

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The aim of this study is to provide a better understanding of the speaking language anxiety that is experienced by many Malay second language learners of English by providing answers to the research questions posed by the researcher in Chapter 1. This study was conducted to find out if anxiety does affect high and low proficiency learners, specifically in a speaking test. Other than that, the researcher also attempted to discern whether the anxiety experienced could affect their test results. For the purpose of this study, 39 participants of both high and low proficiency from an institution of higher learning were selected to respond to questionnaires and interviews. Their scores on a public presentation test were also taken into account. The nature of the data collected was both quantitative and qualitative.

5.2 FINDINGS

In sum, the participants in this study were mostly found to share a common trait which is high anxiety when it comes to speaking, especially in a test situation. This finding parallels Jones' (2004: 33) view that "...not every low-level learner is anxious and not every high-level learner is free of anxiety". In addition, the agony of the participants of this study was not only caused by public speaking, but also the test anxiety as their presentation was being evaluated. As a result, it was a double blow for the learners to be in such a situation where it could have affected the performance as well as the personality of some of the participants. This is supported by Chan and Wu (2004: 293) who stated that "an oral test is more complicated because it provokes both test anxiety and oral communication apprehension". In brief, the English language

anxiety experienced by learners especially in communication can be hampering and can affect their social lives and achievement of academic goals (Woodrow, 2006). In language learning, personality has been found to play a role in the learning process. If learners have an extrovert personality, the learning might be easier. This is especially true in oral or spoken activities. As is generally known, speaking in front of others can arouse the feeling of nervousness in people. Thus, it is not surprising to know that one of the sources of learners' language anxiety is anxious personality (Chan & Wu, 2004). Generally, people with this kind of personality have the tendency to be anxious in any situation.

The researcher's experience as an English teacher has afforded her the opportunity to observe that some of her students were actually good in other English language skills such as writing or reading. However, their overall grades tend to drop due to their not-so-impressive speaking results. Even worse, some learners do not even want to speak up in any of the English classes for fear of making mistakes and being laughed at by peers or friends. This scenario has been confirmed by the participants of this study. Making mistakes and being laughed at can actually bring down their self-esteem. These two factors have also been mentioned by some of the participants during the interview (Chapter 4, Section 4.3.4). Both factors fall under the category of communication apprehension mentioned by Ohata (2005b). This is known as debilitating anxiety.

Debilitating anxiety is not a pleasant experience for second language learners such as the participants of this study as it can contribute to the poor performance of the task at hand. The situation is worsened when the subjects are put in a test situation which naturally causes people to feel nervous, especially when the evaluation involves speaking. Similarly, the particular finding confirms Woodrow's (2006) claim (see Chapter 2, Section 2.8) that second language speakers of English have the tendency to

experience second language anxiety especially when it concerns their oral performance which in turn leads to the debilitating effect. Those who think they are not proficient in a certain language, in this context, English can actually feel very conscious when they have to use the language in public. It can be the cause of embarrassment to many people and those who have a shy personality are likely to be the ones most affected. The Malay participants of this study are also not exempt from this personality as quite a number of them were found to be very shy not just during their presentation, but also during the interview session with the researcher.

Since the general assumption being made by the general public is that high anxiety learners may not be as successful as low anxiety learners, this study may probably shed some light on this matter. The reason for this is because although some participants of this study had to go through a nerve-wrecking experience during the presentation, they managed to prove this general assumption wrong as their results were not reflective of the anxiety they had experienced. It cannot be denied that a test situation can in fact aggravate the anxiety that is already inherent in some people. However, this situation might be advantageous to those who know how to make the best of the situation as it can help them to produce the best in a particular test. In view of the fact that anxiety is something which cannot be avoided especially in a test, it could serve as a motivating factor to strive for better results. This factor was probably one of the reasons why many of the high anxiety participants of this study, specifically those in the high proficiency category achieved satisfactory or even good results in the assessment. In addition, this finding seems to parallel that of what MacIntyre and Gardner (1989) pointed out (see Chapter Two, Section 2.5.1) that the anxiety felt could serve as an asset in learners' performance and facilitate them in their presentation. Hence, high anxiety learners may not necessarily achieve lower grades than low anxiety learners in their speaking assessment as has been proven in this study.

On the other hand, the general belief that low anxiety learners would perform better than high anxiety learners has also been confirmed by this study. Even though the majority of the participants in this study were experiencing high anxiety throughout their speaking assessment, there were a few, from both high and low proficiency groups, who had very low anxiety. Hence, their low level of anxiousness has benefited them as their confidence level was not affected. Consequently, the speaking assessment was a breeze for these low anxiety learners.

