

# Speaking Difficulties and Pedagogical Implications in a Multicultural Setting

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One of the essential skills to develop when learning a language is the ability to speak. However, becoming actual speakers of a language is understood to be the most challenging skill to achieve. Further, speaking difficulty is articulated from the teachers' standpoint with little regard for learners' perspectives. This study reports on perceived speaking difficulties among second language learners in a multicultural context. Analysis reveals speaking difficulties as social anxiety, linguistic difficulties, inhibition and language anxiety. Among these difficulties, language anxiety emerges as most prevalent. On social anxiety, the impact of a positive learning atmosphere and establishing rapport among second language learners cannot be understated. It is evident that a focus on reading unfavourably disturbs the balance of instruction among the four skills. Also, activities focus more on reading skills and less on oral communicative tasks. Inhibition emanates mostly from the fear that committing mistakes will result in criticism, bullying, and annoyance. Assessment comes usually in a form of graded recitation that heightened students' anxiety. Further, the significance of speaking is stressed but activities are very limited to enhance this skill. Teachers always emphasised the importance of speaking skills but examinations mostly assess writing and reading skills.

**Key words:** *Speaking difficulties, social anxiety, linguistic difficulties, inhibition, language anxiety*

## INTRODUCTION

In all aspects of learning, emphasis should be placed on how theories and concepts are applied to real situations. Thus, oral communication should be as natural as breathing in real life. Human beings communicate daily to express their thoughts and emotions. When students learn a language, whether it is first, second or a foreign language, they do it for the purpose of sharing

their thoughts, ideas and emotions to other people. It is the job of language teachers to teach learners to become actual speakers of the language.

Ur (1996) considered speaking as the most important skill among four skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). People who speak a language are deemed to be knowledgeable of that language. Scrivener (2005) has strengthened Ur's claim that speaking is the most important skill by illuminating that using a language in an actual setting is more important than being knowledgeable about it; there is no point knowing a lot about language if you cannot speak it. Hosni (2014) has also postulated that speaking plays a primary role in language learning. Through oral interaction, English as a target language can be explored, understood, practiced and learnt in real life scenarios.

However, one of the major struggles of educators nowadays is the declining academic achievement of students especially in English as evident in the result of the annual National Achievement Test of all schools in the country. Although speaking poses more problems, focus is given to writing and reading skills. Reviews are done mostly on the aspect of comprehension and accuracy but not on the fluency. Intervention programs among public schools concentrated mostly on reading. Furthermore, the assessment of students when enrolling in public schools concerns reading skills but not their speaking ability. The development of oral communication skills has been limited to recitation in the classroom as given by teachers. Because of the lack of exposure, second language learners have been vulnerable to anxiety brought about by their inadequacy to be actual speakers of the target language.

A lot of insights and concepts have been given as to the causes of this problem. One of the many reasons cited are the learning difficulties exhibited by second language learners. Priory Education and Children's Services (2016) has pointed out that children and young people with specific learning difficulties are most likely to fail/struggle in mainstream education environments. As a result, they may have very low self-esteem, poor self-confidence and a belief that they will never deliver what is expected of them. Rababa'h (2005) elaborated that there are factors that have something to do with the learners themselves, the teaching strategies, the curriculum, and the environment that cause language difficulties. Thus, the student's performance is not only a reflection of his own ability or skill as a learner, but their teachers and the entire environment, which greatly affect his development and learning outcomes.

According to Liu (2006) learners are more likely to experience anxiety in the classroom. Inhibition is also a learning difficulty (Ur,1996) that affects second language learners. Basic (2011) has determined that between an adolescent and an adult, it is the adolescent who has a problem of inhibition in speaking English because of being conscious about himself/herself. Adolescents would not take risks in oral communication, impeding their progress in language learning. Another insight on speaking difficulties reported by Zheng (2008) is the assertion that language anxiety is a prevalent phenomenon especially among the second/foreign language

learning population. Further, Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) expounded that language anxiety can be attributed to different factors: communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. Montero, Chavez and Alvarado (2014) have affirmed that several studies on second language acquisition vary with regards to the factors that will either strengthen or weaken speaking difficulties. Among those factors are age, socio-economical context, linguistic background, affective factors and cognitive factors. They have posited that the influence the native language has in learners is related, on some level, with the age in which a person starts his/her exposure to another language.

