Title: The Characteristics of Anxious Students in Speaking Class

Abstract

This research investigates the characteristics of anxious students in speaking class. This was conducted in a private university in Yogyakarta. Two instruments were used in this study, which were structured observation and standardized open-ended interview. Two classes were observed. From the observation, six students were chosen to become the participants. There were twenty characteristics found in this study which finally divided into observable symptoms and non-observable symptoms. The symptoms which included in observable symptoms were trembling, avoiding eye contact, squirming, playing with hair or clothing, nervously touching object, stuttering or stammering, getting sweaty, rubbing the palms, staggering voice, reading from the script while giving presentation, speaking too fast, speaking too slow, remaining silent, using filler, having pale face, and having poor stance. While the non-observable symptoms were getting confused, getting cold, feeling nervous, and heart beating quickly.

*Keywords*: characteristics of anxious students, anxiety, speaking anxiety

**Background**

In learning a language such as English, one of the skills which must be mastered by the students is speaking. In teaching and learning process, the English teachers often speak English in order to make the students accustomed to using English. It is applied especially in English department in university. It indicates that the students also have to try to speak English in class in order to be able to interact with both the teachers and the other students. In some occasions, the teachers ask the students to do group discussion, presentation, or role play. These activities are done so that the students can practice speaking English. However, there are some students who get difficulty in speaking English. For example in group discussion, there are some students who only keep silent while the other students try to tell their ideas. Another example is when the students do presentation in front of the class. Sometimes, each group member does not speak in same portion. It means that there is a group member who only speaks a little. There are also some students who play with their hair, get sweaty, or even tremble when they do presentation in front of their classmates. When the students do those things while they are speaking English, it can indicate that they undergo anxiety. Anxiety is a popular psychology phenomenon which is related to fear, self-esteem, and worry (Yahya, 2013; Wu, 2010 & Zheng, 2008). Based on the examples above, the students experience anxiety in speaking. Thus, they undergo speaking anxiety. Speaking anxiety will only takes place when speaking is concerned (Mak, 2010).

In addition, when the students feel anxious, they will show some symptoms. According to Suleimenova (2013), anxious students show symptoms such as “squirming, playing with hair or clothing, nervously touching objects, stuttering or stammering” (pp. 1861-1862). Getting sweaty, vomiting, trembling, and perspiring are also experienced by anxious student (Ansari, 2015; Boyce, Alber-Morgan, & Riley, 2007). These symptoms of speaking anxiety really exist in foreign language classroom.

In consideration to the background and literature review, this study focuses on the characteristics of anxious students in speaking class. Furthermore, this study aims to help the students to introspect themselves whether they are anxious or not when they speak English. Finally, the students can try to find out the way out to solve their speaking anxiety. Moreover, this study also can help the teacher to identify which students undergo speaking anxiety and the teacher is able to find new strategy to be applied in speaking class in order to overcome or reduce the students’ speaking anxiety.

This study was conducted in a private university in Yogyakarta majoring English Language Education Department. To collect the data, observation and interview were done. The observation was done in two classes and six students became the participants in this study. This study investigates the answer to the question: what are the characteristics of anxious students in speaking class?

**Literature Review**

One of the famous phenomena which exist in foreign language classroom is anxiety. According to Wu (2010) and Zheng (2008), anxiety becomes a major problem in education field including in foreign language classroom and it needs to be overcome. Based on Marwan (2008), anxiety is defined as "threats to self-efficacy and appraisals of situations as threatening or an uneasy feeling due to something threatening” (p.120). Thus, it can be concluded that anxiety is one of the problems exists in foreign language classroom which happens because of something threatening and it need to be solved.

The students can suffer anxiety in some occasions. One of the situations which can be source of anxiety is when the students have to speak English. When the students feel anxious in speaking English, it indicates that they undergo speaking anxiety. Based on Mak (2011), speaking anxiety takes place when speaking is concerned. In addition, Ahmed (2016) added that speaking anxiety is an obstacle for most learners and it affects negatively to their speaking ability. Therefore, it can be said that speaking anxiety only happens when speaking is concern and it becomes a serious problem for learners because of its negative effect.

When the students feel anxious in speaking, they actually show some symptoms. The characteristics of anxious students are divided into two. The first is observable symptoms and the second is non-observable symptoms. Observable symptoms means that the symptoms can be seen by other people, but non-observable symptoms are the symptoms which only felt by the anxious students. Based on Suleimenova (2013), anxious students show observable symptoms such as “squirming, playing with hair or clothing, nervously touching objects, stuttering or stammering” (pp. 1861-1862). In addition, anxious students also experienced getting sweaty, vomiting, trembling, and perspiring (Ansari, 2015; Boyce, Alber-Morgan, & Riley, 2007). Hence, if the students show those symptoms when they speak English, it indicates that they undergo speaking anxiety.