One of the findings of this study is also that the levels of anxiety experienced by high and low proficiency learners was almost the same, and in some cases the high proficiency learners had a higher level of anxiety. However, the latter's anxiety did not seem to have affected their performance. The low proficiency group, on the other hand, were not as fortunate as their performance was affected as clearly evident in their test scores. This finding is in line with MacIntyre's (1999: 34) finding that "...high levels of language anxiety are associated with low levels of academic achievement in second or foreign language courses".

In conclusion, the findings of this study confirm Phillips' (1992) findings that speaking language anxiety can occur across all levels of learners, and that it is not only confined to low proficiency or high anxiety learners. The factors that contribute to speaking anxiety vary according to each individual. Therefore, speaking language anxiety can be said to be a common phenomenon happening among second language learners.

5.3 SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LEARNERS AND TEACHERS

Having a good and understanding teacher, the right attitude and the right mindset can contribute to a significant reduction of the anxiety level in learners particularly in the speaking context. To make the process of reducing the anxiety level successful, both teachers and learners have to play their roles effectively. This is to ensure that both parties can in fact achieve their targets correspondingly.

5.3.1 LEARNERS' ROLE

On the whole, the biggest responsibility lies on the shoulders of the learners as they are the ones who can determine whether they are going to be successful language learners or not. As speaking is a very important skill in any language learning context, it is of the utmost importance that learners have to learn to overcome their apprehension. Teachers are only there to help ease their 'burden' but most of the work should be done by learners themselves. One of the possible ways for learners to overcome their fear is through informing their teachers of their anxiety problem. This can be done through a personal consultation with the teacher. Letting the teacher know of the learners' problem does in fact help to reduce their 'burden' as the teacher might not have very high expectations of this particular type of learners. This method was used by one of the researcher's students who mentioned that talking to the researcher about her anxiety was actually the first step for her in overcoming her fear of speaking in public. The student also noted that her public speaking skill had actually improved after talking to the researcher.

In normal circumstances when language anxiety occurs, some learners might find ways to reduce or overcome their anxiousness. There are several different ways that have been found to help them with the problem. Woodrow (2006) has listed five

different techniques to overcome speaking language anxiety used by the respondents in her study which are:

1. “‘perseverance’ – not giving up when speaking
2. ‘improving language’ – preparing utterances and studying to improve speaking
3. ‘positive thinking – positive self-talk
4. ‘compensation strategies’ – smiling and volunteering comments
5. various relaxation techniques – deep breathing and conscious efforts to calm oneself”

(Woodrow, 2006: 320)

Some of the techniques listed by Woodrow have in fact been used by the participants of this study and some of them seemed to have worked out well for the participants in reducing their anxiety.

In many cases, perseverance is the strategy which has been generally used by learners to overcome their anxiety and it is also the case with Woodrow’s respondents. Likewise, the participants of this study also used perseverance to lower their level of anxiety. Therefore, perseverance is, as a matter of fact, very important for language learners to have due to the fact that it can help with their performance in the target language.

Other than that, applying certain relaxation techniques such as diverting their attention from a stressful attention to positive and pleasant cues can bring about relief to language learners especially in oral activities or exams (Ardi, 2007). Another method to relax is to breathe deeply before starting the exam or assessment. Taking a deep breath can help a person to feel more relaxed. This technique was actually applied by one of the interviewees to calm herself down before the presentation. Apart from deep breathing, learners can also talk to themselves to make themselves feel less stressful (Woodrow, 2006). Words such as ‘I am calm’ or ‘I am ready’ are some of the things that learners can say in order to reduce their anxiety level. Carrying out all these methods can facilitate learners to minimise the symptoms of anxiety (Ardi, 2007).

In addition, being well-prepared can be helpful for learners to lessen their feeling of anxiety. Both Ardi (2007) and Woodrow (2006) share the opinion that preparing and improving their learning strategies could be beneficial for learners as they are fully-prepared of the ‘obstacles’ they might face in their exam or assessment. Most of the interviewees also mentioned that being prepared for the presentation helped to eliminate their anxiety before the presentation. As a result, knowing what to expect or to do can be of so much assistance to learners to reduce their anxiety. Being well-prepared eased their tension as they knew what they were going to do during their presentation.