Oral language skill is one of the four skills in English which could be the most difficult for students. Speaking is an interaction. Interaction cannot take place if the learner lacks social awareness. Unlike writing, which can be a solitary activity, to speak is to be socially active. Inadequate competence in communication cannot keep the interaction going, creating a barrier to learning. Littlewood (1981) cited in Hosni (2014), has emphasised communicative skills can only be enhanced if students have the opportunity to express their own identity. The inadequacy of social interaction can jeopardise the process resulting to learning difficulties rather than positive learning. The research study by Zhou (2016) has also revealed that various reasons could cause trauma to second language learners experience. These unpleasant experiences may seriously disturb students' motivation to learn. In agreement, Gaerlan (2016) extrapolated that the participants are not motivated to use or learn English. Her study has deduced the necessity of specific support for successful learning such as teacher, parental, peer support, and interaction. Therefore, language teachers' ability to facilitate learning is vital in the learning process. But this is not the only challenge. Students are unique social individuals with different needs and difficulties. Prevailing reasons that do not motivate them to learn English should be determined to lessen the pressure on second language acquisition.

The ability to learn a second language may be enhanced or undeveloped depending on the interventions given by the teacher. Students who undergo difficult challenges will surely display low performance because of these barriers of learning. One of the tasks teachers need to accomplish is to decrease anxiety among students by customising their activities/tasks. Horwitz (2001) agreed that the classroom environment, teacher support, task orientation, and focus of instruction affect students' anxiety levels in a classroom situation. In another lens, Gay (2010) pointed out that with the absence of culture responsiveness, teaching can never be the best it should be for the students who are not part of the majority or mainstream group. In light of this matter, Williams, Chapman, Wong, & Turkheimer (2012) have maintained that strong identification with one's ethnic background serves as a barrier against anxiety and depression. However, a latest work by Makarova and Birman (2015) has revealed that a school's support for ethnic minority students is mostly insufficient to their cultural maintenance or bicultural development. This condition has brought a serious challenge in some countries where there was big dropout rate among students from an ethnic minority. A study conducted among undergraduate students from different ethnic groups by Ismaili (2015) suggested that L1 is seen



as beneficial because the teacher is able to support the process of acquisition by explaining difficult concepts and complex words that cannot be demonstrated or showed to the students.

The aim of language education is to provide second language learners with the capabilities to understand the language and the ability to speak and to write it. If language students are not able to speak English, then this aim is not fully accomplished. If difficulties and diversification are neglected and not properly addressed by the teacher, these persistent difficulties in learning will have a lifelong effect on students, affecting their ability to learn. The dire need to identify their difficulties from their own perceived realities is a must to help conceptualised the ways educational programs are taught that will eventually promote fair teaching and overcome factors that may interfere with the process of learning. Hence, identifying these speaking difficulties and its implications to multicultural classroom is a good reason to research the matter, enabling educators to gain more insights on an educational paradigm that provides opportunity for all diversified learners.

## **OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY**

The objective of this study was to determine the perceived speaking difficulties of the students and its pedagogical implications in a multicultural setting.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study employed qualitative research methods in an attempt to lay the groundwork that will lead to future studies. Data was gathered to identify speaking difficulties and its implications in the multicultural classroom. The stages of this study consisted of the conceptualisation of research objectives, development of the research instrument, validation of the research instrument, collection of data, analysis and interpretation of data, and preparation of research report. This study was conducted among 16 Junior High School Students from Grade 7 to Grade 10 officially enrolled in one of the many multicultural schools in Zamboanga City from 2016 - 2017.

