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**The Impact of Anxiety on the Speaking Skill of English as a Second Language (ESL)
Learners in the Saudi Context**

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The notion of anxiety has been widely studied by psychologists for many years. Krashen (1982) identified anxiety as part of an individual's affective filter and stated that lower anxiety was "conductive to second language acquisition" (p.31). Similarly, Spielberger (1983 cited in Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1991) considers anxiety to be a "subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an aroused of automatic nervous system" (p. 27). Pekrun's (1992) expectancy-value theory of anxiety (EVTA) relates anxiety to a person's determination as to whether he or she can control a given threatening social situation.

Anxiety manifests through a feeling of fear towards uncertainties in relation to what will happen in the future. In a language learning context, this may include learners' beliefs about learning a foreign language and the expected outcomes. Various factors are associated with an individual's anxiety. For example, being in situations of heightened uncertainty such as the first day in a new environment or a job interview (Feiler & Powell, 2016; Bhujade, 2017). In a language learning context, an individual's anxiety is mainly related to classroom teaching and learning. In Saudi Arabia, most students learn English as their second language since Arabic is the primary language of the country. Notably, learning a second language comes with the challenges of learners' anxiety and fear, which can adversely affect learning outcomes. Specifically, students who learn English as a second language normally experience anxiety that adversely affects their speaking skills (Al-Hnifat et al, 2020).

In the Saudi context, a study by Alqahtani (2019) investigated a connection between anxiety experienced while speaking English and the outcome of students' English proficiency studying English as a second language at the university level. The study sampled a total of 197 students, in which 96 were males and 101 females. The results showed that a total of 31% of the learners had high anxiety while communicating in English. This was mainly attributed to a lack of self-confidence, which is a major cause of anxiety, and adversely affects the performance of language learners in Saudi Arabia. The findings further indicated that students who experienced anxiety tended to avoid expressing themselves in areas where they faced challenges, such as pronunciation or oral presentations. Therefore, frequent interaction with students is the key approach used by teachers to understand the problems faced by language learners. Notably, Saudi students who experience anxiety in an English language class may fail to reveal their weaknesses due to fear. Such students may continue to suffer and demonstrate poor performance in the English language.

Elkhafaifi (2005) reports that students who develop anxiety while speaking in English tend not to participate in classroom activities voluntarily and avoid making mistakes when using English language. This hinders the productivity of students as they cannot gauge their language learning progress. Moreover, they do not provide teachers with an opportunity to assess their knowledge and assist them with their identified weaknesses and learning needs (Elkhafaifi, 2005). The findings of this study by Elkhafaifi (2005) also suggest that students with speaking anxiety tend to avoid classroom activities, due to which they cannot practice their skills with other students in class. Without adequate speaking practice, a student cannot acquire proficiency in speaking English.

Language learning is one of the areas that is heavily affected by speech anxiety among students. Since speech anxiety negatively affects various aspects of language learning, it leads to the learners' overreliance on teachers to learn English. Therefore, it is important to identify issues that are associated with English speaking anxiety in Saudi Arabian universities. A study by Al-Hnifat et al. (2020) explored factors that appeared to cause anxiety among language students and its effects on learning. A sample of 20 students from a Saudi Arabian university was included in the study, which used semi-structured interviews to collect the data. The study found that student held poor beliefs, having anxious personalities, low confidence, unpreparedness to learn, a negative pre-learning mentality, and lack of prior learning experience with the language are some of the factors associated with anxiety among the students. Notably, some students tend to avoid speaking English in public due to fear of how people will perceive their skills. Since learning requires a lot of practice in speaking to gain more understanding and eventually master the language, anxiety developed by such factors negatively affects students' progress.

Anxious students often tend to overly rely on their teachers to learn new language skills. However, the information given by their teachers may not be enough to ensure language proficiency. Therefore, students must practice speaking skills on their own and gain confidence to speak in English without considering external factors that lead to the feelings of anxiety.

