Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety: Perceptions Of EFL When Working With Google Classroom As A Digital Platform

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Abstract

This research focused on the effect of anxiety when learning English, defining whether the use of a digital platform fosters spontaneity in those who are practicing oral skills in that language. In this qualitative study, information was collected using a survey applied to 10 students who were immersed in an English course at a language institute. These young people took classes in both face-to-face and virtual sessions, using the Google Classroom platform. In conclusion, it was established that language teachers should take into account the emotional factors that particularly affect the development of oral language skills in a language, for which the use of platforms that provide tranquility to those who are consolidating the language is suggested.

Keywords: anxiety, stress, English as a foreign language, speech, Google Classroom.

1. Introduction

The global world requires communication that demands mastery of a language that allows inclusion of the speaker in multiple circles, whose access is facilitated by connectivity. Before moving forward, it is worth noting that the Colombian government's goal in its policies is the acquisition of a foreign language conceived as a contact language worldwide. Thus, in 2004, the Ministry of Education designed the National Bilingualism Program in Colombia (PNB), conceiving it as a state strategy that sought to promote the learning of this language from the early years of education.

Before proceeding, it is worth noting that it was projected that by 2019, Colombian citizens would be able to communicate in English with internationally acceptable standards to ensure economic flow and thus give cultural and commercial international openness.

Let us now appreciate the paradox and falsehood of this norm because, as explained by Fandiño et al. (2012), bilingualism can be conceived as a mode of individual preparation, with which the individual will be able to respond to the demands and socioeconomic needs of the globalization world, disregarding both linguistic and cultural variables, individuality of being, and the right to their differences, in accordance with the culture that corresponds to their native language.

Here, it is appropriate to analyze the effect of bilingualism policies, which, despite having been continued in different governments, have been recognized by several authors as having minimal results, despite the efforts made, especially in public educational institutions, by intensifying the hours dedicated to learning English. The results of the Saber 11 State tests, which evaluate the mastery of the English language by young people in public schools in Colombia, have shown low standards.

It is well understood as Benavides (2021), who has studied the results obtained by students at the end of their undergraduate studies between 2007 and 2017 in the Saber Pro State tests in the area of English, has identified that a high percentage of them are still below level A1 of the Common European Framework, where 25% corresponds to 2007 and 20% to 2017, showing a decrease in language level despite the multiple efforts made in the education sector.

All this highlights the low level of English, raising the need to inquire about the factors that prevent mastery of oral skills, as it is the area of knowledge where the least level of mastery is achieved in public or private educational institutions or private institutes that teach English as a foreign language.

In the face of these digressions, it is essential to recognize the perceived inhibition by the language learner as a preponderant component that hinders their oral performance. In this line of explanation, anxiety is worth recognizing as a high-impact factor that needs to be considered in the academic world due to its pedagogical impact. It should, therefore, be an aspect valued when teaching a foreign language.

This topic has become a predominant component in the domain of foreign language skills. It is widely accepted that speaking is challenging due to the numerous inhibitions that individuals experience when attempting to communicate in a non-native language. In many cases, this fear, tension, apprehension, nervousness, panic, and worry prevent them from engaging in a conversation, as they feel that they cannot be understood. This negative feeling is recognized by Rahmati & Ajeng (2021), who explain that language learners often experience a high degree of anxiety when they have to express themselves, such as during an oral presentation or any other situation where they have to communicate in that language. This anxiety is referred to in this article as foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA).

Yalçın & İnceçay (2014) explain that when a learner has to speak in a foreign language, they may feel anxious and nervous. Thus, this type of emotion is detected when using this skill. Expanding on this idea, Zheng (2008) indicates that FLSA is a particular psychological phenomenon that only occurs when learning the language. In other words, this phenomenon occurs in scenarios where the individual associates the feeling with unique circumstances experienced at that time, in other words, it is related to specific situations.

