Student Anxiety in L2 Oral Assessment: Moving Toward Valid Practice

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L2 speaking anxiety can be debilitating to some learners. This article explores research and suggests possible methods and teaching practices to move toward more valid assessment of L2 learners who experience this feeling.

Albeit strongly motivated and sincerely interested in learning a second or foreign language, many learners express having a 'mental block' in their learning that prevents them from succeeding in the second language (L2) classroom (Horwitz, 2001; Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). In many cases, this may be due to a feeling of anxiety concerning L2 learning. Anxiety is the subjective feeling of worry, nervousness, or unease that comes with an event or something with an unsure outcome. When this feeling is limited to certain situations (e.g. language learning), psychologists further delineate this phenomenon into the category of 'specific anxiety reactions' (Horwitz, et al., 1986), in order to distinguish between those who may feel constant anxiety and others who feel anxious in specific situations. Regarding specific anxiety reaction in language classrooms, educators could help to allay this barrier in L2 learning.

Several studies have looked at the relationship between anxiety and L2 learning under varying physical and social conditions to determine how consequential this issue is in L2 classrooms (e.g. Cheng, Horwitz, & Schallert, 1999; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994; Phillips, 1992; Sellers, 2000; Woodrow, 2006). Sellers' (2000) study on the relationship between anxiety and reading comprehension in Spanish found a direct correlation between university-level students' feelings of anxiety and the amount of content information they were able to recall after reading. Their anxiety had an effect on the reading process itself as well. In another study, Cheng et al. (1999) investigated the link between L2 writing anxiety and general L2 classroom anxiety and found a visible difference between the two types and their effects. This suggests that specific language skills (e.g. writing) can have different effects on students' anxiety. While Cheng et al. (1999) found this to be true for writing, the same may be said for other language skills, such as speaking.

Following the shift away from behaviorism in second language acquisition (SLA) and rote memorization and drilling in L2 learning, teaching practice began to focus more closely on (oral) communicative proficiency and conversational exchange in the language classroom (Brown & Lee, 2015a). Now, in the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) era, second and foreign language classrooms place a stronger emphasis on

fostering communicative competencies and require more L2 speaking and listening practice of the students. This article explores L2 speaking anxiety in the classroom through current research and suggests possible methods and teaching practices to move toward more valid assessment of L2 learners who experience this debilitating feeling.

Anxiety in L2 Speaking Practice and Assessment

It is well known that speaking or reading out loud in front of others can have a certain effect on some individuals' performance. While this might result as a sense of nervous flutters for some, this could manifest as paralyzing stage fright for others. Previous studies have suggested a strong link between speaking anxiety in a learner's first language (L1) and speaking anxiety in the L2 (MacIntyre, Noels, & Clément, 1997). However, the amount of anxiety generated by speaking in the L1 and L2 is more than likely not the same; speaking anxiety may intensify in the L2 due to many other reasons such as low-confidence and limited knowledge of the language.

Concerning the four different language skill areas (reading, writing, listening, and speaking), speaking has been shown to be the most problematic for learners of a second or foreign language with regard to anxiety (Horwitz, et. al, 1986; Phillips, 1989, 1992; Scott, 1986). While many students indicate interest in improving their L2 communication skills, speaking anxiety may prevent them from achieving this goal (Lindenau, 1987, as cited in Phillips, 1992). In addition to speaking anxiety, research suggests that tests and assessments increase learner anxiety as well (see Tobias, 1980, as cited in Phillips, 1992). The combination of the two, thus resulting in oral language assessment, may be then considered one of the most anxiety-inducing situations that can occur in a second language classroom.

In Woodrow's (2006) study of the anxiety levels of second language learners of English, she looked at the relationship between anxiety and second language performance on tests. The participants in her study were advanced-level students in an English for academic purposes (EAP) program who had been accepted to enter into various Australian universities. Given the nature of the EAP students and their admission into higher education in a primarily English speaking country, it is assumed that they were motivated to do well on this speaking performance assessment. Measuring the self-reported anxiety levels of 275 advanced-level EAP students and then aligning those measures with oral performance results, it was determined that anxiety was a high indicator of how well students performed on oral tests. In other words, the higher the students' anxiety, the

lower their performance scored. In addition, students reported what factors caused them to be most anxious in speaking. The most frequently cited source of anxiety was speaking with a native speaker of the target language (English) during the assessment. Therefore, in addition to speaking in the L2 and being assessed, interaction with a native speaker in that context seemed to further raise students' anxiety levels.

