Teachers' Anxiety-relieving Techniques for Academic Success: Cihan University-Erbil, Department of English Language

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Abstract—Although it is fairly obvious that student stress and anxiety have a negative impact on students' academic performance, the role that teachers can play in easing these difficulties is frequently overlooked. The purpose of this study is to discover the techniques employed by teachers to help students who are anxious about speaking English and to determine the effects of those strategies. This study makes use of a qualitative approach. The participants of this study included six lecturers from English Department of Cihan University-Erbil. The obtained data through interview are analyzed descriptively. Peer group and fun activities are two of those techniques that those teachers have used and they could enhance student self-assurance, communication abilities, and collaborative learning. Moreover, relaxing, inspiring, and entertaining are the impact of doing some fun activities by them to alleviate the anxiety level of students.

Keywords—Anxiety alleviation, Academic achievement, Teachers' techniques, Communicative English Class

I. Introduction

Learning a second or foreign language takes a lot of individual efforts. Each learner experiences it differently, with varying pace and result. In Kurdistan Region, Iraq, the English language learners are considered as EFL learners thus neither in public nor formal settings do they ever speak English. As a result, individuals encounter numerous challenges because they do not have enough opportunities to practice their English (Abdulwahid, 2023). Anxiety is one of the common factors in the learning process. This factor makes some of the students embarrassed in the class discussions as they are afraid of sounding foolish or getting negative feedback from the teacher. According to Olatoye (2009), people who are stressed out about their lives may experience restlessness. Most of the university students are anxious about English classrooms. It corresponds to Numrich's (1996) finding that anxiety is a difficulty for language teachers as well and it affects the instructions. Teaching can be impacted by any type of anxiety including feelings, attitudes, and actions. According to Yoon (2012), anxiety is a common human feeling that manifests itself through any internal and external change brought by uncertain circumstances or even just a sense of doubt.

Anxiety is defined as a kind of emotion that results from untreated stress, while stress is regarded as a person's impression that a situation is beyond his capacity to deal with and jeopardize his health and well-being (Bamber and Kraenzle Schneider, 2016). It is crucial to bear in mind that investigations in educational studies do not usually give comprehensive definition for stress and anxiety or even they do not make a distinction between them. Despite the possible differences between stress and anxiety, it is obvious that both are significant problems for undergraduates.

Most of the people have experienced the inexplicable mental behavior that occurs when they are asked a question while learning a language. Sometimes they completely avoid communication chances. Some other students choose not to speak because they are not ready enough or they are reluctant to engage. The majority of anxiety is caused by students' perceptions of isolation in the classroom, lack of self-assurance, or a fear of class activity and interaction (Daly, 1991).

Recently numerous studies have reported the increase of mental health issues among the college students in the United States (Eisenberg et al., 2015). Notably, stress (reported by 40% of all students) and anxiety (29% of all students were found to be the two main obstacles to academic achievement in a countrywide study of undergraduate students in the United States (American College Health Association

[ACHA], 2019). Stress and anxiety are intricate notions and their meanings have generated much discussions (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). In fact, during the previous academic year, more than one-third of all undergraduates claimed to have experienced anxiety that negatively affected their educational attainment (ACHA, 2019; Morey and Taylor, 2019).

Over time, the way that English is taught has changed to incorporate communicative techniques in communicative EFL college classes. This technique helps the learners to become more engaged in the class and enhance their speaking and listening skills. In such classes, the students monitor their performance and compare themselves to their classmates, and they may worry about their performance (Kitano, 2001). Since excessive levels of anxiety will negatively affect the students' performance in EFL classroom, numerous researches have concentrated on alleviating anxiety in these settings (Horwitz et al., 1986). The teaching method that is chosen in a class can help to control this anxiety level? The results also showed that the instructional situation is mostly described by learning techniques. However, there are differences between all of these studies when it comes to their research methods, data collection techniques, and tactics and designs (Tahseen and Raewf, 2018).

To make an active atmosphere for EFL classes in a way that the students engage actively and improve their communication skills, the teacher is required to take into account the students' feeling of anxiety. Six teachers participated in individual interviews for this study and the results and suggestions for lowering students' anxiety levels are reported.