Additionally, Spielberger (1972) states that anxiety is an unpleasant emotional state or condition characterized by subjective feelings of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and/or worry. As Gardner and MacIntyre (1993 cited in Suaga, 2014) explain, linguistic anxiety can be identified, which is associated with the fear that a person feels when expressing themselves using a second language. This feeling is a response to the use of the language. McCroskey (1984 also cited in Suaga, 2014) defines this feeling of unease that arises when a person has to communicate in that language. This feeling can even lead to a block.

In this context, it is worth mentioning MacIntyre and Gardner (1991), who specify the existence of three categories of anxiety, as shown in Graph 1. The first category refers to trait anxiety, which identifies the emotional tendency that a person may have, becoming a characteristic of their personality. The second category is emotional state anxiety, which is related to the response given to a specific circumstance. Lastly, there is specific anxiety associated with the response given to a particular situation. It is important to note that, according to Horwitz (2001), learning a foreign language is a type of specific anxiety that occurs in the classroom, in a defined context. It should be clarified that any other case is related to general anxiety.

Graph 1: Types of anxiety. Source: Horwitz (2001)

Types of anxiety
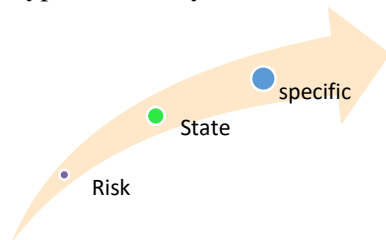
It is crucial to emphasize that this last anxiety is specific to learning a foreign language, as this phenomenon occurs only when learning this skill and not at any other time.

1.1 Literature Review

1.1.1. Anxiety in English language learning

To develop this section, Horwitz et al. (1986) were considered as they identified three effects of anxiety on those learning a foreign language. The first effect is related to communicative inhibition, caused by the fear of speaking due to a shortage of vocabulary and knowledge of the foreign language. The second effect refers to the fear of negative feedback from the interlocutor, in which the judgment of the teacher and ridicule from peers is regarded with suspicion. The third and final effect is connected with the anxiety experienced when taking a language exam, which is associated with the fear of failure and criticism.

It is important to mention Bata and Castro (2021), who explain that students with a high level of emotional intelligence have greater ability to manage stress and their emotions. Therefore, it is suggested that the learner self-regulates, analyzing their feelings without letting them control them, acquiring the ability to

face difficulties and seeking external help if necessary. This way, they can turn difficulties into opportunities that enable successful foreign language learning, strengthening their self-esteem and increasing their motivation and confidence.

In this regard, it is important to consider Krashen's (1983) view that language acquisition is associated with affective situations that occur during language learning. Therefore, he suggests that language should be studied in a relaxed, calm, natural, and peaceful environment because it is believed that this experience passes through an affective filter that facilitates or impedes the cognitive process associated with language learning.

Furthermore, Krashen clarifies that the affective filter develops differently depending on the age at which language is learned. The younger the age at which one learns a language, the less the impact of this emotional factor. This suggests that the younger the language is learned, the less incidence aspects such as self-confidence, security, anxiety, and emotionality have on it, allowing for the establishment that anxiety decreases when learning a foreign language at an early age. Therefore, its effect is minimal but may present with less impact.

This scenario allows for Zheng's (2008) position to be considered as well, as they explain that when a certain level of anxiety is perceived, it can promote speaking ability, calling it facilitating anxiety that generates a positive reaction in the language learner. This position is further supported by Dörnyei (2005), who recognizes that self-esteem and inhibition can facilitate the language learning process if interpreted as an impulse, a desire, or a deeply felt need that drives the learner to make great efforts to achieve fluency in the foreign language.

Regarding the measurement of anxiety levels, Horwitz et al. (1986) designed a scale that calculated the degree of anxiety through a questionnaire of 23 questions related to the sensations of those who engaged in speaking and listening activities in the foreign language as these activities produce the most anguish in language learners. These measurement sources were used to calculate anxiety levels and to seek improvement alternatives that would overcome the difficulties inhibiting the language learning process.