The 16 participants of this study were chosen purposively. They were selected following an inclusion criterion which considered their performance and academic achievement in English class as assessed by their English teachers. Students who were identified with speaking difficulty in learning English as a second language based on their overall performance in the English subject were included in this study. The school is suitable for this study since most of the students come from different ethnic backgrounds. Participants were Tausog, Chavacano, Bisaya and Samal students. They were gathered through focus group discussion (FGD). The semi-structured interview was the instrument used in this study. It served as a guide for the FGD in which questions were divergent in nature to gather the necessary data for analysis. The

research instrument has undergone a validation procedure administered by three experts in the nature of this research.

Data was obtained from the transcripts of the FGD. In order to extract the themes leading to the identification and analysis of students' perceived speaking difficulties, the qualitative data sources were the transcriptions from audio-recorded of the FGD. Transcribing of the data then followed and transcripts accuracy was re-checked for validity. Thematic analysis of interview transcriptions went through the process of familiarisation, coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes and contextualising the analysis. The familiarisation process was done by reading and rereading the transcripts. Possible codes were determined and noted during the familiarisation phase.

## **RESULTS ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Objective 1:**

On the speaking difficulties

#### **1.1 Social Anxiety**

Schwarzer (1984) defined social anxiety as feelings of tension and discomfort, negative self-evaluations, and a tendency to withdraw in the presence of others. When learning a second language, students' anxiety is heightened resulting in low performance. Evident in the responses of the participants were the manifestations of withdrawal and tension when asked about their experiences on speaking using English. Their responses during the interview were reflections of negative self-evaluation because they felt that they do not have the ability to speak; hence, they are demotivated to communicate. Being the centre of ridicule among peers can be a source of discomfort and tension among second language learners. Students anticipate negative reactions; thus, they avoid things they must do in order to learn. Moreover, teachers' anxiety-provoking activities may impede the learning process. Students would not take risk to speak in the classroom and be publicly humiliated. Responses of the participants painted a vivid picture of their social anxiety. This clearly supports the research of Zhou (2016) which revealed social anxiety as an inhibitor of student willingness to interact and collaborate in the classroom due to unpleasant experiences. The unpleasant experiences caused a serious disturbance to student motivation, making them reluctant to participate. In agreement, Hosni (2014) claimed that through oral interaction, English as a target language can be encountered, understood, practiced and learnt. When second language learners refuse to interact, he/she will lose the opportunity to practice speaking English. The ability to speak fluently can only be developed through frequent exposure and constant practice. The input of a teacher is insufficient if not reinforced by interaction.

## 1.2 Linguistic Difficulties

Zhang (2009), as noted by Hosni, claimed that most English learners are not competent in communicating orally and further argued that speaking is the most difficult skill to master. Students experiencing linguistic difficulties struggle to find the appropriate words to build a sentence and express their ideas. Linguistic difficulties also include a student's difficulty in pronouncing the words. The data collected through interviews showed that the majority of the informants have linguistic difficulties. The data gathered from the interview supported this because informants reported the same response when asked if they have difficulty in expressing their ideas through speaking and if they struggle with pronunciation. The responses of the informants clearly pointed out that they find it very difficult to form a sentence when they try to express their ideas in English. Their responses have agreed on various observations that many of today's high school students have difficulty in expressing their thoughts clearly and logically in English due to linguistic difficulty. Additionally, this also accords with how the majority of the informants attributed their linguistic difficulty to their limited vocabulary, the use of mother tongue in the class, and mispronunciation. The participants' emphasis on the use of mother tongue as a reason of their linguistic difficulties supports the claim of Littlewood (1981), as cited in Hosni (2014). This demonstrated the disagreement on the use of L1, stressing that using L1 diminishes the importance of L2 as a means of communication. However, this also contradicts the study of Ismaili (2015), wherein it was concluded that L1 is seen as beneficial to the process of acquisition which helps students to feel more relaxed and assertive to ask questions or express opinions that they cannot do in the target language. The conclusion of Sailors, Hoffman and Pearson (2001) that there are positive and strong effects for the home-language in second language learning is also contradicted. The data revealed that the mother tongue is one of the causes that made students refuse to use the target language. This also supports Montero, Chavez and Alvarado's (2014) affirmation that several studies on second language acquisition have different views on L1 as a factor that either strengthen or weakens second language learning. In this case, linguistic background or mother tongue has weakened the ability of students to acquire the language in the aspect of speaking.

