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# INTEGRATING SOCIO CULTURAL THEORY AND BLOOM'S TAXONOMY TO OVERCOME XENOGLOSSOPHOBIA AND ANXIETY IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE SPEAKING IN SRI LANKAN UNDERGRADUATES

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## ABSTRACT

*The importance of knowing a second or a foreign language today has become a pivotal factor with regard to education, travel, trade, business, information, communication and most importantly to acquire a recognizable occupation. Even so, obtaining a job related to a graduate's educational background in the Sri Lankan context at present, is a challenging task. Having realized this, the local government of Sri Lanka have been taking measures in teaching English at local government schools from Grade 3 onwards since 1950's. Nonetheless, even by the time the Sri Lankan local government school children enter university after engaging in English language learning for over a decade and subsequent to Ordinary and Advanced level examinations, their English-speaking skills stand at a marginal level with traits of xenoglossophobia and anxiety. Thus, the aim of the study is to find out the main factors that influence xenoglossophobia and suggest strategies to overcome them. A sample of 32 Engineering undergraduates from the first year of General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University (KDU) was selected based on purposive sampling technique. The selection process was performed based on an Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI). After having exposed the students to a teaching process for 15 academic weeks, they were re-administered through a post-OPI. The lesson plans were set according to Blooms Taxonomy knowledge-based objectives. Socio-Cultural Theory (SCT) was incorporated when designing the lessons. Data was analyzed via a mixed approach. The findings revealed that the students had increased motivation and confidence to speak English as they were exposed to a gradual process of self-autonomy. Paving way for authentic speaking opportunities via Task Based Activities (TBA) and making students aware of the importance of English language communication for employment purposes from school levels is highly important. Further, teacher, learning environment and material play a considerable role in motivating language learners while self-negativity is a main reason for the majority to possess xenoglossophobia which adversely affects their future employability.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Xenoglossophobia, SCT, English language speaking*



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## 1. INTRODUCTION

English is considered a global language at present, and it is the key to knowledge, information, travel, trade business and technology (Turmapang, 2012). People learn it as a second or a foreign language at present, identifying its benefits and usage. Thus, people have developed intrinsic motivation in improving not only writing and reading skills but also their speaking and listening skills in the English language (Pushpananda, 2016). Recognizing the importance of the language, the local government of Sri Lanka, made it a point to teach English from Grade 3 onwards at local government schools (Perera, 2010). Even though the students learn English for a decade starting from Grade 3 and till G.C.E A/Ls (General Certificate of Education in Advanced Level), they possess traits of anxiety (Gorden, Kuruppu and Kuruppu, 2015). This leads to xenoglossophobia (the fear of speaking a second or a foreign language) with regard to English language speaking at undergraduate level, when compared to the other skills. It has been observed by the researcher during her university teaching career, spanning over a decade, that lack of motivation in participating in class discussions, not taking part in English related activities, deviating from the lessons and the teacher are few of the aspects which display xenoglossophobia in the undergraduates. This ultimately results in producing a graduate output who is incompetent and anxiety-driven when it comes to obtaining a suitable employment prospect in the present-day job market which is highly competitive and largely focused on English language competence (Ranasinghe, 2012).

Considering this situation as the problem, the study aims at exploring the main factors that influence xenoglossophobia in Sri Lankan undergraduates and suggest strategies to overcome them.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

'Xenoglossophobia' is recognized as the scientific term used for Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) and is described as a feeling of unease, worry, nervousness and apprehension experienced in learning or using a second or a foreign language