With such (at times) overwhelming student anxiety, how can language educators be confident that their practices in L2 oral assessment are indeed assessing what they claim to assess? In other words, by not factoring in the debilitating effects of L2 speaking and oral assessment anxiety, can educators really be certain that their assessment practices are valid? Is a student's expression of his or her authentic knowledge in the content area or language being assessed, as supposed? Or, is it rather the performance itself in an arguably high-anxiety situation that counts for the total of the student's oral grade? Anxiety can skew assessment results, so it should be considered when determining final L2 speaking scores. By not allaying or attempting to reduce the anxiety-inducing factors that studies have suggested, L2 speaking assessments cannot truly be considered a valid indicator of students' performance in a second or foreign language.

Moving Toward Valid Practice

Regarding students' attitudes toward assessment, studies have indicated certain preferences between anxious and non-anxious learners. For example, Birenbaum and Feldman (1998) examined the relationship between learning patterns and certain assessment formats (open-ended and close-ended questions) among students in higher education. The results of their study found that low-anxiety (i.e. confident) learners preferred open-ended questions in assessment, whereas high-anxiety (i.e. less confident) learners preferred close-ended questions. While the study's results are not surprising, what can be accomplished with that information may be less obvious. Educators might attempt to move from close-ended, controlled techniques toward more open-ended possibilities in their teaching practice. Below is an abridged taxonomy of language-teaching techniques (originally adapted from Crookes & Chaudron, 1991, p. 52-4, as cited in Brown & Lee, 2015b, p. 226-7) that moves from controlled techniques to open-ended techniques for L2 speaking.

Controlled Techniques
1. <u>Warm-up</u>: Mimes, dances, songs, jokes, play. This activity gets the students

stimulated, relaxed, motivated, attentive, or otherwise engaged and ready for the lesson. It does not necessarily involve use of the target language.

2. Content explanation: Grammatical, phonological, lexical (vocabulary), sociolinguistic, pragmatic, or any other aspects of language.

3. Role-play demonstration: Selected students or teachers illustrate the procedure(s) to be applied in the lesson segment to follow. Includes brief illustration of language or other content to be incorporated.

4. Dialogue/Narrative presentation: Reading or listening passage presented for passive reception. No implication of student production or other identification of specific target forms or functions (students may be asked to understand).

5. Dialogue/Narrative recitation: Reciting previously known or prepared text, either in unison or individually.

6. Reading aloud: Reading directly from a given text.

Semi-controlled Techniques

7. Storytelling (student-generated): A lengthy presentation of story by a student (may overlap with Warm-up or Narrative recitation). May be used to maintain attention, motivate, or as lengthy practice.

8. Question-answer, referential: Activity involving prompting of responses by means of referential questions (i.e. the questioner does not already know the answer beforehand).

9. Cued narrative/dialogue: Student production of narrative or dialogue following cues from miming, cue cards, pictures, or other stimuli related to narrative/dialogue (e.g. metalanguage requesting functional acts).

Open-ended Techniques

10. Role-play: relatively open-ended acting out of specified roles and functions.

11. Report: Report of student-prepared exposition on books, experiences, project work, without immediate stimulus, and elaborated on according to student interests.

12. Drama: Planned dramatic rendition of play, skit, or story.

13. Interview: A student is directed to get information from another student or students.

14. Discussion: Debate or other form of grouped discussion of specified topic, with or

without specified sides/positions prearranged.
15. A propos: Conversation or other socially oriented interaction/speech by students, on general real-life topics.

(Brown & Lee, 2015b, p. 226-7)

Moving along this spectrum toward the most open-ended tasks could lead learners into a more confident state as they build upon past L2 speaking experiences and become less anxious in class. By reducing the effect speaking anxiety has on particular students, oral assessments may be considered more valid.

In another study, Cassady and Gridley (2005) analyzed the effects of online formative and summative assessment materials on students in higher education with specific attention to their testing behaviors (i.e. performance and study habits) and beliefs (i.e. anxiety or 'perceived threat'). What the researchers found was that there were no negative effects of online testing reported; performance results were comparable between both online assessment and paper-pencil assessment. However, Cassady and Gridley did find that perception of the test itself differed in terms of how anxious students were in taking the test. In fact, students taking online tests for both formative and summative assessments reported lower levels of anxiety and perceived test threat. Results from this study therefore advocate for use of technology in the L2 classrooms with respect to assessment as this may diminish the anxiety of test-taking some students feel subjected to. Nevertheless, it is true that while students may feel less anxious while interacting with technology, this may not show their level of social competence in using English with other speakers. While that may be the case, it is important to take into perspective the objectives in the L2 classrooms and what the instructor is aiming to assess. If the objective is to use English to give an oral presentation, then assessing the student by having him or her give a presentation in front of the class remains an important element to meet that objective. But, if the language objective is not rooted in social context, then placing the student in an anxiety provoking situations may be unnecessary and result in less valid assessment.