## 1.3 Inhibition

Low participation in class is a result of inhibition. Inhibition according to Ur (1996), is characterised by fear of criticism, worries concerning committing mistakes or shyness. The majority of the informants demonstrate inhibition based on their responses when asked if they experience fear of criticism when speaking English. It is observed that the participants were having difficulty in speaking English due to inhibition. This interpretation validates the conclusion of Zhou (2016) that trauma can affect an individual's cognition and learning. However, the participants did not impute the cause of their inhibition to their ethnicity and first language. These unpleasant experiences, however, may seriously disturb students' motivation to learn. Trauma in this case is brought about by criticism and mistakes. In addition, the result

also supports the claim of the Priory Education and Children's Services (2016) that children and young people with specific learning difficulties can struggle in mainstream education environments. As a result, they may experience low self-esteem and poor self-confidence. Because of their inhibition, second language learners are very anxious when exposed to communicative situations using the target language.

#### **1.4 Language Anxiety**

Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) claimed that language anxiety can be attributed to communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. Based on the responses of the participants during the interview, a number of them have language anxiety. From the statements emerged a specific theme that points to language anxiety. This proves Zheng's (2008) insight on learning difficulties that language anxiety is a pervasive phenomenon, especially among the second/foreign language learning population. This finding also supports Horwitz' (2001) conclusion that classroom atmosphere, teacher support, task orientation, and focus of instruction affect students' anxiety levels in a classroom situation. Most likely, in the multicultural context of this study, teacher support and task orientation. Since reading is the focus of the teacher, students are not exposed to various speaking tasks. The lack of orientation on this type of activity affects their performance. However, recitation as a form of assessment is frequently given. Recitation is an assessment that is perceived as anxiety-provoking activity rather than an activity that the learner should enjoy because they can finally make use of the concepts they have been familiarising for so long. Analysis of the data showed that their language anxiety are attributed mostly to fear in failing the subject and oral evaluation or recitation. Generally, among the population in this study, mother tongue and ethnicity do not play an integral role in language anxiety nor in strengthening it.

#### **On pedagogical implications**

This study ascertained several implications related to teachers, teaching strategies and assessment that should be given consideration. The majority of the informants during the interview stated that no distinction or consideration is given to their difficulties when asked how their teachers address their struggle of speaking English. Evident in the responses of participants is that the speaking difficulties of second language learners are not given real attention. Emphasis in English language class is placed on reading and not on speaking skills. This supports the claim of Rababa'h (2005) that one of the factors affecting language difficulties are related to teacher and teaching strategies. Furthermore, it strengthens the view of Ur (1996) that speaking difficulties are prevalent because oral language development has been neglected in the classroom. Hence, a teacher plays a significant role in an educational setting to facilitate and guide students through the learning process. This implicates how teachers are supposed to be aware of the prevailing speaking difficulties and what specific strategies to employ among students. Administrators should establish a program that builds



awareness of oral development and assessing speaking difficulties before classes have even started.

Social anxiety, linguistic difficulty, inhibition and language anxiety as speaking difficulties bear implications to pedagogical equity. Students need a teacher and an education paradigm that give considerations to their backgrounds, capabilities and limitations. Teachers' preparation should be equal and relevant to all learners. Differentiated instruction should be employed to give all students the opportunity to learn. Though the teacher's role in the class is very significant, the critical importance of considering a learner's insights cannot be ignored anymore. Teachers encounter a wide range of students with distinct qualities, strengths, weaknesses and difficulties. It is the job of the teacher to identify and understand these differences where he/she can anchor his/her instructions and strategies.

Regarding the linguistic difficulties of students in speaking, it is evident that the focus on reading has implications on the balance of instruction among the four macro skills that needed to be mastered by every learner to make them actual speakers of the language. The data showed that teachers focus on reading skills but not on oral communicative tasks. Speaking fluency progresses with constant practice. Exposing students to a situation where they interact using English offers additional input from the environment and at the same time provides an output for students to express themselves to others. They can process their comprehension while processing production; thereby enriching their vocabulary and eventually teaching them how to choose correct linguistic form in communicative tasks or in real life situations.