An anxious personality can be a childhood phenomenon that emerges from other psychological factors, such as previous failures. This can lead to a negative mentality that affects a learner's efforts. A negative learning mentality means that a student will develop an attitude that will negatively influence his/her outcomes in speaking English as their second language. A negative mentality and low confidence coupled with anxiousness may hinder a student from producing the language they have learnt, which would act as a starting point to practice speaking and apply the learned concepts. An anxious student may also come unprepared to learn, meaning that they may not take their studies seriously and may fail to see practicing through speech as a helpful approach (Al-Hnifat et al., 2020).

In a bid to reduce the learners' anxiety, ESL teachers should always assess their preparedness to learn. In this sense, they should detect the learning hindrances and address them to improve outcomes. One of the hindrances commonly observed by ESL teachers in the Saudi universities involves the occurrence of anxiety among students. Asif (2017) conducted a study to assess the triggers of language anxiety among ESL students in Saudi Arabia. The study used a 20-item questionnaire structured to collect information from English language teachers. The teachers reported that anxiety adversely affected ESL learning.

Asif (2017) also reported that the first language prowess is a major factor that leads to the development of anxiety. In most circumstances, students have an excellent grasp of their first language and tend to use it in speaking instead of communicating in the second language to improve their fluency. In Saudi Arabia, Arabic is the first language to most of the university students, yet they often compare their first language with English as their second language. As they compare the years they have taken to speak their first language with excellence, it leads to their anxiety and uncertainty about how long they will take to speak the new language with fluency. The anxiousness further affects students' focus on the second language as they consider their first language as the benchmark of their progress. However, ESL students are usually encouraged to focus on the level of new knowledge gained in English, rather than compare their first language with English (Asif, 2017).

Asif (2017) also reported that due to excessive anxiety, Saudi students in ESL classrooms tend to develop a fear of making mistakes. As a result, students may fail to be industrious in searching for new information that can contribute to their speaking proficiency. Some learning activities, such as role plays, are essential in learning a new language; however, anxious students tend to run away from such approaches and when they perform them, they do so with a fear of failing. This significantly affects their critical thinking and speaking skills. Teachers agree that mistakes are part of learning and the way a teacher responds to the students' mistakes in class may have a major influence on the development of anxiety and students' learning (Asif, 2017). Another factor that was cited as a major influence in anxiety development was negative classroom environment. Issues such as disorganized spaces, uncooperative learning environments and poor discussion groups may increase anxiety and affect the learning process. Therefore, teachers in Saudi Arabia have a role to minimize the anxiety by encouraging a cooperative learning environment where students do not worry about making mistakes (Asif, 2017). Failure to effectively address this problem may lead to poor performances among students of English language in the Saudi context.

The negative influence of anxiety on the speaking skill of learners of English as a second language in Saudi universities calls for effective intervention strategies to ensure that the learning progress is not affected. Rafada and Madini (2017) conducted a study that highlighted possible interventions to reduce anxiety in ESL classrooms. The study sampled a total of 10 female students aged 10-20 years from King Abdulaziz University. This

qualitative research used semi-structured interviews to collect data. The results showed that Saudi students feel anxious when speaking English in their ESL classrooms. Nevertheless, students have shown significant willingness to reduce anxiety with the aim of minimizing the negative influence of anxiety on their studies. Some of the approaches used to improve English skills and reduce anxiety included watching movie clips using the English language, interacting and speaking with native English speakers, reading English books and blogs, and practicing speaking English with classmates.

In a nutshell, anxiety has major effects on learning English as a second language in Saudi Arabian universities. These effects appear to result in poor performance of language learners, as it leads them to avoid participating in speaking activities in classroom. They also avoid answering questions, speaking with other students, and joining class discussions. Therefore, teachers should employ strategies that encourage speaking in English to realize improved learning outcomes in an ESL classroom.