The following research questions were investigated in this study:

1. What are the techniques that the teachers use to alleviate the students' anxiety level?
2. Are the teachers' techniques effective to reduce the students' anxiety?

II. Literature Review

Regarding the students' anxiety in EFL classes, some research findings are available in the field of education. "Using a Mobile Application (WhatsApp) to Reduce EFL speaking anxiety" was the title of a study by Han and Keskin (2016) which fund that the male students had higher level of anxiety than the female ones.

According to the recent technologies and social advancements, the English language teaching has increasingly changed from the grammatical translation approach to include the communicative methods (Nishino, 2008). In most of the universities in Kurdistan-Iraq, especially the private ones, English is chosen as the main studying language in the classrooms, especially in the English language departments. It is the main reason that the students experience anxiety in the class. The learners would not be able to understand the information being covered in class, and their anxiety levels will rise as a result of believing that the classes are beyond their level of proficiency if teachers continue using the second language like English (Rivers, 2011).

Additionally, Zhang (2019) believes that anxiety is related to the students' academic achievement, self-confidence, and enthusiasm. The students will be more motivated to learn a language by alleviating their anxiety level (Yan and Howitz, 2008). Van Batenburg et al. (2019) demonstrated that the learners' performance in EFL communicative class can be a good criterion to estimate their self-confidence under carefully targeted training. Most of the students felt confident more in group activities or pair works (Kosh and Terrel, 1991). The teachers can strengthen the students' self-confidence to have a better engagement in class activities. In this way, they will be more motivated and interested in studying English, and it can be done by giving chance to them to use their English more in class.

According to MacIntyre and Gardner (1989), language anxiety is a social anxiety that results from the communicative aspects of learning a second language. The symptoms of social anxiety include uneasy feelings, a bad opinion of oneself, and a tendency to retreat (Schwarzer, 1986). This association was also noted by Gass and Selinker (1994), who explained that individuals with social anxiety worry about how others see them and are concerned with leaving a positive impression on those they contact with. These individuals could be teachers, classmates, or interlocutors in contexts where language acquisition is occurring.

This was also covered more recently by Toth (2010), who stated that because language learning takes place in a social context and involves interpersonal communication, language anxiety can be classified under the larger category of social anxieties. Stage fright, communication anxiety, speech anxiety, and shyness are a few examples of additional social anxiety. People who have social anxiety are nervous about engaging in any kind of interpersonal engagement and worry about how they will come across to others. With disengagement and a passive verbal communication style brought on by social anxiety, people tend to avoid social interactions. Since social contacts are crucial for acquiring communicative competence, this has grave implications for language learning (Horwitz et al., 1986).

Although some believe that a little anxiety is crucial for language learning, it is difficult for some students to focus on and recall the new language. This feeling will impress the needed practice to internalize the new language.

MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) describe language anxiety as follows:

"Learning a second language is an unpleasant experience for an anxious student. These students try to retract from active participation in class, and they are afraid of making mistakes while they are making new language structures." (p.112).

"The Reduction of Speaking Anxiety in EFL Learners Through Drama Techniques" is the title of a study by Atas (2015), came to the conclusion that in EFL classes the students' anxiety can be decreased by drama. The emotional atmosphere of the EFL classroom is really enhanced by using the drama. This quality of the class helped the students to give up their preconceived notions about EFL classes, and it made them enthusiastic to attend actively in them without any fear and anxiety.

Despite the fact that there have been lots of studies about students' anxiety. This study is completely different. The main focus of the others was on how the students handle their fears and anxiety on their own. The subject of this research is the teachers' techniques to alleviate the students' anxiety in EFL classrooms. It may be argued that the main problem with this study is that the students did not conduct it. The learners do not alleviate this anxiety level on their own.

III. Methodology

A descriptive and qualitative research is used in this study. As Gay et al. (2006) claimed;" Qualitative research is the collection, analysis, and evaluation of extensive narrative and visual data to generate knowledge about a particular subject of interest."