In addition to various types of assessment techniques and mediums of practicing assessment, a third study looked at perceived competence (i.e. self-assessment) in an L2 as a function of actual competence and language anxiety. MacIntyre et al. (1997) gave

37 adult, English L1 students learning French as an L2 a language anxiety scale and a modified version of a 'can-do' checklist with which they were asked to self-assess in completion of 26 different language tasks. The study found that L2 anxiety, perceived L2 competence, and actual (teacher-rated) competence all intercorrelated (MacIntyre et al., 1997, p. 266). All connections involving language anxiety were negative; "as language anxiety scores [increased], the ratings of ideas expressed, output quality, and self-rated competence [decreased]" (p. 274). However, results indicated that anxious students tended to underestimate their competence in L2 performance, just as less anxious (more confident) students tended to slightly overestimate their competence in the L2. As considerable research has suggested that learners can accurately assess their abilities, MacIntyre et al. propose two possible biases that may be occurring in the L2 learning environment: 'self-enhancement' and 'self-derogation.'

Self-enhancement comes from the need to improve one's own self-perception and self-worth (MacIntyre et al., 1997). As individuals respond to the need to see themselves in a more positive manner, they may become overly optimistic. While this might not be as beneficial for assessment of all learners, others have argued that this bias helps during the acquisition of new skills because "it provides the impetus to invest the extra effort needed to confront a challenging obstacle" (p. 269). Self-derogation, on the other hand, refers to a systematic underestimation of one's abilities. This is common among anxious or depressed learners who have little faith in their own abilities as well as little agency in their learning. Although this appears quite negative, previous quantitative and qualitative studies (see MacIntyre et al., 1997 for a short review) have reported that this bias may be helpful in preparing learners to defend against loss in self-esteem in the event of a failure in language production. By not being over-confident that he or she would succeed, the learner may be less devastated to learn that a mistake has been made. Of course, in moving toward self-assessment, the instructor would have to lead students to a compromise between the two biases in order to obtain accurate perceived competence and thus a valid assessment of students' performance.

Incorporating self-assessment as valid practice

Self-assessment is one form of 'authentic' assessment that gives the learner agency in his or her own learning. By reducing one of the contributing factors to anxiety (e.g. a native-speaker rater of L2 speaking, as previously mentioned to be one of the main causes of anxiety in learners), the assessment practice may be considered to be more valid. In self-assessment, the learner is able to assess him or herself on the ability to complete a variety

of language tasks or functions in relation to a checklist or scaled rubric. As well as promoting self-regulation and learner autonomy, using self-assessment moves learning toward a more differentiated approach and allows the learners to focus on their unique strengths and challenges (Harris, 1997). Other strengths of self-assessment, based on a list by Harris (1997), are:

- Self-assessment can help make learners more active.
- Self-assessment can help learners realize they have the ultimate responsibility for their own learning.
- Self-assessment provides individual focus; learners focus on their own strengths and weaknesses specifically.
- Self-assessment allows students to see their learning in personal terms.

As earlier research has also suggested, learners are most often able to accurately self-rate their abilities and "there is consistent overall agreement between self-assessment and rating based on a variety of external criteria" (Blanche & Merino, 1989, p. 315, as cited in MacIntyre et. al, 1997). Therefore, with minimal established negative factors of self-assessment, instructors may also incorporate this valid assessment practice into their L2 speaking classrooms. Language instructors may choose a slow transition toward self-regulation and learner autonomy through gradual implementation of self-assessment in their teaching practice. Starting with simple checklists and 'can do' statements, the instructor can establish a precedent of self-assessment practice in the classroom and learners will begin to gain direction from there. The purpose of self-assessment should be made aware to learners, emphasizing specifically how this tool can greatly benefit their own learning. By scaffolding these individual self-assessments with support and rationale, students will take the assessments more seriously and they will thus be more effective.

Conclusion

This article discusses L2 speaking anxiety in the classroom by exploring relevant research. It also suggests possible methods and teaching practices to move toward more valid assessment of L2 learners who experience this debilitating feeling. In accordance with the increased emphasis on spontaneous oral production and L2 speaking assessment in second and foreign language classrooms, reducing learners' speaking anxiety is important for valid assessment of speakers' communicative competence. L2 speaking anxiety can be allayed by knowledgeable instructors who recognize the effects of anxiety

and work with students to reduce its presence in second language learning. Possible means of reducing anxiety in the L2 classroom are moving from more close-ended techniques toward more open-ended possibilities, utilizing technology and online forms of both formative and summative assessment, and moving toward self-regulation and ultimately learner autonomy through self-assessment practice.

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