One way to address this situation is through the use of technological means, for which the use of the "Google Classroom" platform was suggested, as Ramirez et al. (2018) mention that technology has become an instrument that facilitates language teaching processes by enabling the appropriation of the language and favoring oral expression. The learner does not perceive the pressure of being directly observed since they are not being watched, but the platform provides the opportunity to interact and be heard.

Therefore, it is suggested that the English teacher conduct research on the various didactic resources available on the internet, identifying those that promote a comfortable and interactive learning environment that allows for the effective acquisition of language skills.

1.1.2. Digital Platforms - Google Classroom

It is undeniable the popularity that digital platforms have gained by facilitating students' access to schools from their homes, especially during times of pandemic, where technology is available. According to Poongodi (2020), virtual classrooms allow for learning from anywhere in the world, providing an appropriate environment. Therefore, it is necessary to recognize their impact, particularly during the pandemic. Nowadays, the use of this platform has become an opportunity.

Given its importance, it is indisputable that the use of digital platforms has transformed the behavior of students in various groups, especially facilitating the development of oral proficiency in foreign languages. Being at home made them feel uninhibited, not having to be in direct contact with their classmates, teachers, and other school members. Gamboa and Herrera (2022) highlight that virtual communities promote members' participation, making them actively engage in different groups and exchange information without inhibition. This aspect favors the acquisition of oral proficiency in foreign languages by promoting interactive communication. The virtual environment allows for relaxed, calm, and safe communication, which was particularly useful for those in social distancing.

It is pertinent to acknowledge the teacher as a digital citizen, who discovered and acquired the ability to navigate the network, enriching their pedagogical practice, especially during the pandemic. Teachers developed the skill to choose appropriate oral activities that facilitated spontaneous and calm language use and created a friendly environment that provided security and confidence when participating in oral activities in foreign languages, supported by technology and the creativity and initiative of the learners.

Likewise, the importance of promoting tasks used as alternative strategies mediated by phone calls, institutional email, WhatsApp, text messages, Messenger, blogs, Facebook, and others is recognized. These tasks fostered the oral participation of language learners, who, with proper use, revealed a pedagogical vision that amazed many and motivated others, providing confidence and verbal fluency, which led to the recognition that despite the advantages offered by this platform, it was necessary to rely on other technological resources to achieve oral fluency and communicate in foreign languages.

In this context, Google Classroom is mentioned for facilitating the dissemination of activities that promote interaction among students, teachers, and parents in some cases. Teachers could organize a virtual classroom to develop classes by proposing various activities, establishing private classrooms among participants to whom specific and varied topics were assigned that promoted the need to communicate in foreign languages. Furthermore, this platform provided the opportunity to democratize thoughts using this language to send comments that they then corrected or endorsed due to their easy comprehension. It is worth noting that this platform allowed for storing information, leaving it as evidence for some time, so teachers could also upload multimedia materials with audio, photos, and videos. Supported by the use of an electronic board, announcements and thought-provoking questions were also posted, inciting dialogue and the need to communicate and interact among participants. This undoubtedly excited, motivated, and facilitated the acquisition of oral proficiency in foreign languages in a fun, enjoyable, and interesting way, without fear and apprehension that hindered communicative interaction in foreign languages in the past.

2. Method

This research was developed based on the foundations presented by Moreno and Ramírez (2020), who discuss the qualitative method, emphasizing the interpretive perspective of the researcher to identify those factors that, associated in this case with anxiety, hinder the mastery of oral skills in the English language. It is important to note that in this approach, the researcher was a practicing teacher who was highly related to the problem addressed in this study.

It is worth noting that a virtual survey was applied in this approach due to its flexibility and ease in collecting information. Camargo and Ramírez (2020) support this idea by explaining that this instrument allows for the exploration of information among those surveyed, as they feel more comfortable while responding, and also due to the ease and speed of its application and interpretation.

Furthermore, the arguments presented by Wang (2005) are admitted, who determined that the survey facilitates the understanding of the data, which for this case was supported by the discussion and interpretation of the researcher, deciphering the findings in light of the theoretical framework included in the development of this study.

