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International Journal of Engineering Technology Research & Management

STUDENTS' LANGUAGE ANXIETY AND SEMANTIC COMPETENCE IN RELATION TO THEIR SPEAKING AND READING PROFICIENCY

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ABSTRACT
This study was conducted to investigate the language anxiety and semantic competence in relation to the speaking and reading proficiency of the Junior AB-English Language (AB-EL) students at the Visayas State University. Data were gathered using survey questionnaires and tests on reading and speaking proficiency. Results indicated that the language anxiety of the respondents has a relation to their speaking proficiency. It showed that as the language anxiety level of the respondents increases, their speaking proficiency level decreases; and as the language anxiety decreases, the speaking proficiency level increases. Therefore, English teachers are advised to try to enhance the speaking proficiency of the students by creating a friendly and supportive atmosphere in class, encouraging students' involvement in class activities, and teaching some anxiety-reducing strategies to the students. However, this study revealed that the respondents' semantic competence has no relation to their reading proficiency. It showed that a high level of competency in semantics is never an assurance for a high level of reading proficiency. The respondents have different levels of competency in semantics and in reading proficiency depending on their previous knowledge and exposure to signs, symbols, meaning, and reading. It is recommended that students practice speaking in straight English as well as develop their reading habits and become wide readers. For the teachers, it is recommended to be mindful on how to help their students develop their reading behavior and love for reading.

KEYWORDS: language anxiety, semantic competence, speaking proficiency, reading proficiency, reading habits, reading behavior.

INTRODUCTION

Studies on language anxiety have been flourishing using the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale, or other scales, or other data-collecting instruments such as diaries, journals, interviews, and observations. In Liu and Huang's (2011) research, "An Exploration of Foreign Language Anxiety and English Learning Motivation", results showed that the high-anxious students tend to perform worse than their low-anxious peers, and they also tend to speak more briefly sometimes even inaudibly. Highly anxious learners can even speak with shaking hands and legs. Some even go blank when having to speak the target language. Many chose to remain silent in English class and thus their oral proficiency in the target language just falls down or becomes lower. The study recommends that in order to be proficient in English language, these students must need to break beyond the boundaries of grammar into the actual use of the language in real communicative situations in classrooms and in the society.

Learners of English as a foreign language in countries where English is not widely spoken outside the classroom often build a substantial knowledge about the language through study of its grammar and vocabulary, but have difficulty in developing in oral proficiency because they lack exposure to the language, and experience using it. For such, fluency is perhaps the major speaking problem they face. Their speech tend to be slow, hesitant, and full of repetitions and self-corrections. According to Mazouzi (2013), learners' activities should be designed based on an

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International Journal of Engineering Technology Research & Management

equivalence between fluency and accuracy achievement. Both fluency and accuracy are important elements of communicative approach. Learners should pay enough attention to the exactness and the completeness of language form when speaking such as focusing on grammatical structures, vocabulary, and pronunciation. Thornsbury (2005) declared that pronunciation is the lowest level of knowledge learners typically pay attention. In order to speak the English language accurately, learners should master phonological rules and they should be aware of the various sounds and their pronunciations. Learners should also know the stress, intonation, and pitch. All of these elements help learners speak the English language easily and effectively. It is also important that learners learn about semantics. Semantics comes from the Greek word "semantikos" which means to show or give signs (Khan, 2012). The study of semantics includes the study of how meaning is constructed, interpreted, clarified, obscured, illustrated, simplified, negotiated, contradicted and paraphrased. However, semantics generally refers to how meaning is conveyed through the symbols of a written language. Hence, semantics is the study of the meaning and not the associative meaning. The conceptual meaning is what a word in fact denotes, as for example, Friday the 13th is a day between Thursday the 12th and Saturday 14th, and that is the conceptual meaning of the phrase Friday the 13$^{th.}$, yet for many people, the idea of that day brings to mind thoughts of bad luck and misfortune, which is the associative meaning. Language is dynamic that it changes from time to time (Zazulak, 2016). Because language is dynamic, understanding semantics is one important tool to try and find a more comprehensive definition of "meaning" which truly covers the concept especially in reading comprehension. People tend to think that reading is visual skill that depends primarily on linking letters to sounds. That has led people to expect that reading problems must be due to either difficulties with recognizing the letters or matching those letters to their appropriate sounds. While reading a text, students develop hypotheses, ingrate ideas, and construct conclusions. Finally, good readers will re-read or skim previous sectors of a text to further develop their comprehension. The Junior AB-English Language students might have been studying English in many years but when it comes to using English as the universal communication in the process of communicating to others, they encounter many problems and break down the chain of communication caused by anxiety. So, this study aimed to determine the English language learning anxiety factors in speaking among the respondents. Also in this study, it was hypothesized that the respondents already possessed knowledge on semantics and that they are able to comprehend reading selections. Nonetheless, this study sought to further investigate the relationship between semantic competence and their reading proficiency.