Inhibition emanates mostly from the fear of committing mistakes that will result to criticism, bullying, and annoyance. Inhibition is most crucial in language learning. To speak is to get attention. Proficiency and accuracy of learner grammar, reading or writing is not a total guarantee of second language acquisition. No matter how accurate and proficient a learner can be in grammar, the inability to engage in oral communication is a failure for both the teacher and the student. Hence, the remedy will also come from both them. In a multicultural classroom, programs should be implemented to ensure that teachers and students should be aware and be sensitive towards diversity especially among students who belong to the minority.

Language anxiety has caused trauma to many language learners. In speaking, fluency assessment is usually in the form of recitation. Adding to that, recitation is not viewed by students as an assessment that will contribute to the progress in learning the target language but rather as a process of receiving negative feedback from teachers and peers. This highlights the perception of students that speaking in English class is a form of punishment rather than an avenue to learn a second language. Further, teachers always emphasise the importance of speaking skills, even though major examinations mostly of assess writing and reading skills.

To succinctly describe speaking difficulties in the multicultural classroom of second language learners, the four themes of social anxiety, inhibition, linguistic difficulty and language anxiety

emerged as the primary difficulties of students from different ethnicities. These speaking difficulties implicate the conceptualisation, organisation and teaching of educational programs and evaluation/assessment that will provide equal learning opportunities to students with learning difficulties from diverse backgrounds. The participants have exhibited tension, discomfort and withdrawal when speaking English because of the negative experiences they had in the classroom. Insufficient exposure to the target language has resulted in their social anxiety. However, the majority of the participants do not attribute their social anxiety to their mother tongue or ethnicity but rather to the negative experiences like embarrassment due to incompetence in speaking English. Because of this, they resorted to their first language in expressing their ideas and refused to use English even inside the classroom. It is also demonstrated that the informants have a limited vocabulary that causes their struggle to share their thoughts and ideas to others. This linguistic anxiety is also the result of speaking their mother tongue even in English class. Moreover, it is concluded that the informants who exhibit inhibition are deeply affected by other factors. They lack self-esteem, fear criticism, and worry about committing mistakes. Another conclusion is that language anxiety is attributed to their specific fear on oral assessment or recitation. Hence, it can be safely concluded that a second language learner's mother tongue has only a minimal influence/effect on the development of social anxiety and linguistic difficulties but none on inhibition and language anxiety. Also, the role of the teacher to identify and lessen the effects of learning difficulties and customising teaching strategies have also been given consideration as a very vital step in second language learning. Finally learning difficulties have implications to the conceptualisation, organisation, teaching of educational programs and assessment/evaluation.

On the basis of the study and its findings there are points of recommendation to be given consideration. First, among the curriculum planners, the curriculum should emphasise communicative tasks that provide second language learners frequent opportunities to speak. Fluency should also be highlighted alongside accuracy. The findings also entail that differentiated instruction should also be given consideration to make learning possible for all students. Second, school administrators should formulate a policy that includes standardised comprehensive evaluation procedures for students in the assessment of their learning difficulties so teachers can appropriately provide sufficient assistance and prepare instructions to second language learners. Moreover, training should be conducted for teachers to equip them with pedagogical tools and up-to-date teaching strategies and further their knowledge on equality-responsive teaching. Thirdly, teachers should reconsider their teaching style. Awareness of pedagogical equity should be enhanced and be practiced in the classroom. Identifying the learning difficulties of the students should be a crucial step in preparing activities/lessons with the purpose of reinforcing their self-confidence, willingness and ability to learn. More emphasis should be given to communicative competence and performance. Classroom management should also be of utmost importance when a positive and comfortable learning atmosphere is evident. Speaking the target language should be also be given priority both in instruction and evaluation. Fourth, students should make an effort to speak English to



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interact with peers, teachers and even to other people outside the classroom. Lastly, it is recommended that future researchers will further this research to determine on how to address the specific learning difficulties of second language learners in the multicultural classroom.



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