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Speaking Anxiety of Tertiary-Level Learners of English in Bangladesh: an Investigation into the Predicaments and Prospects

孟加拉大學階段英語學習者的口語焦慮:困境與前景

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Abstract

Foreign language anxiety (FLA) is one of the major affective factors that influence the process of foreign language learning. This study examined the causes of foreign language anxiety and its impact on the oral performance of the students of an English language course at a private university in Bangladesh. An action research project attempted to illustrate how this foreign language anxiety could be minimized by adopting entertaining activities in the class. The study employed qualitative method using in-depth semi-structure interviews, field notes, and audio-video recordings of the oral performance of the learners. The thematic analysis highlighted a substantial gap between the English learning of Bangladeshi university students and their speaking anxiety. The findings of this research suggest that creating a stress-free environment through enjoyable activities helps reduce learner anxiety and maximizes speaking output. The study uncovers a new dimension of the nature of FLA experienced by English learners at the tertiary level, which may help teachers adapt teaching materials and sustain the classroom environment to ensure maximum outcomes in the EFL context.

摘要

外語焦慮 (FLA) 是影響外語學習過程的主要情意因素之一。本研究探究了外語焦慮的原因及其對孟加拉一所私立大學英語課學生口語表現的影響。本行動研究試圖說明如何透過課堂上的娛樂活動來減少外語焦慮。本研究採質性研究法, 使用半結構式深度訪談、田野札記及學習者口語表現的錄音錄影。主題分析凸顯了孟加拉大學生英語學習及其口語焦慮間的巨大差異。研究結果顯示, 透過愉快的活動創造一個沒有壓力的環境, 有助於降低學習者的焦慮, 並將口語的產出最大化。本研究揭露了大學英語學習者所經歷的外語焦慮特性的

Extended author information available on the last page of the article

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新面向,這可能有助於教師調整教材和維持教室的環境,以確保在EFL的情境中取得最大的成效。

關鍵詞 外語焦慮·質性行動研究·EFL情境·學習者焦慮·口語技巧·高等教育

Keywords Foreign language anxiety · Qualitative action research · EFL context · Learner anxiety · Speaking skill · Higher education

Introduction

Over the past few decades, Asian countries have started to adopt English medium instruction at the university level because English language skills have an enormous impact on a student's academic and future professional life. These language skills have the potential to broaden graduates' horizons, enhance career opportunities, and improve labor market prospects. So, proficiency in speaking skills is undoubtedly an important part of successful L2 teaching-learning in the world of globalization today. For instance, according to Sha'ar and Boonsuk (2021), oral communication skill deserves more attention due to its importance in students' labor market demand, as it plays a role in the professional advancement of their future careers. In EFL contexts, most of the students are passive recipients of instructions in foreign language lessons. When they are invited to participate in discussion or any other oral activity, they feel shy and uneasy and show reluctance to talk. A kind of anxiety, or fear, or shyness for affective and cultural reasons plays an important role as a deterrent for foreign language (FL) learners in an active classroom (Bagherkazemi & Arefkal, 2022; Hamid et al., 2018; Hasan & Shehzad, 2020). Removing this foreign language anxiety (FLA) from EFL learners is a major challenge that an English teacher faces while dealing with tertiary-level students in an EFL context such as Bangladesh. Students experience anxiety mainly in the tasks that involve speaking, such as classroom discussions, oral presentations, pair/group activities, and question-answer sessions. King and Smith (2017) identified language anxiety as the fear experienced by learners when speaking in a foreign language, potentially leading to social embarrassment. Thus, Chiu et al. (2010) conclude that FLA occurs more in productive skills, i.e., speaking and writing, than in the receptive skills. This kind of anxiety, or, in other words, FLA, has also been reported recently among Bangladeshi young learners (YLS) by Hoque et al. (2023) in a study on an English language teaching scenario in Bangladesh, even at the primary level.

Despite the potential impact of FLA on language learning at tertiary-level education (Chou, 2018; Wahyuningsih & Afandi, 2020; Wijaya, 2023), the role of FLA in contributing to English learning has received relatively little attention in language learning-teaching research. Therefore, this study examines both the causes of and solutions to FLA among English learners at tertiary level in Asian countries, particularly Bangladesh. Additionally, this article investigates the role of enjoyable activities, such as watching English movies, listening to English songs, role playing in English, telling stories, playing language games, and doing group or pair work as

strategies to minimize foreign language anxiety. Researchers in the recent past have agreed on some common trends of FLA, and suggested techniques, such as mood booster pedagogy provisions for a positive psychological approach, learner enjoyment, encouragement, learner-engaging activities, and learner-centered teaching and learning would be helpful to redress the effects of FLA in a foreign language classroom (Philp & Duchesne, 2016; Yongliang et al., 2021). However, there is room to examine the factors and strategies of FLA among the learners of English. This study aims to fill in this gap initially by addressing the research questions mentioned below:

1. What are the factors that make students anxious while doing oral performance in English lessons?
2. How and through what strategies can the teacher help redress the level of FLA among the learners of English?
3. How far do entertaining activities enhance students' participation in oral performance in EFL/FL lessons?

