



An Investigation into the Causes of Students' Inhibition in Learning English Speaking Skills in Quang Phuong Lower-Secondary School

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Abstract: *This research paper brings to light the causes of inhibition in learning English speaking skills. All 120 Grade-9 students in Quang Phuong Lower Secondary School were chosen as participants in the study. Also, three English teachers were interviewed to gain more insightful information. Two complementary methods of data collection were used to carry out this research, namely, quantitative and qualitative methods. Analyses of two types of data reveal that the reasons making students inhibited come not only from the learners themselves but also from the teachers and other sources. Implications were made to reduce this negative affective factor in learning English speaking skills among adolescent learners*

Keywords: *speaking skills, affective factor, adolescent learners and inhibition.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the importance of affective factors has become a matter of debate and extensive research among language teachers, linguists, and researchers. Affective factors include emotion, feeling, mood, manner, and attitude (Ni, 2012). All these factors, especially motivation, self-confidence, anxiety, and inhibition, directly influence the input and output of learning a second language. Although investigations have begun to shed light on the effects of Affective Filter in second language acquisition (SLA), relatively little is known about the effects of affective factors in speaking skills of adolescent learners who experience the puberty period – one of the most sensitive periods in the development of human beings. This period changes not only the physical state but also the psychological state of learners.

One of the affective factors that influence adolescent language learners strongly is inhibition. Inhibition plays a powerful role in constraining achievement which prevents them from gaining sufficient practice. Inhibition has been recognized as a powerful wall that keeps the fruits of speaking skills inside the fragile interior of adolescent learners (Mohseni & Ameri, 2010).

This paper's major aim is to raise the often-neglected issues regarding the causal root of inhibition to adolescent learners and therefore, pinpointing and meticulously discussing the implications that inhibition has on the adolescent English language learners (ELLs) in a Vietnamese setting.

The overall purpose of this research is to investigate the following issues:

1. What are the causes of students' inhibition in learning speaking skills?
2. What are the strategies to avoid students' inhibition in learning speaking skills?

2. BRIEF LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Definition of Inhibition

Mohseni and Ameri (2010) made a vivid analogy between an EFL classroom and a populous swimming pool in their paper entitled "Inhibition revisited in EFL learning and teaching". They stated that an FL classroom can be:

"[...] compared to a populous swimming pool. Swimmers who are competent dive in. Slow learners concentrate on improving their style and performance, while others are there for fun and never mind making waves that disturb others.[...]" "Sometimes they might dip their toes in but most often they walk away without getting wet." (p.1).

It is obvious that students are strong enough to try learning how to swim but they do not dare to. They are the shy ones who stand timidly on the sides waiting for the right time to enter. It can be inferred that students often inhibit themselves in speaking up in class instead of taking some risks and presenting their ideas. Because of that thinking, they may not be able to raise their voice and speak courageously. This phenomenon in learning is called inhibition (Mohseni & Ameri, 2010). In this article, based on the previous discussions, inhibition is understood as:

“[...] a negative affective factor that moderates learners' natural performance but makes students act in an anxious, reluctant, hesitant or manner. If students have inhibition, they tend to keep themselves in their shells because of fear, reluctance, and embarrassment. Inhibition in learning speaking skills discourages risk-taking.”

2.2. Sources of Inhibition

There have been several number of studies discussing the causes of inhibition both in the psychological and educational spheres. In their well-known psychology book, namely, “Surviving your child's adolescence”, Pickhardt and Wiley (2013) pointed out some causes that lead to inhibition among young learners.

Firstly, he stated that the fear of inadequacy is an influential factor that causes inhibition in language classrooms. According to him, at an age when confidence can be in short supply, expressive inhibition can be couched in statements of deficiency like this: “I'm not good enough” and “I'm not talented enough”. Then, the second factor is the fear of embarrassment. At the age of vulnerably being concerned about their images and worrying about making mistakes, inhibition can be couched among this group in a determination to avoid being teased. Learners would say: “I do not want being laughed at”, “I hate being poking fun at” or “I hate being teased”. The dismay of getting failure is another factor. He emphasized that when the young learners orally perform, particularly in comparison to peers, can be major barriers to self-esteem, trying anything new or unfamiliar or different or can uplift the threat of not doing it competently or in an expected way. Because they cannot do it well enough, or well at the first attempt, or it could be safer and better not to try, despite of something he/she would love to do. Apart from the sources of inhibition that appear in Pickhardt and Wiley's (2013) study, Mohseni and Ameri (2010) also examined these factors within Iranian subjects in the research namely Inhibition revisited in EFL learning and teaching. Initially, they claimed that the issue of dealing with sensitivity could be an inhibitory parameter to turn a learner into a taciturn person. When one can reckon the consequences a word may entail in the occasion of being a given circumstance, he or she may resort to seclusion. In addition, the authors also state that students are not normally aware that errors are a natural part of language learning.