Regarding the technique employed to persuade instructors to take part in the interview, the study's researcher asked her colleagues to assist her in this research. It was necessary for the class(es) to mostly be taught in English. As both the instructors and the students agreed that using Kurdish language should be avoided, several of the instructors spoke in Kurdish when the students struggled to understand the lessons' content. In this study, data were gathered through interviews and classroom observations. To learn about the goings-on in the classroom and to learn about the teachers' methods for dealing with students' anxiety while teaching English, classroom observations and interviews were conducted. Six teachers from Cihan University-Erbil, English Department participated in this interview that their demographic data are shown in Table I. As the different lecturers were teaching different subjects in the English department, so their textbooks were different. To get ideas for lowering the students' anxiety levels, the teachers were questioned.

The researcher in this study took on the role of an objective observer. Through their interactions during the learning process and their reaction when the instructor uses a technique, the researcher was able to identify the teachers' strategies for reducing students' anxiety when speaking English. In addition, to determine which strategies, have the most effects on students' levels of anxiety, the researcher also evaluated the effects of the teacher's methods for reducing students' speaking anxiety symptoms.

Six lecturers participated in semi-structured one-on-one interviews, which were held in their offices or a quiet area of campus and were scheduled based on their availability. 30–60 min were allotted for the interviews. During the interview, they were asked the following questions are going to be clearly stated in the data and data analysis section:

1. What types of techniques do you use to lower students' anxiety levels?
2. How do you deal with students that are extremely anxious?
3. How can you employ communicative activities in English classrooms to take advantage of group interaction and lessen anxiety levels among your students?

The interview data were first transcribed and coded. Based on the causes of anxiety that earlier researchers had found, such as establishing a risk-free environment, coding categories were developed (also minimizing stress levels; Shao et al., 2013), enhancing the number of speaking engagements (Dewaele and Al-Saraj, 2015), adding more pair and group projects (Crawford et al., 2019), and employing group dynamics (Murphey et al., 2014). After that, the interview data were analyzed for patterns and correlations.

IV. Data and Data Analysis

To lower the students' anxiety level, various techniques were used by the teachers such as peer group, games.

A. The Impact of Peer Group
Developing student's self confidence

This excerpt was obtained by recording the first observation and interview:

Learning in a group is preferable since we are more confident when we are working together than when we are working alone and are hesitant to speak in front of the class.

This extract showed that the students preferred to study in a group than study individually. Students gain greater

TABLE I
Demographic Data of Interviewed Teachers

Considered points	Teacher 1	Teacher 2	Teacher 3	Teacher 4	Teacher 5	Teacher 6
Age	In the 50s	In the 30s	In the 30s	In the 20s	In the 40s	In the 30s
Gender	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Nationality	Iraqi	Iranian	Iraqi	Iranian	Iraqi	Iraqi
Teaching experience	20 years	13 years	8 years	3 years	11 years	6 years
Degree	MA	MA	MA	MA	MA	MA
Work sectors	English Dep.	English Dep.	English Dep.	English Dep.	English Dep.	English Dep.
Status	Assistant lecturer	Assistant Professor	Assistant lecturer	Assistant lecturer	Assistant lecturer	Assistant lecturer
Number of class(es)	5	4	5	4	3	5
Students in charge	Vocabulary	Syntax I	Listening and speaking	Comprehension I	18th C. Novel	18th C. Poetry
Use of language	English	English	English	English	English	English
Classroom strictness	Mild	Neutral	Neutral	Neutral	Mild	Mild
Fear of making mistakes	Yes, but sometimes No	Yes, but sometimes No	No	No	No	Yes, but sometimes No
Students in charge	2nd Stage	4th Stage	2nd Stage	2nd stage	4th stage	4th stage

confidence through group study than they would separately. Students' anxiety levels may rise if they believe they are alone and have no support from those around them. They can improve their learning process and boost their confidence and motivation by minimizing their anxiousness.

Developing communication skill

This extract was taken from the first observation and interview by recording:

That is the distinction between studying alone and working in a group, yet it may be the same in terms of English comprehension. Individually, we can learn more about ourselves.

By this extract, it was proved that the student preferred to study in a group than study individually. The teacher used group discussions to help pupils improve their communication skills so they could learn how to talk and express their goals and opinions with others. However, because the outcome of their debate was based on all of the ideas that were addressed, it was occasionally challenging for him to discern the distinctions between his abilities and those of the other group members. It is evident from his comment that "we understand ourselves better individually".