The study, while investigating the research questions linked with psychological, cognitive, and social aspects of foreign language learning, attempts to recommend a way to redress such problems by examining the evidence of speaking anxiety of tertiary-level students in Bangladesh.

Theoretical Underpinnings of the Study

In a study, Horwitz (2001) noted that anxiety is “the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system” (p. 125). According to Khan and Al-Mahrooqi (2015), it is difficult to define this kind of anxiety as it is related to human psychological construction. It has a difficult hierarchy of intervening variables. Researchers like Su (2022) and AL-Qadri et al. (2023) considered FLA a complex, multidimensional phenomenon. Ohata (2005) also argued that FLA could not be described simply; it could be delineated as a multifaceted psychological experience. Based on these conceptualizations, FLA can be dealt with from different viewpoints using different approaches. Buitrago and Contreras (2008, p. 28) categorized the causes of anxiety as “psychological, cognitive, methodological, and social-affective.” Tumasang (2021) also classified the causes of anxiety in terms of academic, social, cognitive, and personal factors.

In an empirical study, Wilang and Vo (2018) found that FLA caused mental blocks in the way of achieving new knowledge. Therefore, students with high levels of anxiety understand difficult grammatical constructions less effectively than their less anxious counterparts. Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014, p. 238) posited that FLA could be “quite insidious.” MacIntyre (2017) and Michiko and Yoshitaka (2021) reported that FLA inhibits EFL learners’ “thoughts, communication, and learning.” Krashen’s (1992) affective filter hypothesis also states that high anxiety prevents language input from reaching learners’ language data-storing innate ability (Sobecks,

2020) which has famously been coined by Noam Chomsky (1965) as “language acquisition device (LAD).” Schlenker and Leary (1982, p. 645) find correlations between FLA and social anxiety as they point out that social anxiety “arises whenever people are motivated to make a desired impression on others but are not certain that they will do so.” Because the classroom is a microcosm of society poses the same threat to students which dissuades them from participating in classroom communication. However, in most cases, this sociopsychological factor is misunderstood by teachers, who consider it as a “student’s lack of motivation and poor attitude.”

There are controversies about FLA as well. Two discrete brands of FLA “debilitating (harmful) anxiety” and “facilitating (helpful) anxiety” should be considered for individual learners of EFL by all teachers to ensure equal opportunities for all. For instance, in a study, Katemba (2013) posited that facilitating anxiety motivates the learner to “fight” for the new learning task. Dikmen (2021) observed that FLA could have a positive impact on learners if the anxiety is at a moderate level. On the other hand, Michiko and Yoshitaka (2021) believed that anxiety could be a consequence rather than a cause of poor achievement in foreign language learning. Researchers like Michiko and Yoshitaka (2021) and Oteir and Al-Otaibi (2019) strongly uphold this modified view of adapting both types of anxiety in EFL classrooms to ensure the principles of equality of opportunities for all irrespective of different emotional and psychological makeups. It is common knowledge that in the same class with the same facilities and having the same duration of English study, some students learn more quickly and effectively than others. One reason may be the difference in their emotional response to the target language (TL). Gardner et al. (1997) believe that students’ individual differences and affectivity cause variation in their achievement. While motivation and a positive attitude towards the TL accelerate language learning, anxiety has a negative effect on it. This affective variable plays a vital role in language learning. Overlooking this sociopsychological aspect may not provide a complete comprehension of FLA (Islam & Hoque, 2019).

Thus, FLA is a multifaceted issue with multiple theoretical roots. A variety of reasons, including psychological, cognitive, methodological, and social-affective factors, might cause FLA. While FLA’s links with sociocultural anxiety can hinder language acquisition and deter classroom participation, it is vital for teachers to recognize the individual differences in learners’ emotional responses. Addressing these diverse theoretical underpinnings and acknowledging the affective aspect of language learning is crucial for promoting equality of opportunities and enhancing language learning outcomes.