Another strategy frequently used by learners is positive thinking. Having a positive outlook on things has generally helped people in many ways. Thus, the field of language learning can also benefit from having positive thinking. In this context, learners could think positively that they would be able to perform a particular task well. Through this kind of thinking, learners would be able to look at their performance positively which will indirectly help to bring down their anxiety level. Being positive thinkers does not only reduce the learners’ anxiety level, but it could also enhance their performance. This is because when a person thinks positively, the level of self-confidence could also be higher. Many of those coping strategies mentioned by other researchers have actually been employed by the participants of this study. Some strategies mentioned to overcome their anxiety were looking for ‘comfort’ in the audience, deep breathing before the assessment and being well-prepared.

5.3.2 TEACHERS’ ROLE

Other than the role of learners themselves, teachers can also do a lot to help their learners ease anxiety. Under normal circumstances, it is probably common to find that most of the learners in a language class would feel nervous in a speaking class. One method is to probably inform learners especially in the first class, that it is natural for

them to experience anxiety in a speaking class. Teachers can also let their learners know that making mistakes is part of the language learning process and that it is not wrong for them to make mistakes while learning. This method has also been suggested by Horwitz et.al (1986: 131) which is known as “acknowledging the existence of the anxiety”. This is essentially true as many language learners are afraid of making mistakes while speaking as they do not want to be laughed at by others. Learners need to know that they are not expected to be perfect in their language production, but the improvement should occur gradually.

Another way for teachers to reduce learners’ anxiety is to have a friendly learning atmosphere in the classroom. What is meant by friendly is that teachers can create a classroom where there are lots of opportunities for learners to interact with them without feeling afraid. In this study, several participants have actually reported that having a friendly teacher aided them during their presentation. By being friendly with them, the teacher had in actual fact made the participants feel comfortable as the person who was grading them was a familiar face to them. Even so, learners should be allowed to contribute ideas in their language classrooms as there should not be any gap or barrier to stop them from giving ideas or contributing to class discussions. Teachers should be encouraging them and not penalising them for any mistakes made. Nevertheless, teachers can correct the mistakes made by using a technique that might not cause any embarrassment to learners. For instance, if a learner pronounces a word wrongly, the teacher can correct the mistake by repeating the wrongly pronounced word in the correct pronunciation. In this way, the learner would indirectly realise that she or he has made a mistake and that it has been corrected. Furthermore, teachers should also allow for some light moments in class whereby they can occasionally joke around with their students to minimize the tension in class. It is hoped that the teachers’ friendliness would provide more comfort for learners to be in the classroom.

5.4 IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

The findings of this study are indispensable as the phenomenon of speaking language anxiety appears to be prevalent among Malay second language learners of English. Therefore, a number of implications resulting from this study are listed below:

- 1) Similar studies as this should be conducted to see whether there is a connection between the Malay culture and English language anxiety. The issue of whether the Malay identity is a factor that contributes to Malay students' achievement or lack of it during presentations or public speaking should be researched further. Related studies could also be carried out with other ethnic groups in Malaysia such as the Chinese and Indian students to see if they have similar experiences in English language learning, particularly with regards to the speaking skill. Researchers could also carry out a more in-depth research on major ethnic groups in Malaysia so that comparisons can be made and the necessary measures taken to address the issue. This is important as many graduates these days do not seem to possess good communication abilities which have severely affected their chances of getting employed. Researchers should examine the 'root' of this problem as it can negatively affect learners throughout the language learning process.
- 2) The objective of such studies should not only be confined to the speaking skill, but also to the other productive skill, which is writing, especially under test situations, either during class assessments or examinations as test situations could also pose problems to second language learners as this study has shown.

5.5 CONCLUSION

This study has shown that anxiety does not afflict only low proficiency learners, but also high proficiency learners. However, this study cannot be regarded as

representing the whole Malay ESL learner population because the sample used is small. Nonetheless, the data gathered suggest that the anxiety faced by the participants of this study is similar to those found in other related studies by Phillips (1999), Chan and Wu (2004) and Ohata (2005a).

In conclusion, language anxiety is not always negative for it also produces facilitating effects on the learners. They should take advantage of the facilitating anxiety to help them become confident speakers of the target language. The low proficiency learners especially should not feel demotivated when they experience speaking anxiety as high proficiency learners are not spared of the experience. As the focus of this study is on the speaking anxiety of Malay ESL learners, this study would be useful in Malaysia as there has been no previous work that involved Malay ESL learners and their anxiety. Thus, it is hoped that this study could help teachers to understand their learners better and it could also help learners to know that being anxious in language learning is not actually 'wrong' and can eventually lead them to become successful language learners.