2.1 Participants

This research was carried out in a language institute that had specialized classrooms and whose didactic materials were supported by technology, thus facilitating the learning of the foreign language due to its autonomy.

The total sample of participants was represented by 10 students who were part of an English course at a B2 level, with a weekly intensity of four (4) hours. The English sessions were developed in a hybrid modality, which means that they included both face-to-face and virtual sessions. Regarding the oral participation, it is worth noting that it was developed online on the Google Classroom platform, clarifying that most of the oral activities, corresponding to 80%, were conducted on this site, while the remaining 20% were conducted face-to-face.

3. Results

The findings obtained regarding the question related to the emotional factors that had the greatest impact when participants had to communicate in English in person are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Emotional factors when communicating in English in person. Own elaboration.

Figure caption legend: Frustrated, Stressed, Sad, Without emotions
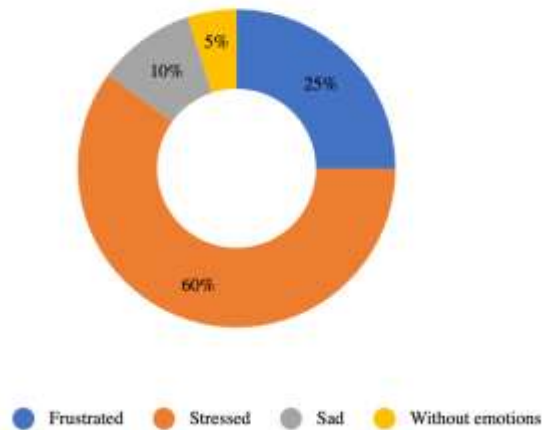
For this study, responses were mainly considered to obtain a higher percentage due to their repetition and were related to the theme of stress, considering the theoretical foundations included within the development of this study. In the first selected question, which asked about the emotional factors that influenced in-person communication in English, a trend corresponding to 60% is highlighted, which expressed a state of stress due to the fear of being ridiculed for pronunciation errors they might make. This was followed by 25% who reported feelings of frustration, especially when they had to communicate and felt pressured because this activity was evaluated. This aspect is in line with Horwitz's (2001) postulates, which associate anxiety with the perceived fear of individuals, especially when they are being tested, increasing their stress levels considerably, and even leading them to a state of panic that completely blocks them from communicating, especially in face-to-face situations.

It is precisely here where the teacher must find a methodology that allows the student to overcome their fears of communicating in that foreign language. It is suggested to create a relaxed and comfortable environment for the class, introducing topics that are of interest to the students, where they experience a comfortable sensation without any fear or pressure, establishing motivation that induces them to speak without any hesitation, thus reducing the level of anxiety.

It should also be noted that the English teacher should organize a cooperative scenario within the class, based on respect for each other and, above all, avoiding the student feeling obligated to communicate in the foreign language. On the contrary, it should become a challenge and a desire to participate in the communication activities proposed by the teacher or suggested by them, allowing them to overcome this challenge by seeing it as a game.

Now, we will move on to Figure 3, which illustrates the skill in which the student perceives the highest level of stress when learning a language.

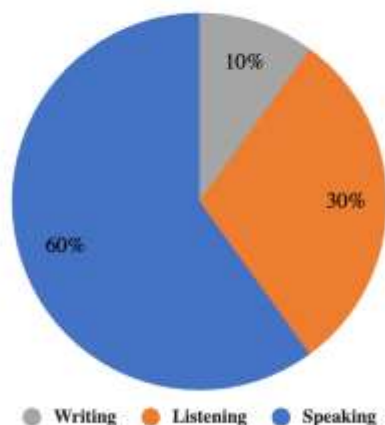**Figure 3**. Language skills with the highest level of stress. Own elaboration.