Research in FLA of English Learning

According to different FLA studies, multiple strategies can be employed to deal with FLA in language classes. For instance, Lucas (1984) lists two strategies that teachers may employ to deal with FLA in language classes: (a) forming a friendly learning environment and (b) engaging students in a variety of classroom activities. In a similar vein, other investigations by Abdurahman and Rizqi (2021), Liu and Jackson (2008), and Hashemi and Abbasi (2013) reveal several strategies to cope with FLA

in language classes in China and Japan. The results highlight teachers' motivation to identify worried students and use intervention measures. The researchers also look at teacher behaviors and classroom conduct, such as humor, patience, friendliness, and liveliness, as well as teachers' innovation in the classroom and how to effectively point out students' mistakes (Botes et al., 2023; Neff & Dewaele, 2022; Toyama & Yamazaki, 2022). The teacher's role is crucial in assisting the students' familiarization with the subject matter and in assisting them in selecting the right speaking techniques. Furthermore, He (2017) surveys 302 Chinese university students and 30 instructors from two different universities to assess FLA in speaking ability. The study indicates that teachers' roles are crucial. The study also finds that friendly and humorous instructors are preferable. The reason is that students think that being treated kindly by their teachers makes them happy and encourages them to participate in class.

Recent studies also support that allowing students to speak in their mother tongue or following the grammar-translation method (GTM) may help them overcome their fear of speaking a foreign language in public (e.g., Kruk, 2018; Tien, 2018). The study by Bruen and Kelly (2017) discovered that more than half of students attending Japanese and German classes agree that using GTM in second-language classes makes the learning environment more stress-free and less intimidating. Similar to this study, when children speak their first language, it is like securing their chances to communicate more effectively. Then, students will no longer be hesitant to speak up in class. To put it another way, students can become more assured when speaking English.

Language, psychological, and/or cultural factors may also contribute to FLA in many Asian nations particularly in Bangladesh (Hamid et al., 2013; Yeşilçınar & Erdemir, 2023). Due to social and language difficulties, students in many Asian countries find it difficult to interact effectively and appropriately (Islam et al., 2018). Speaking can be negatively impacted by psychological issues like shyness while interacting with others. Additionally, cultural influences include the fear of losing face or being publicly humiliated as a result of a teacher or peer's critical assessment, the threat to one's reputation, or the fear of being seen as arrogant. According to Khawaja et al. (2017), one of the causes of FLA is the worry of receiving a poor evaluation from peers or teachers. This can cause students to avoid dialogue and participation or simply be quiet in class (Yassin & Razak, 2017). The last but not the least, shy students try to avoid speaking in front of the class by staying quiet or not participating.

In summary, this investigation provides insight into the important academic matter of foreign language anxiety (FLA) among tertiary-level English learners in Bangladesh. It illuminates the pivotal elements that contribute to speaking anxiety, encompassing diminished self-perception, apprehension of criticism, and linguistic obstacles. Significantly, the study underscores the significance of teachers in alleviating these anxieties through the cultivation of a stress-free, interactive classroom environment and the incorporation of pleasurable activities into language instruction. The findings underscore the importance of teachers' motivation and understanding of students' psychological needs. Although this investigation is constrained to a singular classroom, it necessitates additional research in diverse contexts to

refine pedagogical practices and, ultimately, enable learners to embrace the challenges of language acquisition with eagerness rather than trepidation.

Methods

This study applied qualitative action research to have a direct and deep insight into speaking anxiety of English learners at tertiary level in Bangladesh at a private university. Edge (2005) argued that English language teachers should not confine themselves to practicing the prescribed theories and methods for teaching English; rather, they should take initiative to assess their teaching context and through reflection increase their understanding of the work. Typically, researchers undertake action research within their own teaching circumstances to explore and address specific problems and challenges. It involves gathering and interpreting data to better understand an aspect of teaching and learning and applying the outcomes to improve practice.

Based on Fraenkel et al. (2012) evaluative research design, the study was designed into five stages; those are (1) identifying the problem, (2) planning a change, (3) acting and observing the process and consequence of change, (4) reflecting on the process and consequences, and (4) re-planning and acting.

Participants

Using purposive sampling, 15 students (see Table 1) were selected for interview. All the students were given pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality and privacy. Eight of them were male, and seven females with an age range from 18 to 20. All students had studied English as a compulsory course for 12 years in primary, secondary, and higher secondary level. The students are of diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, and their level of English also varies. Eight of them came from rural government and non-government schools. On the other hand, seven of them came from urban government and non-government schools. The medium of instruction in their previous studies was Bangla. The following table presents the demographic details of the interviewee students.

