is essential to understand the root causes of speaking anxiety and incorporate teaching methodologies that minimize its impact. Thus, this article will first identify why the fear of making mistakes causes speaking anxiety in the classroom and offer solutions that will help educators minimize this apprehension among their students.

The Problem

Fear of making mistakes

Of the four language skills, speaking is one that requires practice in the classroom in order to develop fluency. Unfortunately, students often fear making mistakes in front of their classmates and teachers. More specifically, we can say that the "Fear of negative evaluation is the apprehension about other people's evaluations" (Lucas, Miraflores & Go, 2011, p.102). This fear of negative evaluation leads to a speaking anxiety that makes students scared to speak in class. When they are scared to speak, they have difficulties developing the fluency that is needed to improve their English speaking skills.

There are many causes for this fear of making mistakes, with how their peers perceive them in the classroom being a major cause. Students often feel that other students are judging their speaking skills, thus they do not want to speak and make mistakes in front of them.

Furthermore, in many language classrooms, students are often comparing their English levels to others. A mistake would show that they are not as advanced as other students, and this creates speaking anxiety in the classroom. This social dynamic is a major factor in the development of fear and routinely increases speaking anxiety in language classrooms.

Another contributor is the teaching methods used. Ineffective error correction techniques that make students feel like their errors are negative things greatly contributes to the fear of making mistakes. In reality, mistakes should be seen as a positive aspect of language development as it shows that students are trying and provides a chance for effective error correction where all students in the class can benefit. Unfortunately, some teachers do not see them this way and use teaching methods that are increasing speaking anxiety levels. Furthermore, ineffective error management techniques discourage students and makes them scared to speak. Thus, it is very important to understand that "…teachers need to include a program that enables learners to start in a relatively comfortable and stress-free environment, and give them the opportunity to learn in their preferred style" (Tasnimi, 2009, p.121).

Moreover, when students are given no preparation time before speaking, they often encounter speaking anxiety. This typically occurs when a teacher calls upon a student to answer a question without time for them to think. This has devastating effects on students as they instantly feel nervous and have trouble thinking due to this apprehension. For instance, in her research, Mak found that "…speaking in front of the class in a second/foreign language classroom without preparation is the most speaking-in-class anxiety-provoking factor" (2011, p.209). Students have a fear of making mistakes, and this adds to the speaking anxiety levels. Thus, singling out students in the classroom often has devastating effects on speaking development and should be avoided.

The Solutions

Cooperative learning, preparation time, and positive classrooms

In the language classroom, finding solutions that lower speaking anxiety levels is essential. Not only will it make students want to speak English in class, but it will also create an environment where all students want to develop their language skills. One way to do this is through cooperative learning. This involves structuring classes around small group tasks where students work together and learn together. This has added benefits in that students occasionally learn better from each other rather than their teacher because it is less stressful talking to their peers. Research shows that students learn better, remember concepts longer, and actually enjoy cooperative learning activities in the classroom compared to traditional teacher centered approaches. For example, "Recently, cooperative learning (CL) has been proposed as a framework for organizing and maximizing authentic and purposeful classroom interaction among learners in a supportive and stress-reduced environment, thereby increasing their achievement in the cognitive, affective, and social domains of schooling" (Shaaban & Ghaith, 2005, p.15). Most importantly, it lowers anxiety levels as only a small number of students will notice mistakes when they are made compared to the whole class during teacher directed lessons.

Another technique involves providing adequate preparation time before being required to speak in class. This has many added benefits such as a chance to practice, allowing for time to think, and lowering overall speaking anxiety levels. This can be as simple as allowing students a few minutes to think about their answer, brainstorm ideas, and practice in their head exactly what they are going to say before they say it. This technique can drastically reduce the fear of making mistakes as students will feel more confident with their answers before speaking. By reducing the fear of making mistakes, speaking anxiety is reduced and students are able to develop their communication skills at a faster rate.

The last technique that reduces the fear of making mistakes and the related speaking anxiety is a very important one. It involves creating a positive classroom environment that makes the students feel more comfortable in class. A big part of this involves the teacher and from day one, they must let students know that mistakes are acceptable in class, and they should reward students for effort, even if they are not correct. This has the positive effect of developing self-confidence, allowing students to learn from their mistakes, and makes them actually want to come to English class. This technique will have a huge impact on reducing the fear of making mistakes and will increase participation in class. When students know they

are in a safe classroom where the teacher provides positive reinforcement, then they will not fear making mistakes as much and will have lower levels of speaking anxiety.

Conclusion

As McCroskey states, speaking anxiety is "An individual level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons" (1977, p.438). Given this definition, in today's EFL classrooms, we can say that all students will have some level of speaking anxiety and a fear of making mistakes is a major part of that. Thus, it is up to the teacher to recognize this fear and incorporate methodologies that will make students more comfortable. Mistakes in the language classroom should not be seen as negative things, they should be seen as positives. It is imperative that students understand this. Furthermore, cooperative learning, adequate preparation time, and positive classrooms are three ways to effectively lower the fear of making mistakes. When this fear is low, students will have lower speaking anxiety, and will have the self-confidence needed to speak more. When students are speaking more, they are developing more and thus, they will progress at a faster rate. In the end, they will be confident English speakers who don't mind making a mistake or two. They will see them as positives and will essentially be more confident English speakers.

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Acknowledgement