OBJECTIVES

This research was on the language anxiety and semantic competence in relation to the speaking and reading proficiency among Junior AB-English Language students at the Visayas State University. Specifically, it aimed to:

1. Determine the students' language anxiety;
2. Determine the students' speaking and reading proficiency;
3. Determine the relationship between the students' language anxiety and speaking proficiency;
4. Determine the students' semantic competence; and
5. Determine the relationship between the students' semantic competence and reading proficiency.

Theoretical Framework of the Study

Lucas, Miraflores and Go (2011) said that communication apprehension is characterized by fear and anxiety in communicating with people. Difficulties in speaking in public and listening or learning a spoken utterance are all manifestations of communication apprehension. This type of anxiety in learning a second language is derived from the learners' personal knowledge that they will have difficulty in understanding others and making themselves understood. Learners suffering from communication apprehension choose to keep silent in their English classes especially when their semantics is compromised. Semantics is central to the study of communication, and as communication becomes more and more a crucial factor in social organization, the need to understand it becomes more and more pressing (Leech, 2012). Leech's theory correlates with the reading proficiency of the learners since

iJETRM
International Journal of Engineering Technology Research & Management

three stages are necessary in the learners' reading and thinking skills which will lead them to arrive to a certain conclusion of the text or reading material they are reading. In order to fully grasp the entire text, one must take into consideration the three stages from Leech's theory which are the mind-thought process, cognition, and conceptualization.

METHODOLOGY

This study followed a descriptive survey method. The researchers used two survey questionnaires. They made use of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) adopted from Horwitz et al (1986) and the survey instrument retrieved from TutorVista. com (2017) to determine the semantic competence of the students. The researchers also provided a speaking and a reading proficiency tests. These tests were recorded and evaluated by a requested teacher from the Department of Liberal Arts and Behavioral Sciences (DLABS). The tests are from IELTS or International English Language Testing System (2017). The data gathered were analyzed using descriptive statistics which included the measures of central tendency, frequency and percentage distribution. To determine the relationship between language anxiety and speaking proficiency, and of between semantic competence and reading proficiency, Spearman's Rho correlation analysis was used.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results showed that there is a significant relationship between the respondents' language anxiety and speaking competence. That is to say, as the language anxiety of the Junior AB-EL students of increases, their speaking competence also decreases; or either as the language anxiety of the respondents decreases, their speaking competence increases. This implies that it is essential for the students to reduce or do away with their anxiety to develop their speaking proficiency. One of the remedies to counteract language anxiety is to participate in oral activities that could develop their self-confidence. Results also revealed that the respondents are semantically competent. This implies that the students have the ability to determine the meaning of a particular string of words. Since a particular string of words may correspond to more than one syntactic structure, one can take semantic competence to consist of the ability to determine the meaning of a particular syntactic structure (Davidson, 1984). This ability also consists of the ability to determine the relationships between the meanings of distinct syntactic structure. These relationships include entailment, equivalence, and contradiction. Findings further revealed that the respondents fell under "modest users" in their reading proficiency test. This implies that they have partial command of the language, coping with overall meaning in most situations, though are likely to make many mistakes. However, results showed that there is no significant relationship between the respondents' semantic competence and reading proficiency. That is to say, a person can be semantically competent without being a proficient reader or the other way around. In other words, the Junior AB-English Language students of the Visayas State University are semantically competent; however, they are not proficient readers. Hence, there is no significant relationship between the two variables.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We would like to extend our gratitude to our grandparents, parents, siblings, relatives, friends, and colleagues for their support and comfort. We also thank our mentors at the Department of Liberal Arts and Behavioral Sciences (DLABS), and of course, to the AB-English Language students who were the respondents in this research. We also thank our respective inspirations who make our lives more meaningful and awesome thus making this research a success.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study concluded that there is a great number of respondents that are highly anxious in speaking the English language even though they practice the language itself. Nonetheless, this study discovered that majority of the respondents are moderately competent in speaking the English language. Majority of the respondents are very knowledgeable with the denotative and connotative meanings of words and were observant for they were able to identify various signs and symbols presented to them. This has somehow something to do with the respondents

iJETRM
International Journal of Engineering Technology Research & Management

being AB-English Language students. Since semantics is considered as one of the branches of linguistics, the respondents are already acquainted and familiar with the underlying context of the particular subject. However, it was also discovered that majority of the respondents may be semantically competent but they are not proficient readers. Thus, teachers are advised to help develop their students' self-confidence by introducing various oral exercises. Likewise, students are advised to practice speaking in straight English and develop their love for reading.

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