Data Collection Procedures

Within the action research design, the qualitative data collection methods were planned for two phases. At the beginning of the course, data about the backgrounds of the students and their language skills were collected. Based on these data, an outline of the course was prepared and submitted for approval by the academic council of the university. The syllabus committee within the academic council approved the course outline (syllabus). The course was designed to improve four skills of English with special emphasis on speaking. The duration of the course was 4 months with 6 contact hours per week. The data were collected from June 2019 to September 2019. The lessons were designed with entertaining activities, such as watching movies,

Table 1 Participants' profile

No.	Student pseudo name	Gender	Region	Types of institution	Level of fluency (self-stated)	Level of anxiety (self-stated)	Use of English outside class	Exposure to public speaking/oral activity
1	S 1	Male	Rural	Non-government	Low	High	Never	None
2	S 2	Female	Urban	Government	Moderate	High	Very low	None
3	S 3	Male	Rural	Non-government	Low	High	Very low	None
4	S 4	Male	Urban	Non-government	Moderate	Moderate	Very low	None
5	S 5	Male	Rural	Government	Low	High	Very low	None
6	S 6	Male	Rural	Government	Low	High	Very low	None
7	S 7	Female	Rural	Non-government	Low	High	Very low	None
8	S 8	Female	Urban	Government	Moderate	High	Very low	None
9	S 9	Female	Urban	Government	Moderate	Moderate	Low	Occasionally
10	S 10	Female	Urban	Non-government	Moderate	Moderate	Occasionally	Occasionally
11	S 11	Male	Rural	Government	Moderate	Low	Very low	Occasionally
12	S 12	Male	Rural	Government	Moderate	Low	Very low	None
13	S 13	Male	Rural	Government	Low	High	Very low	None
14	S 14	Female	Urban	Non-government	Moderate	Low	Low	Occasionally
15	S 15	Female	Urban	Non-government	Moderate	Low	Low	Occasionally

listening to English songs, participating in pair or group work, role play, language games, and oral presentations for engaging students in oral activity which helped them to engage in cooperative pro-active learning with enjoyment (e.g., Hashemi & Abbasi, 2013; Liu & Jackson, 2008). Important grammatical items were also taught when needed. As researchers like Horwitz (2001), Lababidi (2016), and others recommend for positive reinforcement, user-friendly lesson delivery, mood booster pedagogy, as strategies to redress FLA (Mentioned earlier before R Q) throughout the course, a stress-free and entertaining environment was maintained so students felt comfortable and willing to engage in learning activities.

Data Analysis

This study used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012) to examine the data collected through semi-structured interviews. Following an inductive approach, the data were read and re-read to identify significant statements, sentences, or phrases in the data and encoded it before analysis. Therefore, following the open-coding techniques, this research used a thematic coding process which is known as one of the significant identifiable methods of analysis in an action research study. That is, themes, in this article, were patterns across datasets that were significant to the explanation of speaking anxiety and were linked to the specific questions. All the audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim immediately after the interviews. Transcripts were reviewed and cross-checked by the co-researchers for accuracy. Once the transcription was finalized, a content analysis method was applied to identify the themes. The themes fall into the categories proposed by Buitrago Tinjacá and Ayala Contreras (2008) which are psychological, cognitive, methodological, and social-affective. These themes are related to lack of confidence, nervousness, and low self-perception. Detailed discussion of the coded themes is done in the following sections.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Consideration

According to Jones et al. (2014), a qualitative study needs to show that it is credible, transferable, affirmative, and reliable. Interviews were conducted with undergraduate students and rigorously reviewed the transcriptions until a point where no more information was being gathered. Member check techniques were applied to justify the reliability of the study as it has been considered one of the major credibility techniques (Lincoln & Guba, 1999). Furthermore, pseudonyms were given to confirm the privacy of the participants and students' institution. The consent form was delivered and signed by each participant before the start of the interviews. The detailed information was provided in the form, and participants were free to withdraw from the interviews at any time, if they decided so. All records, documents, and notes were compiled in a secure place and would be kept for 5 years.

Findings of the Pre-intervention Interview

The data collected from the pre-intervention interview provided an opportunity to understand students' self-reported causes and the nature of anxiety they experienced. The findings revealed that most of the students were apprehensive of losing face in front of the class. The fear of negative evaluation by the teacher and classmates discouraged them to participate actively in the class. The themes fall into the categories proposed by Buitrago Tinjacá and Ayala Contreras (2008) which are psychological, cognitive, methodological, and social-affective. The findings of the first interview are discussed in detail in the light of category categories, psychological, cognitive, and social affective, suggested by Buitrago Tinjacá and Ayala Contreras (2008) in the following sections.

Psychological Factors

The concept of “self” is an important issue in foreign language teaching-learning situation. As Dörnyei (2002, p. 87) mentioned, “Self-esteem and self-confidence are like the foundations of a building.” Therefore, if the students do not feel safe in terms of their self-esteem, they cannot participate in class actively and eventually their learning will be limited. The data revealed that they suffered from lack of confidence and nervousness, and their perception of their own ability was also low. For instance, firstly, 13 out of 15 students revealed that they did not have sufficient opportunities in their previous courses, which could boost their self-confidence. As S1 said,

In our school and college, we did not have any presentation we had only written exam; so, I feel uneasy while presenting.