Creating collaborative learning

This extract was also taken from the second interview by recording:

I have a lot of friends who can assist me and work with me if I study in a group rather than alone.

This excerpt demonstrated that one of the things that can help students feel less anxious about learning English is collaborative learning. When they encounter challenges, the students can seek assistance from one another and from the other students in their groups. Since it required the students to share, discuss, and work together as a group, a group was able to find solutions to those problems. When students can learn alongside one another and support one another, collaborative learning can be a beneficial habit. It can help the learners become more involved in school activities, build positive relationships with others, and focus on both their own lives and the needs of society.

B. The Impact of Games

Relaxing

This extract was taken from the first observation and interview by recording:

I like playing games in class because they prevent me from being bored while I'm learning and having fun.

This extract demonstrates how stimulating games are. Playing games in the classroom helps students recall information more quickly and effectively by reducing worry and stress.

Motivating

This extract was taken from the first observation and interview by recording. It was shown by this statement: We were more alert and creative, not feeling sleepy, and in the mood to study. Get more self-assurance and stop being awkward while learning in class. Make it simple for us to recall new words. Students can learn by using all of their

senses using games. Games entice students to participate in class, amuse them, naturally teach the language, and foster fluency.

Amusing

This extract was taken from the first observation and interview by recording:

Because playing educational games did not make us feel anxious or uncomfortable when we wanted to speak. being ecstatic. Funny, so we're laughing.

This excerpt demonstrated how games are entertaining and can distract pupils from their actual study. It demonstrates how games direct students' attention away from language forms and toward language use, causing them to automatically employ grammar and vocabulary when speaking English.

V. Findings and Discussion

A. Techniques Used by Teachers to Control Students' Anxiety

Peer group and giving more speaking chances in class

The students were separated into groups for this strategy. The teacher then assigns a topic for the students' group discussions. The conversation proceeds well because the students speak in their groups while the teacher moves from one group to the next to maintain order, encourage participation, and provide support. After they are finished, the teacher assigns one group from each to present in front of the class, and the other group is to provide feedback.

Students were permitted to interact in class. They would have the opportunity to discuss it in front of the class when they had done debating it. Based on the aforementioned observation, this method will help the students feel more at ease when they learn in groups rather than working alone. They can share their limited knowledge and unclear instructions with their classmates to reduce their anxiety about making mistakes as they learn. The teacher uses this technique to encourage pupils to express their viewpoints during class discussions.

The lecturers can teach students how to rephrase, define challenging phrases in plain English, and apply beneficial expressions to be encouraged to talk and interact in class more. They can let the learners to talk about their favorite topics in their groups even with mistakes. Uttering words and trying to make sentences are enough to reduce that anxiety level and the teacher can improve it by giving compliments. The teachers should teach students how to cooperate well in pairs. For instance, advanced students should assist beginners by using words other than the ones they recently used. Sometimes using idioms can be troublesome for students' comprehension, Idioms have an odd place in every culture. When one is unfamiliar with the culture, it can be difficult to interpret them. Idioms can also be misleading. Despite having a positive literal meaning, idioms often have a negative connotation (Azeez et al., 2023).

Peer Group, according to Kang (2006), is a small group of friends who have close relationships and frequent contacts. They participate in group activities, discuss opinions, and exchange ideas. One method for controlling students' anxiety

when it is at a moderate level is peer groups. When students learn in groups rather than alone, they will feel more at ease.

Fun activities and methods for utilizing classroom dynamics

In such activities that are mostly like a class game, the teacher tries to engage the students in a fun but relevant activity which is according to the subject matter. They need to be grouped again to interact with their classmates. Due to their enjoyment of the course, the students benefit from this method. With the use of this technique, teachers may get their students excited about participating in class activities and out of a tense mood. In addition, the teacher encouraged students to communicate using this activity. To get kids interested in speaking in class and engaged, the teacher came up with a simple game. The outcome was that the learners were quite content, found the lecture to be enjoyable, and it was simple to follow along. These techniques help students feel more joyful and less anxious while participating in classroom activities. When they are content and at ease, they can take in the material without worrying about their circumstances or their ability to learn. When students are having fun, they are more likely to take chances, making mistakes without feeling defeated, they attempt to address their original emotions and apply the lesson to their daily lives.