(Macmillandictionary.com, 2022; Urbandictionary.com, 2022). There are various reasons causing xenoglossophobia in learners and how to overcome them as stated in literature. According to De Souza (2012), one of the main reasons for the xenoglossophobia in Sri Lankan undergraduates is the monoglot ideology where they disregard English, resulting from the effects of British colonization during when linguistic abuse was experienced by Sri Lankans by not being able to use their mother tongue. Apart from this, the unsuccessful methods used in teaching a second or a foreign language is recognized as a reason for xenoglossophobia by Shiffman (2006). Accordingly, using age-old techniques in teaching such as the grammar translation method, results in lack of motivation in the learners. Shiffman (2006) further describes that by pumping a large amount of grammar and vocabulary into a learner's memory does not bring satisfactory results at the end. Apart from this, the three domains; teacher, material and the environment are inter-connected and work together in developing the language competence of a student (Dislen et al., 2013; Ranasinghe and Leisher, 2009). Accordingly, when the English language teacher is unable to arouse the motivation in learners via diverse lessons, when they are not apt and skillful in delivering the lessons based on students' requirements and when the classrooms are not equipped with the modern technology and creativity, students tend to increase anxiety in speaking. In addition, having mixed ability groups in the classroom also creates negative emotions in the weak students, paving way for higher levels of shyness, embarrassment (Perera (2010). Enguita, Martinez and Gómez (2010) suggest that lack of awareness on the benefits of learning English is a key reason why students lack competence to communicate in the English language. It should be considered as a responsibility of the school teachers to enlighten about the benefits of learning English from school level while providing ample opportunities to communicate in English via various techniques (Hettiarachchi, 2015). This may include communicative task-based, student-centered activities which are enjoyable for students to follow, without making them feel more anxious and nervous in the classroom (Wijetunge, 2016).

Nevertheless, as Meshkat and Hassani (2011) state, one of the main reasons for speaking anxiety is the competitive nature of the examination systems and focusing mostly on covering syllabuses focused on reading and writing by both students and teachers. In the Sri Lankan education system, this is considered as a more important aspect than acknowledging students about the benefit of learning English language in the long run thus, leaving the students inept and incompetent to speak the language.

The lessons designed in this study focus on assisting English as a Second Language (ESL) speakers to overcome xenoglossophobia and thus are based on the knowledge-based objectives of Bloom's Taxonomy while integrating Socio Cultural Theory (SCT). The main and the specific objectives of the lesson plans in the current research are based on the revised Bloom's Taxonomy by Anderson and Krathwohl (2001) focusing on enhancing the English speaking confidence of the students. The lessons at the bottom two tiers of the 6 tiered taxonomy deal with activities which focus on group work, the mid two tiers on pair work and the top two tiers on individual tasks, focused at creating autonomous speakers. This allows the students to gradually come forward and improve their skills rather than fearing or shying away from the tasks.

This is similar to what Vygotsky (1978) stated as SCT. Accordingly, a child's language development takes place in two ways. First, through the social plane where he/ she socializes with the society and acquires the language. Then, through intra-psychological category where he internalizes the language on his own and uses it as an autonomous speaker.

Accordingly, social interaction plays a primary role in enhancing cognition. As mentioned above, after the basic/necessary foundation is laid at the first level through social interaction where the learner acts collaboratively, grasps the knowledge and understanding to move to the next level via group and pair work, he/she is capable of acting independently and autonomously later. As a result, the learner becomes more focused with "voluntary attention logical memory, and formation of concepts. All the higher functions originate as actual relationships

between individuals" (Vygotsky, 1978, p.57). The lessons are designed to achieve this particular goal. In addition, Aimin (2013) states, learners thus are responsible for their own learning environment and the environment continues to nurture and scaffold them further. Therefore, the teachers are considered as the active constructors of this learning environment that encourages the learners to be motivated. Therefore, "as a result of the guidance, a novice becomes the effective member of a community" (Behroozizad, Nambiar and Amir, 2014, p.219). With this appropriate instruction and interaction, successful learning occurs as the control between the activities is shifted from the social to the individual plane (Ellis and Barkhuizen, 2005). This stage of ameliorating the cognition of a learner from average to advanced level through assistance is defined as Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) by Vygotsky under SCT.

In line with SCT, all lessons are mainly based on Task-Based Activities (TBA) and contain pre-, during- and post-tasks (Ellis, 2017). "Using TBAs has proven to improve motivation and confidence in students" (Wijetunge, 2016, p.206). Accordingly, incorporating task variety, authentic and entertaining tasks and providing opportunities for students to learn as a team while focusing on student-centered learning, assists in overcoming classroom anxiety

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

A sample of 32 Engineering undergraduates in the first year of General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University (KDU) was chosen as the sample based on purposive sampling technique. They were exposed to a specific English-speaking programme based on the Socio-Cultural Theory by Vygotsky (1978) and Bloom's Taxonomy Knowledge based Objectives for a period of 15 weeks (1 academic semester, 45 lecture hours). Participant observations were carried out and interviews were conducted for the individual participants and teachers where they were administered through open-ended and close-ended questions. The quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS while the qualitative data were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using content analysis incorporating Atlas ti using the 6 phases of thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006).