Secondly, 10 out of 15 of the participants reported that they felt “nervous” when they answered questions orally. Eight participants said that even if they knew the answer, they would make mistakes due to nervousness. However, it does not happen in case of writing. As S2 reported, “When I write sentences, I don't feel problem but when I speak, I feel nervous.” Similarly, S3 observed, “When I see that everyone is staring at me, I feel tensed and forget everything.”

Thirdly, “low self-perception” was reported by 14 out of 15 students. The following was a typical view expressed by six students S1, S3, S5, S6 S7, and S13,

Whenever I come in front of the class, I feel nervous thinking that if I say something wrong, others will laugh at me.

This happens mostly because of the fear of negative evaluation. Though they wanted to learn English, their self-resistance and fear of losing face made them passive in the class. Martin (2019) also found that the anxiety level of the students heightens when they face activities like doing oral presentation, contributing to formal discussion and “answering teachers” questions.

Cognitive Factor

According to Piaget (2001), language development is the ability of understanding and expressing thoughts in terms of writing or speaking. It was evident when 9 out of 15 participants stated that though they could make simple and short sentences, they were unable to produce complex sentences to express their feelings or opinions. That is why they did not want to participate in class discussions. Sağlamel and Kayaoğlu (2013) also found that lack of grammatical knowledge and regular speaking practice in the TL caused problems in oral communication which may lead to anxiety. This was evidenced by S1, S2, S4, S 7, S10, S13, and S15 in their statements. For example, S4 explained,

When I speak Bangla, I just think and say but when I speak English I think it in Bangla, then translate it into English and then say it. So, this sort of multitask create pressure in me and I feel nervous.

Eight participants reported that they often did not participate in speaking activities since they feared that they might articulate difficult words in a wrong way. As a typical view stated by S1, S4, S5, S6, and S13:

Since English is not our mother tongue it is natural to feel anxious when I speak English. Anxiety arises when I think how I will be perceived by others.

S2 students reported that when they wanted to say something, they struggled to find suitable English words for that expression. As S7 said:

My vocabulary stock is limited, so when I speak, I struggle to find the word needed to express what I want to say and it makes me nervous.

Methodological Factors

Owing to the teacher-centered GTM dominance in ELT, the students hardly had any opportunity to practice speaking and listening in the lessons of their previous schooling. In answering the question of whether they had speaking and listening tests in their examination system, 100% participants replied in the negative. Since these two skills were not assessed in the examination, the teachers did not want to spend time on teaching those skills. Consequently, the students lacked efficiency in these skills. As S8 reported:

Talking in front of an audience is a difficult thing, everyone cannot make it. It requires courage, confidence, orientation and lot of practice.

In the schools of rural Bangladesh, the only source of learning English is through the teachers, whose English proficiency and content knowledge are poor (Hoque et al., 2021). The students usually did not get a chance to listen to native accent, and thereby, they develop inappropriate pronunciation. As a result, five out of fifteen students reported that they had the fear of not being understood by

the teacher and the audience. Moreover, almost all the students said that they did not have the opportunity. S9 said:

I want to develop my speaking skills but I do not get the environment to practice it outside this class.

Social-Affective Factors

Gardner et al. (1997) in their empirical study on the relationship between different affective variables and language performance found that FLA was the factor that had high level of negative correlation with language achievement. The findings of the first interview support this view as we see the fear of losing face prevents them from performing in the class. They choose to be passive rather than taking the risk of making mistakes. Three out of fifteen students reported that they had bitter experience of being humiliated by their teachers for making mistakes in the classroom. They did not feel free to participate in the class. Five out of fifteen students reported that their classmates teased them when they spoke English in class or outside the class. S 10 reported it:

I enjoy learning English and I want to be fluent in English. I have a desire to go abroad for higher study. But when I speak English inside or outside the class my friends tease me. So, I feel discouraged to speak English.

The interview S2, S4, S6, S7, S10, S11, S14, and S15 report similar reasons like being embarrassed, or looked down upon for making any mistakes generally hindered their speaking. Personality traits like shyness, introvert nature, or excessive self-consciousness also hindered the learning process of the students. There were three students who fell into this category. Their anxiety level was so high that building their trust and confidence was difficult.

The Intervention

This research took into consideration all the phenomena reported by the students and designed the pedagogical strategies and teaching contents in such a way that it would address diverse needs of the students. As mentioned in the research design, this research used entertaining activities including watching movies, songs, language games, presentations, role play, pair work, and group discussions as instructional strategies. It involved the students intellectually as well as emotionally with the target language. Most importantly, it tried to establish trust by creating a non-threatening atmosphere. The impact of the intervention was recorded carefully. The course also included formative and summative assessment. At the end of the course, another round of interview was conducted to elicit information about the impact of the class activities on their anxiety and their self-stated achievement in the course.