Moreover, when the students feel anxious, they do not only show observable symptoms, but they also feel non-observable symptoms. According to Suleimenova (2013), “fidgeting, headache, experiencing tight muscle, and feeling unexplained pain or tension in any part of the body” are experienced by the anxious students (p. 1861 – 1862). Ansari (2015) also stated that, “nervous, worried, fearful, and heart beats quickly” (p. 39) are non-observable symptoms which felt by anxious students. Moreover, weak knees and dry mouth also become anxiety symptoms (Boyce, Alber-Morgan, & Riley, 2007).

**Methodology**

Qualitative research method was adopted in this study. According to Creswell (2012), “the characteristic of qualitative research is exploring a problem and developing a detailed understanding of a central phenomenon” (p. 16). Creswell (2012) also added that the nature of qualitative study is word. Hence, by applying qualitative research method, the data is detail and rich. Since the problem investigated in this study is a specific problem, case study was used. According to Merriam (1998), case study is an investigation about “particular situation, event, program, or phenomenon” (p. 29). The kind of case study applied was interpretive case study. According to Merriam (1998), interpretive case study “contains rich, thick description” (p. 38).

This study was conducted in a private university in Yogyakarta starting from February up to April 2017. The instruments used in this study were observation and interview. Structured observation was done in order to get non-verbal data and it was also used to choose the interviewees. According to Cohen, Manion, and Marrison (2011), in conducting structured observation, observation checklist must be prepared so that the observation will be organized. Two classes were observed during one of the speaking classes. After doing observation, the data was analyzed by counting the number of symptoms shown by the students. The students who showed more symptoms than the other students became the participants.

Finally, six students became the participants in the interview. The participants were two male students and four female students. Standardized open-ended interview was used so the participants answered same questions in the same order. According to Cohen, Manion, and Marisson (2011), the characteristics of standardized open-ended interview is the participants are asked same basic questions using same order. The interview was also used to confirm the symptoms shown by the participants during the observation. After doing interview, the data was analyzed using some steps. The steps were transcribing, member checking, and coding.

**Findings**

The observations were done in two classes. The students were observed when they did group discussion and presentation in front of the class. There were seventeen observable symptoms used to identify which students felt anxious in speaking class. The observation analysis is presented below:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **No.** | **Visible symptoms** | **Frequency** | **Percentage** |
|  | Trembling | 13 | 8% |
|  | Remaining silent | 25 | 15% |
|  | Sitting in the back row | 0 | 0% |
|  | Avoiding eye contact | 40 | 24% |
|  | Squirming | 1 | 1% |
|  | Playing with hair | 5 | 3% |
|  | Playing with clothing | 20 | 12% |
|  | Nervously touching object | 28 | 17% |
|  | Stuttering or stammering | 7 | 4% |
|  | Getting sweaty | 1 | 1% |
|  | Vomiting | 0 | 0% |
|  | Blushing | 0 | 0% |
|  | Rubbing the palms | 14 | 8% |
|  | Staggering voice | 3 | 2% |
|  | Reading from the script while giving presentation | 7 | 4% |
|  | Too fast speed of speech | 1 | 1% |
|  | Too slow speed of speech | 3 | 2% |
| **Total** | | **168** | **100%** |

This study used two instruments to get the data. After doing observation, six students were chosen based on the observation result to become the interviewees. Therefore, the result of observation and interview are triangulated. The findings are divided into two based on the type of the characteristics of anxious students which are observable symptoms and non-observable symptoms. Based on the observation result, some students were trembling when they spoke English. It seemed when the students did presentation in front of the class. They did presentation using poster. When they presented, the poster was moving because they trembled. In addition, during the interview session, all of the participants mentioned that they trembled when they spoke English. The third participant said, “I always tremble every time I speak English” (P3.11).

Another symptom which appeared was remaining silent. It revealed for 25 times or 15%. During the group discussion, some students only kept silent when the other students tried to tell their opinions. In one group which consisted of four up to five students, there was a student who kept silent while the other students in the same group were trying to tell their opinions.

Based on the observation result, it can be seen the most frequently symptom shown by the students is avoiding eye contact. When they spoke English, instead of looking at the audience, they were looking up the ceiling, looking at the window or projector. During the interview session, two out of six participants stated that they avoided eye contact when they spoke English.

Nervously touching object was appeared 28 times during the observations. The students touched their book or their pen when they did group discussion. It is also supported that five of six participants mentioned that they touched something near them when they felt anxious in speaking.