#### 4. ANALYSIS

Based on the responses of the students, the following observations were made on the first and the last day of the programme.

**Table1: The general observations made on the first and the last day were as follows.**

First day	Last Day
The majority was nervous, less talkative, hesitant to volunteer. Did not answer nor engage in discussions.	The majority was motivated and confident to communicate and respond to questions.
Preferred working in groups. Only the 'best' speakers volunteered to take part.	Chances were delegated. There were regular speakers in table topics sessions. Students Preferred autonomous activities.
Did not enjoy CTBA: Did not take part, did not take up responsibilities nor engaged in discussions.	Enjoyed CTBA and teamwork, volunteered as leaders and engaged in discussions.
Feared stage performance, were highly reluctant to use the microphones.	Confident on Stage and moved, there were no objections towards using the mikes.
Did not know how to use body language; No facial expressions, no eye contact and looked away when speaking, hands were often in the pockets, clutched, folded or swinging, the use of the stage was nil.	Body language improved. Effective facial expressions, hand and eye coordination and stage movement.
Did not prefer constructive criticism by the peers and felt embarrassed by the teacher feedback.	Valued constructive criticism by peers, teachers and Toastmasters. Responded positively. Used criticism to improve their communication.
Feared to discuss with the lecturers and did not volunteer in the	Became friendly and comfortable with the lecturers over time. Asked

classrooms when questions were asked. Did not involve much in discussions. Unwilling to attend the class.	for clarifications and made discussions. Even informed when unable to attend the class. Had questions after the sessions.
Nervous around TMs and English speakers, hesitated to present in front of the TMs.	Preferred company of English speakers and performers, wanted to be a part of TMs.
Poor language and insufficient vocabulary	Improved language and vocabulary
Were hesitant to come up as a leader. Did not want to take up the challenges until nominated.	Voluntarily took up leadership roles and were motivated to select leaders for the forthcoming sessions. Came up with interesting topics and words for the day. Requested for assistance when required.

Semi-structured interviews were held with the sample and teachers involved. It was necessary to find out the opinions of the sample towards the teaching-learning process on Communicative Task-Based Activities (CTBA), their attitude towards the change in confidence, motivation and xenoglossophobia levels and suggestions. The opinions of the teachers were also gathered with regard to the reasons for xenoglossophobia in learners and their interaction during the classroom when being engaged in CTBA.

Based on the responses of the students and teachers, the following was derived subsequent to the coding process as the most influencing factors causing xenoglossophobia and classroom anxiety in the learners.

- Impact of socio-economic background and parents' education on the English speaking ability of the sample.
- Teacher, learning environment and material
- Negative experiences during school times
- Unawareness of the benefits of learning English
- Lack of exposure to the language

- Diverse reasons causing phobia
  - Vocabulary
  - pronunciation
  - grammar
  - accent
  - feeling of other being better
  - feeling of being laughed at
  - lack of motivation and confidence to communicate
  - the feeling of being humiliated in front of the other for the negative criticism offered by teachers
  - the fear of being punished for mistakes
  - being inferior in front of the opposite sex

100% claimed that the uncomfortable feeling that they felt on the very first day, disappeared gradually when they participated in the programme. After the programme, it was stated that they could easily engage in day-to-day conversations with outsiders and 80% stated that they had no problem conducting impromptu speeches to unknown audiences. 100% were comfortable in conducting prepared speeches. Many claimed that “I don’t care about the mistakes anymore. Even if I make mistakes, I do not care. I am not afraid that others would laugh at me. I have the confidence to say what I have to say”.

Marks obtained by the students were clustered according to the UGC marking criterion. Accordingly, it was visible that all students had scored below 45 marks at the pre-test while all had scored above 50% marks at the post test. To witness the statistical significance SPSS was used.

**Table 2: Paired sample statistics Paired sample correlations**

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1 Pre-test OPI	37.50	32	9.639	1.704
Post-test OPI	67.88	32	9.033	1.597

**Table 3: Paired sample statistics Paired sample correlations**

	N	Correlation	Sig
Pair 1 Pre and Post-test marks	32	.673	.000

It is revealed that the mean value is higher in the post-test when compared to the pre-test and that the standard deviation in the post-test stands at 9.033, which is a difference of .606. The significant difference of Paired sample correlations is .000.