Findings of the Post Intervention Interview

The data accrued from the responses of the students after the course bore testimony to the changed classroom climate, enthusiasm of the students for learning as well as their progress and achievement in English-speaking skills. Significant improvement was found in psychological, cognitive, and social affective categories. This section illustrates the instructional strategies and their impact on students.

Psychological Strategies

Creating a non-threatening atmosphere is essential for boosting students' morale. The teaching strategies used for this purpose were playing games, listening to music, arranging drill competitions, and watching movies, which made the class participatory and enjoyable. These strategies ensured active participation with reduced anxiety.

Drilling with short simple sentences and tongue twisters also removed shyness and fear in participation. Students were asked to memorize a paragraph within given time. The students presented the paragraph in front of the class while a volunteer recorded the time with a stopwatch and wrote it on the whiteboard beside the name of the participant. The participant who took the shortest time was the winner. As these activities were full of enjoyable and excitement and did not pose any cognitive pressure, the students were interested to taking part in these activities. Soon after the intervention, they felt that it was not a typical English class. So, they became motivated and enthusiastic to attend class. Gradually, they felt safe and became interested in participating in the language games, oral drills, pair, and group work. The majority of the participants expressed views, such as, the following said by S8:

I enjoyed the games and group activities most. I learnt many things from my friends. And we had a lot of entertaining.

Thus, the rapport building between the teacher and students, students and students worked well in minimizing anxiety and nervousness. When the students became habituated to participating actively in these activities, their friendship grew stronger. They wanted to help each other, rather than laughing at those making mistakes. The intervention created a stress-free learning environment, which directly impacted on the confidence level of the students by reducing their anxiety. Therefore, they enjoyed the class more actively and attentively with positive attitude.

From the very beginning of the course, efforts were made to develop positive attitude of the students towards the target language. They were filled with enthusiasm when we showed them *Ballerina*, a short Disney film. Showing an English animated movie was a great shift from a traditional classroom to a student-centered classroom. The objective of showing movie was to engage the students intellectually as well as emotionally with the target language. We chose the movie considering the age, interest, and linguistic ability of the students. Besides, short movies were chosen to present such content that motivates the students to achieve success through persistent

efforts. The movies were shown in parts followed by a question-and-answer session after each part. The comments of the students reflect how they were sensitized by the movies. S10 said:

Watching movie was influential. It generated intense desire in me to learn English. Now I desire to give voice in animation movies. I also want to be a news presenter.

All the students expressed the following sentiment:

Watching English movie and listening to songs improved my pronunciation and created a strong desire in me to speak English fluently.

The main thing achieved from this activity was intense engagement with the target language. A movie presents authentic language in context. It also exposes the students to the cultural aspects of the language they are learning and address the need of learning pragmatics. Therefore, it works far better than teaching the language as discrete points.

Cognitive Strategies

Cognitive ability is the mental capability of focusing, understanding, comprehending, remembering, connecting ideas, and solving problems. The students who possess strong cognitive ability find learning easy and interesting while others with weak cognitive ability find it challenging. For cognitive development, we used the strategies, such as teaching grammar in a enjoyable way, providing mentally engaging tasks and exposing those to oral activities and presentation frequently. When the students were highly engaged with this teaching–learning process, difficult concepts of grammar were also acceptable for them. The tasks were based on prompts, such as “Tell us about your daily routine, describe what is happening around us, inform us about a picnic that you have enjoyed recently or act out a dialogue between you and your friend about your future plan.” These strategies enriched communicative skills of the students. Statements made by 12 out of 15 interviewees reflected the view of S14 who reported,

Practicing English for practical purpose motivated me and helped me overcome my speaking fear.

These oral activities enabled the learners to notice the output they produced and gave them a chance to modify the output by understanding the gap between their output and the expected outcome (Swain, 1985). In answering to the question whether their speaking skill has improved after the course, all the students replied in the affirmative.

Methodological Strategy

The students have been learning English from their early childhood mostly in a traditional way. Therefore, to break the monotony of this journey, we tried to

present the teaching content in a different way. We introduced songs and popular video clips which improved listening skill and pronunciation.

After grammar classes, songs and music were played almost regularly, to cheer them up. The songs were played, within the format of the lessons and just before ending the class as well. S15 mentioned,

I love music. This was the best part of the class for me.

Teachers often face challenges in retaining the attention and interest of the students while teaching pronunciation. But students attend class with rapt attention if engaging activities like music and movies are integrated within the lesson plan. These are not only entertaining activities but also listening tasks, which provide authentic language. Learning pronunciation by listening to native voice usually works well. Students hear the voice of the native speaker of the target language as input, which helps them modify their output. Fill in the gap' activity was used to test the listening skill of the students. An empirical study conducted by Suriyatham (2019) with Thai first-year university students revealed that language learners achieved great benefit from songs in learning linguistic aspects like pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar. She also opined that those students can learn target language culture by listening to songs. Schoepp cited in Suriyatham (2019) advocated for using songs as a teaching material for EFL students to develop cognitive, linguistic, and affective aspects.