The next symptom which appeared was squirming. This symptom revealed once by a male student when he did presentation. This symptom appeared once and the percentage. He moved his body like there was something uncomfortable in his body. He wriggled from side to side.

Playing with hair or clothing appeared when the students did presentation. The female students tended to play with their headscarves when they presented in front of the class. The male students played with their hair though their hair look okay when they did presentation. Both the female and male students played with their sleeve.

Stuttering or stammering appeared seven times during the observations. For example, a male student said, “home schooling can help eee eee he or she, boy or girl, girl eee because, because, eee we can, we can”. Another student said, “full day school can eee can, avoid, what, avoid, avoid”. One of the participants also said that she stuttered when speaking English.

There was a male student who got sweaty when he did presentation in front of the class. The classroom was facilitated with air conditioner and during the observation, the air conditioner was on. However, when this student did presentation, he got sweaty and he wiped his sweat. In addition, one of the participants stated that he got sweaty when he spoke English.

Some of the students rubbed their palms when they spoke English. Based on the observation result, it appeared for eight times. One of the participants also mentioned that she rubbed her palms especially when she had to speak in front of the class. In the interview session, she said, “I rub my palms especially when I perform in front of the class” (P6.20).

When the students spoke English, sometimes their voice staggered. This symptom revealed three times in the observation. A male participant also stated that when he spoke English, sometimes he spoke like he yelled at someone. In the interview session, he said, “my voice sounds like I’m shock” (P4. 21).

Reading from the scripts also appeared for seven times. This symptom revealed more when the students did presentation. Some of the students brought a piece of paper filled with the note about what they were going to say. Those students read from the script at glance when they presented. Moreover, in the interview session, one of the participants said that she read from her note when she spoke English.

There was one student who spoke too fast when she did presentation in front of the class. She did that from the beginning until the end of her presentation. There were also some students who spoke too slowly. They spoke too slowly because they used filler such as “eeee” or they thought about what they were going to say. Speaking too fast appeared once time while speaking too slowly revealed three times during the observation.

There was another observable symptom which did not include in the observation checklist, but it appeared during the observations. Some students made used filers when they spoke English. The fillers they used were “eee” or “well”. During the second observation, one of the students used filler. When she explained about the place she wanted to live in, she mumbled, “it’s like eee it’s famous eee and then eee why we eee”. In addition, three participants stated that they used fillers when they spoke English.

One of the interviewees said that when she felt anxious she would have pale face and poor stance. Those two symptoms include in the observable symptom. In the interview session, she explained that her face would be pale and also have poor stance when she had to speak English especially in front of the class. During the observation, this participant’s face was pale and the way she stood was looked uncomfortable.

Besides the observable symptoms, the participants in this study also mentioned some symptoms which finally categorized into non-observable symptoms. In the interview session, one of the participants said that she got confused about what she was going to say even when she had prepared. There were also two participants who stated that they got cold when they spoke English. They did not know why their hands got cold when they had to speak English. Another symptom which mentioned by the participants during the interview session was feeling nervous. Four participants stated they felt nervous when they spoke English. Participant five said that he felt nervous though he had prepared and practiced what he would speak. The last non-observable symptom mentioned by the participants was heart beating quickly. Five participants admitted their hear beat quickly when they spoke English. Participant two stated, “when I speak English, I am trembling, cold, and my heart beats quickly” (P2.10).

**Discussion**

Based on the result of observation and interview, it can be concluded that the characteristics of anxious students are divided into two which are observable symptoms and non-observable symptoms. There were sixteen observable symptoms and four non-observable symptoms. The result shows that most of the students undergo speaking anxiety. Their anxiety increases when they have to speak English in front of the class. Some of the students also felt anxious when they did group discussion. However, they could handle their anxiety better than they did presentation in front of the class. It can happen because of the atmosphere between speaking in group discussion and speaking in presentation is different.

The students undergo speaking anxiety because of some factors. By knowing the characteristics of anxious students, it helps the teacher to identify which students undergo speaking anxiety and the teachers are able to reduce the students’ speaking anxiety. The students are also able to introspect themselves and find the factors causing their speaking anxiety.

**Conclusion**

This study was conducted to find the characteristics of anxious students in speaking class. There were twenty characteristics found in this study which finally divided into two characteristics. The first is observable symptoms. The symptoms which included in observable symptoms were trembling, avoiding eye contact, squirming, playing with hair or clothing, nervously touching object, stuttering or stammering, getting sweaty, rubbing the palms, staggering voice, reading from the script while giving presentation, speaking too fast, speaking too slow, remaining silent, using filler, having pale face, and having poor stance. While the non-observable symptoms were getting confused, getting cold, feeling nervous, and heart beating quickly.

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