

SSSS: SPEAKING STUDENTS SCARED STIFF

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INTRODUCTION

Second language classroom anxiety is a general type of anxiety related to learning a second language with a strong speaking anxiety element (Cheng et al 1999). When we consider this, we find it causes some difficulties in the assessment of speaking skills.. As noted by Nakamura (in Sook, 2003), since the role of the speaking ability has become more central in language teaching, testing oral proficiency has become one of the most important issues in language testing, especially with the advent of communicative language teaching. It is generally perceived that oral testing is difficult (Jones, in Sook, 2003), and it is a perplexing problem for many language teachers (Nagata, in Sook, 2003).

Woodrow (2006) suggests that second language anxiety has a debilitating effect on the oral performance of second language learners, and this kind of anxiety cannot be easily dismissed in the context of L2 teaching. In speaking exams, which are naturally anxiety-provoking environments, being evaluated might either serve as a reminder of the learner's current L2 competence in comparison to others, or produce idealized images of themselves as successful language learners (Eharman, 1996). This being the case, the assessment of productive skills has always been a challenging and controversial issue. Language educators have always been overly pre-occupied with setting out assessment criteria and procedures to increase objectivity, but have rarely stopped to ask how the learners feel about them. Sadly enough, the "learner" side seems to be ignored, largely because the focus has been on testing mechanisms rather than the promotion of language competence.

Stemming from the inherent difficulty in testing speaking, this study aims at "voicing" the language learners' opinions and feelings specifically about the assessment of speaking skills in the School of Foreign Languages at Izmir University of Economics. Considering that there are "panic" and "fear" factors in speaking tests, and that speaking tests can be both frustrating

and nerve-wracking for language learners, this study gives the learners a chance to voice their opinions and share their feelings about the speaking tests.

CONTEXT

- Izmir University of Economics was founded in the year 2001.
- 140 instructors work in the School of Foreign Languages, English Preparatory Program.
- Currently, there are 1300 students studying in the preparatory program. Students in the preparatory program are grouped according to their proficiency levels. The levels in the fall semester in the academic year 2006-2007 were: beginner, elementary, pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate.
- The courses offered in this program are: main course, reading, listening and writing.
- In the academic year 2006-2007 speaking classes were been added to the preparatory program as a separate component (2 hours per week taught by foreign instructors) based on perceived needs regarding the teaching of this particular skill. This inevitably called for a need for testing mechanisms to be put in place.
- The final speaking exam was held at the end of the fall semester with one Turkish and one foreign instructor.

DATA COLLECTION

The data was collected following the steps below:

- **Step 1:**

The students were asked how they were feeling in recorded discussions immediately prior to taking the speaking test given at the end of the first semester in the 2006-2007 academic year. Some of the speaking test sessions were also recorded.

- **Step 2:**

Students from each level (Beginner, Elementary, Pre-Intermediate and Intermediate) in the preparatory program were interviewed. Prior to the interview, the students were given an “adjective test”, through which they described their feelings before, during and after the exam.

- **Step 3:**

Some of the oral examiners were also interviewed to find out their opinions on the exams, and their comments were compared to students' remarks. Those interviews were also recorded.

Questions for Students Before the Exam

- How are you feeling right now?
- What do you think is going to happen when you enter the exam room?
- Do you have any tactics to deal with the “anxiety” issue? Do you think they are going to work?
- Do you think who your partner is in this exam is an important factor that might affect your performance during the exam?
- Do you think the instructors in the exam room could be an important factor that might affect your performance during the exam?
- Which of the two speaking tasks in the exam do you think you will perform better at?
- What are the other factors that you think might affect your performance in the exam? (physical conditions, seating arrangement, etc.)

Questions for Students After the Exam

- How are you feeling right now?
- How was your exam?
- Did you use any tactics to deal with your anxiety? Did they work?
- How did the following factors affect your performance in the exam?
 - Your partner
 - Instructors
 - Tasks/Instructions
 - Others
- What are your expectations about the future speaking exams?

Questions for Teachers

- Now that you have done the speaking exam, in retrospect, how would you evaluate it?
- What were your feelings during the exam?
- How do you think the students felt during the exam?

- In which ways did students' state of mind in the exam affect their performance, in your opinion?
- In what way did the tasks affect their performance, in your opinion?
- How did their partners affect their performance, in your opinion?
- How did your presence and attitude affect their performance?
- Any suggestions for future speaking exams?
- In relation to students' performance during the exam, did you notice anything – either positive or negative-?

The in-depth qualitative interview format was used to attempt to identify potential sources of “speaking test anxiety”.