Social-Affective Strategies

To address the social affective side, strategies of cooperative learning were used. Kagan (1994) defines cooperative learning as a teaching system where a small heterogeneous group of students work together to achieve a common goal. The teaching strategies like group work, pair work, and games create a setting for the students to work with other students, so they feel less anxious and enjoy these activities. According to the cooperative learning theory, students learn best when they work together in a stress-free atmosphere (Tamimy et al. 2023). Willis and Willis (2007) concluded that the most effective way of teaching language was by engaging learners in tasks that required them to use the language for themselves. So, after enhancing their confidence, we engaged the students in pair work and role play. To scaffold them initially, they were asked to write dialogues that they just needed to act out. They were given help to pronounce the words correctly and act out the dialogues with proper intonation. Later, they were just given the topic, and they produced the dialogue themselves. Often, in the role play with them, the instructors created an atmosphere of friendliness and ease, which noticeably reduced students' speaking anxiety.

S6 said:

Speaking in English several times in our class helped me to improve my pronunciation.

Role play, group work, and pair work activities helped creating a nonthreatening atmosphere and thus lowered the filter and maximized language learning, especially productive skills. Pair work and role play promoted negotiation for meaning and the ability for sustained conversation. Regarding the effectiveness of meaningful interaction, researchers like Sundari (2017) and Neiva-Montaño (2021) report that it enables students to advance to a higher level of knowledge and performance which would not have been possible independently. This also helped to create a learner-centered classroom and promote learner autonomy. Most of the students were no longer afraid of coming in front of the audience for presentation. Only a few students who had severe weakness in English hesitated to present anything orally. So, we gave them chance to write their dialogue, practice it in pair, and then present in front of the whole class. Gradually, they gained confidence and tried their best to keep pace with the rest of the class. Sometimes, we paired students considering their ability. To help the weak students, we paired them with the strong students. But that did not meet the cognitive demand of the strong students. So, sometimes, we paired the strong students with other strong students and gave them more challenging tasks.

Public-Speaking Ability

At the last part of the course, we arranged a public-speaking program for the students in the form of a “story-telling contest.” The contest was a breakthrough. It required the students to employ appropriate facial expressions, correct pronunciation, intonation, and body language to tell the story on stage. Neiva-Montaño (2021) opines that explicit practice, gesture, posture, facial expressions, stress, intonation, and nonverbal cues help students learn how to express themselves more naturally in English. The contest gave them spontaneous and natural pleasure and boosted their confidence. The appreciation from the authority, judges, teachers, and the audience helped them create a positive self-image. Most of the students had the following views:

S3 said:

The story-telling contest made me confident. I felt proud when everybody praised my performance.

They gave up their fear and was ready to face new challenge. It reminded me of the proverb “Nothing succeeds like successes.” In the beginning of the course, the students were very unwilling to come in front of the class and present anything orally, but after the story-telling contest, they become zealous for success. Their performance in the contest and the appreciation from the audience stimulated them to do better performance next time. Research has found that this type of activities reduces performance anxiety and motivates language learners greatly (Sağlamel & Kayaoğlu, 2013).

Discussion

FLA is one of the major factors that hamper foreign language learning in general. This study was designed to understand the factors that make students anxious while doing oral performance in English lessons, the strategies teachers need, and

how entertaining activities enhance students' participation in oral performance in EFL and FL lessons. This study revealed the truth about the tertiary students at private universities in Bangladesh. Learners' low self-perception of their ability, fear of being criticized, and lack of knowledge about the structure and pronunciation of the target language have been explored as major causes of speaking anxiety among the learners of English in Bangladesh at the tertiary level. This is consistent with previous studies that demonstrated FLA in language classes (e.g., Bagherkazemi & Arefkal, 2022; Hasan & Shehzad, 2020) and other research conducted on FLA in similar EFL contexts in the region, such as King and Smith (2017) in Japan. However, post intervention findings of the present study go further to report that endorsing a progressive mindset among language learners can significantly reduce speaking anxiety and improve oral performance in foreign language classrooms.

Regardless of scholars interested in FLA research, few studies have examined whether enjoyable activities and a stress-free learning environment are a key to reducing students' psychological and cognitive barriers while taking part in oral performance in English lessons. Previous studies have shown that English instruction assisted in improving students' English listening skills (Chou, 2018; Islam, 2013; Wahyuningsih & Afandi, 2020), and the current study similarly concluded that English instruction and interactive speaking classroom environment were needed to block these psychological and cognitive barriers. This research also found that there was a subtle relationship between entertaining activities and a stress-free learning environment, which boosted the students' confidence and increased active participation. Entertaining activities like playing language games, listening to songs, and watching English movies worked as stimuli for adolescent learners to reduce their speaking anxiety.