Figure 3 shows that speaking was the language skill that caused the highest level of stress, probably due to the fear of using words incorrectly and being judged by classmates. This fear is especially evident when oral ability is part of an evaluation, as it is the space where the fear of being identified or questioned due to a lack of language proficiency is most evident. The fear of making pronunciation mistakes or the implications this would have on the evaluation of their language level, as well as the potential effects on their work, academic, or intellectual performance, make the student reluctant to take the risk of communicating in a foreign language, leading to frustration.

It is important for teachers to consider the consequences that stress can have on each student, as it can have negative effects on both short- and long-term memory and can even lead to intolerance, authoritarianism, temperamental behavior, and even aggression as a response to frustration. In these circumstances, teachers must demonstrate visual and pedagogical acuity to provide an effective and appropriate response that is consistent with the student's learning pace and attitude, which will demonstrate reciprocity, strengthen their self-esteem, and increase their motivation.

Now we present Figure 4, which investigated the communication medium that generated the least amount of stress when communicating in the foreign language.

Figure 4. Means that facilitated communication in English. Own elaboration.
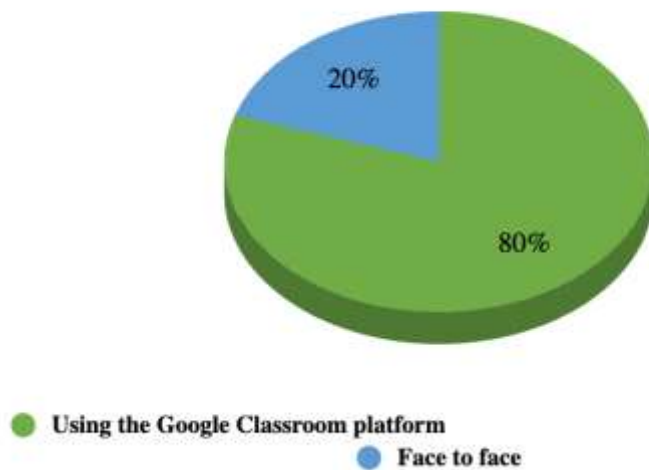
In this figure 4, the importance of the teacher is evident, as they make methodological decisions when learning a foreign language. For this reason, it is necessary to choose didactic alternatives that enable the development of communicative ability, seeking tools that are flexible and comfortable when the student needs to communicate in the foreign language. This is evidenced in figure 4, where 80% of the respondents reported feeling more comfortable and attempted to communicate in the foreign language using the Google Classroom platform, reducing their fear of trying because it provided security and the feeling of not being observed or judged when speaking.

It is important to suggest that teachers use technological means that provide confidence and security to the student when presenting oral assessments so that they do not feel judged or evaluated when speaking in the foreign language. Their greatest fear is being subjected to ridicule and jokes from their peers. In this way, greater participation and confidence are promoted, strengthening their self-esteem, allowing them to empower themselves with knowledge of the language, and seeking an opportunity to express themselves in the foreign language.

4. Conclusions

The findings of this research allowed us to establish the following:

The teacher must have pedagogical acuity to identify if there are causes or circumstances that prevent the development of the oral ability of their learners, considering the emotional aspects that undoubtedly constitute a vital element within the learning process, but have had little consideration regarding their implications in the mastery of the English language.

It is crucial to recognize how emotional factors significantly affect the acquisition of language skills, but their greatest impact is on the development of speech. This highlights the undeniable lack of relevance that this topic has had in the circle of English teachers. However, in cases where the teacher decides to consider

these variables and their impact on the development of oral communication, it is suggested that they offer multiple methodological learning options in a context where the student feels uninhibited and emotionally stable. This creates an environment of confidence, generating the desire to communicate, and recognizes that technological spaces create relaxed atmospheres, especially for the student, who can regain their self-esteem and strengthen their security in the development of speech in the foreign language.

Advances in the field of neurolinguistics and emotionality have gained greater relevance in the current post-pandemic era. This has forced English teachers to rethink their approach to teaching as students come with emotional difficulties and problems that often act as obstacles to learning a foreign language. Therefore, these circumstances must be considered in the learning planning process, and when combined with technological means, they can significantly enhance language mastery, especially in the development of oral ability.

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