RESULTS

The results of the adjective test given to the students are as follows:

Table 1 Beginner (5 Sts)

	BEFORE	WHILE	AFTER
Panicky	2	3	0
Confused	2	3	0
Nervous	4	4	1
Scared	0	2	0
Worried	4	2	2
Indifferent	0	0	0
Bored	0	1	0
Neutral	0	0	0
Confident	1	0	0
Relieved	0	0	4
Good	0	0	0
Excited	0	0	0
Willing	0	0	0
Enthusiastic	0	0	0

Table 2 Elementary (5 Sts)

	BEFORE	WHILE	AFTER
Panicky	0	3	0
Confused	0	2	0
Nervous	3	1	0
Scared	0	1	0
Worried	4	1	1
Indifferent	0	0	0
Bored	0	0	0
Neutral	0	0	0
Confident	0	1	4
Relieved	0	0	1
Good	0	0	0
Excited	1	1	2
Willing	0	0	0
Enthusiastic	1	1	0

Table 1.1

	Number	Percent
Negative Adjectives	30	85.7%
Neutral Adjective	0	0.0%
Positive Adjectives	5	14.3%
Overall	35	100.0%

Table 2.1

	Number	Percent
Negative Adjectives	16	57,1%
Neutral Adjective	0	0,0%
Positive Adjectives	12	42,9%
Overall	35	100,0%

Table 3 Pre-Intermediate (5 Sts)

	BEFORE	WHILE	AFTER
Panicky	0	0	0
Confused	0	1	1
Nervous	0	1	2
Scared	0	0	0
Worried	1	1	1
Indifferent	0	0	0
Bored	0	0	0
Neutral	1	2	2
Confident	3	2	1
Relieved	0	0	0
Good	0	0	0
Excited	1	1	0
Willing	2	0	0
Enthusiastic	0	0	0

Table 3.1

	Number	Percent
Negative Adjectives	8	34,8%
Neutral Adjective	5	21,7%
Positive Adjectives	10	43,5%
Overall	35	100,0%

Table 4 Intermediate (5 Sts)

	BEFORE	WHILE	AFTER
Panicky	1	0	0
Confused	1	0	1
Nervous	0	0	0
Scared	0	0	0
Worried	1	0	0
Indifferent	0	0	1
Bored	0	0	0
Neutral	1	3	4
Confident	2	4	0
Relieved	0	0	4
Good	0	0	1
Excited	4	2	0
Willing	2	1	0
Enthusiastic	1	0	0

Table 4.1.

	Number	Percent
Negative Adjectives	5	14,7%
Neutral Adjective	8	23,5%
Positive Adjectives	21	61,8%
Overall	35	100,0%

What is most significant about these tables is that there is a direct correlation between the proficiency level of the students and the type of adjectives used to describe their feelings about the speaking exam. As illustrated in Table 1.1., the lowest level (beginner) students have a high anxiety level of 85.7% whereas, the highest level students (intermediate- Table 4.1.) had a nominal ratio of negative adjectives (14,7%). All other levels in between followed a similar pattern.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

As a result of interviews conducted with the learners and the assessor teachers, three main areas appeared to be the main sources of anxiety in the speaking exams:

- 1) Partners: Results of the interviews with both the students and the examiner teachers showed that certain points should be taken into consideration when assigning partners

for the test-taking students. For example, pairing a confident partner with a weaker partner or a weak partner with an average partner does not seem to be a good idea.

- 2) Examiner teachers: The results of student interviews indicate that teachers' body language, smiling faces, and gestures for encouragement make a big difference in students' performance in the exam room.

The proclaimed goal of eliminating negative emotional elements from the speaking exams is virtually impossible to achieve, or rather a misconception regarding the teacher's responsibility. However, it is undoubtedly true that the teachers' supportive attitude toward anxious students, along with continuous efforts to understand their effective needs, can make a significant contribution to creating a comfortable exam environment. (Ohata, 2005)

- 3) Tasks: The tasks should be the most efficient way of obtaining the information about the test takers (Sook, 2003). In such speaking exams, it should be made clear to students what is expected of them in each task. Instructions should be unambiguous, and prompts should be given carefully.

Students naturally felt some pressure being forced to speak in front of their peers and teachers as was also evident in Lambert's (2003) study. Frustration and irritation over their own unsatisfactory performance was evident in their remarks during the interviews.

Students feel challenged by the fact that they need to recall and coordinate many grammar points at the same time during the limited test period. As a result, they may say wrong things or as was typical in this study, simply "freeze" due to nervousness.

This kind of a test taking situation makes the students anxious about the negative consequences of getting a bad grade. This can invoke other psychological stress factors, such as the fear of losing self-confidence or feeling inferior to others (Ohata, 2005).

In conclusion, our first and most important task as ESL/EFL teachers is to gain a better understanding of the nature of student anxiety in terms of when, where, how, and why students feel anxious, before attempting to discover effective ways of anxiety reduction. (Spielmann and Radnofsky in Ohata, 2005).

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