There was a significant change in their anxiety level, which was manifested through their performance as well as their willingness to participate in lesson activities and take on new challenges in leading or taking part in pair or group work, role play, presentations, etc. It was also revealed that adolescent students were awfully sensitive to criticism and failure. It became clear through the study that the role of the teacher is very crucial in improving their motivation in order to keep them engaged. These findings are consistent with those of the previous studies conducted by Hashemi and Abbasi (2013) in Japan and Liu and Jackson (2008) in China. Both studies identify several strategies that assist teachers in overcoming students' FLA in language classes. However, post intervention findings of this study concluded the significance of effective strategies in reducing speaking anxiety and boosting motivation in South-Asian cultural contexts, particularly in Bangladesh.

Teachers have to have a genuine interest in making the breakthrough. Therefore, teachers' motivation is also an important factor in tackling the speaking anxiety of English learners at the tertiary level in Bangladesh. They need to understand the sociopsychological needs of the students to create a congenial atmosphere for nourishing growth. All foreign language teachers are, therefore, required to help students build positive self-images and rapport between teacher and students and between students and students through lesson delivery strategies and activities embedded in the lesson delivery plan through a lesson regime of

a culture of mutual trust, respect, and cooperation. Attitudinal change, changes in pro-active habits in the lessons, mutual understanding, and team spirit were visible among the participants during this action research. All these combined together enabled the learners to estimate how competence in English can make a difference in their lives. They envisioned the future and did self-assessments to map out their own route to success. The positive attitude and collaboration with their peers helped them to carry on the hard work spontaneously with enthusiasm rather than anxiety.

Implication and Conclusion

This study brings to light some practical constraints of teaching and learning EFL, which are closely linked with the sociocultural backgrounds of both the learners and teachers of EFL at the tertiary level in Bangladesh. This clearly echoes the ideas that Kumaravadivelu (2006) advocates who emphasize that post-method pedagogy should be tailored to specific teacher groups, learners, and institutions within a specific sociocultural context. The findings of the current research reverberate the argument of Kumaravadivelu (2006) that socioeconomic and cultural values must be incorporated into the EFL curriculum of a non-English-speaking country. The findings revealed that the EFL learners of Bangladesh at the tertiary level are culturally constrained when speaking out in public or in a formal classroom because of inherent cultural barriers of shyness and social hierarchy. Usually, a learner feels shy or anxious about the traditional teacher-student relationship—the teacher is the all-important venerable knowledge-giver, and the learner is the polite and respectful recipient of the knowledge. The above scenario has resonated with other researchers, including Hasan and Shehzad (2020) and Bagherkazemi and Arefkal (2022), who suggest that educators should create a supportive and interactive classroom environment to reduce speaking anxiety among tertiary-level English learners.

The current EFL syllabuses of Bangladesh from primary to tertiary levels opt for the Communicative Language Teaching Approach, which requires the existing English teachers, who are the products of a GTM regime all through their education lives. Therefore, the teachers find it comfortable to stick to their “GTM tricks” of teaching a foreign language in Bangladesh. Coincidentally, the learners also feel at ease in a GTM environment in their EFL lessons. This “practicality,” as Kumaravadivelu and others argue, is informed by this research reverberating from a recent study by Hoque et al. (2023) in Bangladesh. Lack of teacher training has also been reported through fieldnotes, as they are proven to be pedagogically unsound in delivering an EFL curriculum in South-Asian countries like Bangladesh. Similar findings have been reported by Hashemi and Abbasi (2013) in Japan and by Liu and Jackson (2008) in China. Hence, curriculum design should incorporate real-life communication scenarios to enhance speaking skills, in line with broader literature (Chou, 2018; Islam, 2013), combining teaching-learning strategies from classical and modern methods like CLT, CLT, and GTM to support both teachers and learners to come out of FLA in EFL classes.

This study thus provides insights into FLA among tertiary-level English learners in an Asian EFL context. It examines the several predicaments of speaking anxiety, encompassing diminished self-perception, apprehension of criticism, and linguistic obstacles. Significantly, the study underscores the role of teachers in alleviating these anxieties through the practice of a stress-free, interactive classroom environment and the incorporation of pleasurable activities into language instructions. The findings emphasize the importance of teachers' motivation, competence, and comprehension of socio-cultural backgrounds and emotional needs of the EFL learners. Although this investigation is constrained to a singular classroom, it necessitates additional research in diverse contexts to refine pedagogical practices and, ultimately, to enable learners to proactively and productively embrace the challenges of language acquisition with eagerness rather than anxiety.

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Declarations

Competing Interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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