Making risk-free classrooms

For making an unthreatening atmosphere for class, reducing the difficulty and volume of the lesson's material, delivering it at a slower pace with simple language, and giving out handouts that summarize it can be so helpful for alleviating the student's anxiety. Making students do the same activity more frequently and increase routine work instead of giving new materials every session can make a safe environment for them to not be stressed.

B. The Effectiveness of Teachers' Methods for Reducing Students' Anxiety

Peer group impact

Increasing students' self-confidence

Students gain greater confidence through group study than they would separately. Students' anxiety levels may increase if they believe they are alone and have no support from those around them. They can improve their learning process and boost their confidence and motivation by minimizing their anxiousness.

Increasing language skills

The anxious student can express his thoughts and aspirations with the other students by attending in groups. The teacher used group discussions to help pupils improve their communication skills so they could learn how to talk and express their goals and opinions with others. However, in study groups, it was sometimes challenging for him to distinguish between his abilities and those of the other participants because the outcomes of their discussions were based on all of the ideas that were brought up.

Encouraging collaborative learning

Every learner occasionally needs assistance from others when they lack knowledge or information. Peer groups can foster collaborative learning that aids students in problem-solving. In their 2010 study, Suwantarathip and Wichadee looked at its application with a group of undergraduates. Students of varied backgrounds and skill levels were divided into small groups in class, and they collaborated to perform a variety of language activities. They used a game called "Numbered Heads Together" as one of their activities. In groups of four, the students collaborated while each had a number allocated to them. The class collaborated to find the solution before the teacher called on a number to answer a question. When their group members were there to support them, the students claimed to feel less anxious.

The impact of fun activities

Trying to relax and taking a rest

Every student occasionally needs a relaxing environment to make learning fun in class and prevent them from feeling stressed out while studying. Oxford (1990) advises language teachers to instruct their learners in the use of emotive methods to reduce anxiety. The methods of gradual relaxation, deep breathing, and meditation can be used by students to achieve a calmer condition, and the teacher may decide to include these at the start of the class hour. Oxford also suggested using humor and relaxing music to promote relaxation and lift students' spirits. Teachers can encourage laughing in their classrooms and help students feel more at ease using funny movies, jokes, dialogue, role-plays, games, and other enjoyable activities.

Inspiring and entertaining

Students can learn by using all of their senses using fun activities. Such activities encourage students to participate in class, amuse them, naturally teach the language, and foster fluency. Another effective method for lowering anxiety is to teach students to encourage themselves (Oxford, 1990). It is crucial to teach students to regularly speak positively about themselves as language learners and the progress; they are making because self-deprecating attitudes frequently accompany worry and can negatively impact language acquisition. A few encouraging self-talk phrases for pupils to use include "I comprehend a lot more of what is stated to me now" (p. 165) and "It's OK if I make errors." The teacher should act as an example of these phrases (p. 165). When students do well or accomplish a personal objective, they should be inspired to treat themselves.

It demonstrates how those activities direct students' attention away from language forms and toward language use, causing them to automatically employ grammar and vocabulary when speaking English.

VI. Conclusion

According to the research findings, it is finally concluded that the teacher can use games and peer groups as coping mechanisms for her students' language anxieties. Peer groups have an impact on students' self-confidence, communication abilities, and ability to learn collaboratively. In addition, games have a calming, inspiring, and entertaining effect. The semi-structured one-on-one interviews were done with

six teachers. Based on the findings, the researchers came to the conclusion that the teacher used fun activities and peer groups to help students who were anxious about speaking English were successful to alleviate their anxiety level. Peer groups have an impact on students' self-confidence, communication abilities, and ability to learn collaboratively. In addition, the effects of enjoyable activities can be calming, inspiring, and entertaining. It is hoped that by implementing these recommendations, teachers will eventually be able to help students advance their TL conversational abilities.

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