**Table 4: Paired sample T test on OPI marks**

	Paired Diff		95% Conf Lower Upper	Std. Error Mean	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Devi			
Pair 1 Post-marks Pre-marks	30.375	7.568	27.646 33.104	1.338	.000

A mean value of 30.375 can be witnessed in the paired sample T-test. Standard deviation is 7.568 and the 95% confidence interval of the difference is 5.458. The significant 2-tail stands at .000, below the value 58 of .05 ( $p < .05$  59 making it be a significant difference.

#### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

It was identified that there were several main reasons for undergraduates to be anxiety-driven with regard to English language speaking. One of the main reasons for this is the exam-oriented nature of the local education system where recognition is provided by teachers solely on preparing the students to excel in the two most competitive examinations in Sri Lanka namely; G.C.E O/L (General Certificate of Education in Ordinary Level) and G.C.E A/L (General Certificate of Education in Advanced Level) and the sole effort of the students is to excel in these two

highly competitive examinations. As a result, even at the home-front, the parents influence the students to focus on passing the written papers (tests only reading and writing) which will ultimately be the only proof of language competence in gaining a suitable employment. The majority of the students do not allocate sufficient time or seek opportunities to engage in improving speaking and listening skills. However, it was identified that based on the socio-economic background of the students, their motivation factors vary.

The teacher, learning material and the environment have a high impact with regard to learner motivation as indicated by Dislen et al., (2013) and Ranasinghe and Leisher, (2009). When the teachers are equally motivated in teaching, using entertaining and innovative methods to teach, building a close rapport with the students and incorporating a variety of activities by creating a stress-free learning environment in the classroom, it leads to better results. Teacher favoritism and punishments on the contrary result in less motivation and involvement. The negative memories associated with school times, where they were mocked and criticized for their mistakes in front of the peers have also resulted in xenoglossophobia and anxiety in English language learning.

Considering about the mechanisms to improve confidence and motivation in students, lesson plans set according to the six tiers of the Bloom's taxonomy, are highly effective in enhancing the students' autonomous learning and speaking skills. Exposing the students to impromptu and autonomous speaking, using a gradual technique assists them to overcome the negative thoughts, anxiety and xenoglossophobia levels. As stated in literature, when students are exposed to be involved in interaction with more skilled peers or individuals, they actively learn more (as cited in Notes, 2018). Learning enhances through social interaction and culture.

Using TBAs while providing opportunities for student-centred learning also assist in improving the confidence to speak in English language. Incorporating the three phases of TBAs as stated by Ellis (2017) encourages the learners to engage and

learn and interact actively while enjoying the tasks. Thus, entertaining TBAs including the three phases with diverse activities is recognized as an effective technique to improve motivation and reduce xenoglossophobia.

## **5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

In conclusion, it can be stated that the main reason for xenoglossophobia in Sri Lanka is the exam-oriented education system of the country where insufficient opportunities are provided to the students at school level to improve their speaking skills. Non-recognition of the benefits of learning to aptly communicate in the English language hinders opportunities for undergraduates to obtain a suitable job. Teachers have a huge responsibility to play in this regard.

The recommendations can be stated in tri-fold. First, the government of Sri Lanka should invest sufficient funds to improve English language skills of all teachers and learners of the country despite the socio-cultural, socio-economic obstacles. Secondly, the educational implementing units should allocate trained teachers to teach in all parts of the country and right incentives should be provided to teachers and learners for their hard work. In addition to this, the local syllabuses should be changed regularly while focusing on the needs of students. Thirdly, it is recommended for the teachers to provide awareness to the learners on the benefits of English speaking from school levels. Exposing the students to more speaking opportunities in the classroom, creating a student-centred learning environment with better opportunities to socialize, engaging students more in group activities in order to mingle them with colleagues and build connections, will pave way for the learners to improve motivation and overcome xenoglossophobia. Incorporating TBA based on Bloom's Taxonomy knowledge-based objectives, while giving special recognition to speaking in English, is recommended as a strategy to improve speaking motivation and confidence in students.

Intrinsic motivation to study English language should be inculcated into the minds of all Sri Lankan students. The employment benefits and opportunities available

for a language proficient graduate should be instilled in the students at a young age.

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