They stated that errors are healthy symptoms of progress; much like “doubt” which is a prequel to “faith”. If there are no mistakes, there would be no need for teachers or classrooms; just as when there is no disease, there is no doctor. It is better to see errors or mistakes as blessings in disguise that can bring benefits in language learning. The authors want teachers to always pay attention to this problem. The third reason that affects inhibition in language learning is the interference of the mother tongue. That is to say, some of the learners are even not capable of learning their first language; that's why their performance in L2 is also poor. Finally, one more reason that is considered noticeable and worthy of being mentioned in this study that is in favor of the idea in Wiley's research is the fear of rejection. There is perennial anxiety resulting in inhibition in those having a deep-rooted built-in perfectionism to perform tasks accurately, fearing to sound silly or act clumsily or make mistakes; a disposition which is a by-product of a face-saving strategy to secure their ego. Therefore they may practice “avoidance” at times or resort to “hypercorrection”.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Approach

Both quantitative and qualitative methods were employed in this study. According to Vockell and Asher (1995), quantitative and qualitative methods have the greatest value when combined. Moreover, Consdelli and Wrigled (1999) once stated that applying a mixed- method design for a study that combines the quantitative and the qualitative approach can bring the best optimal result.

3.2. The Subjects

The invited participants of this study consist of two selected groups of respondents. The first team comprised all the five teachers who work with grade 9 students in Quang Phuong Lower-Secondary School located in a rural area in Quang Binh province of Vietnam. The teachers interviewed have got different experiences in teaching students in this school. Their ages range from 37 to 40 and their teaching experience ranges from 14 to 17 years. The second group comprised 120 adolescent students in grade 9 (from 14 to 15 years old) in Quang Phuong lower-secondary school. The students were asked to take part in answering questionnaires. Among them, ten members were representatives to join in the interview section. Generally, these students have assumed to experience puberty in the adolescence period. Puberty may cause learners to be inhibited more frequently than in other periods of human development Inderbitzen & Hope, (1995)

3.3. Data Collection

3.3.1. Rationale for the Selection of Data Collection Instruments

Questionnaire

One of the most universally used methods for collecting information is a questionnaire because it can construct a huge amount of information about many different issues (Richards, 2001). Moreover, respondents can complete the questions at their convenience without any time pressure. Gillham (2000) also pointed out that using a questionnaire is very economical.

Interview

Adopting interview for collecting data is also widely and highly accepted due to many reasons the method bring about. Firstly, an interview can help the interviewer in controlling the response situation, time and place, and the sequence of the questions asked. Another advantage of the interview is that the data collected is rich and rewarding because the interviewees express various ideas and feelings. Patton (2002) gave one more reason for using interviews for collecting data is that respondents can also use their mother tongue or any gestures to modify or support their answers. Through this technique, the interviewer will get fuller responses.

3.4. Design of Data Collection Instruments

3.4.1. Questionnaire

In the paper, a questionnaire was utilized to obtain students' attitudes regarding the reason for inhibition in improving English speaking skills. The questionnaire included both closed and open-ended questions to maximize students' contribution. Questions took the arrangement of checklists, yes/no questions, multiple choices, and 5-point Likert scale (M=5).

3.4.2. Interview

The interviews were conducted to give a detailed account of both teachers' and students' views relating to the causes of inhibition. The methodology consists of an interview that is semi-formated with three teachers and eight students in compensation for the one-dimensional questionnaire.

3.5. Data Analysis Procedure

The data collected from the questionnaire and interview will be analyzed by the researcher. Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software is used to analyze data from the questionnaire. On the foundation of the gathered results of the questionnaire, and information gathered from the interviewed process, the answers were then examined.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Causes of Students' Inhibition in Learning Speaking Skills

The results of the questionnaire attested to five main reasons why students often have inhibition in learning English speaking skills.

4.1.1. The Stressful Learning Environment

No	Item	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
1	The stressful learning environment	2.3	11.6	17.8	53.5	14.7

According to the research results, the learning environment closely relates to the occurrence of inhibition in speaking. There was a high general agreement (M=3.67) with a percentage of 68.2% respondents who agreed and strongly agreed that inhibition results from the negative learning environment. The figures above suggest that there should be a positive learning environment for students in the speaking classroom so that they will be motivated and inspired to talk instead of having mental and emotional strains while studying. George Lozanov - an educator and psychologist coming from Bulgaria who was the founder of the learning method in 1979, namely, Suggestopedia believed that a relaxed but focused state is the optimum state for learning. It is especially useful in harmonizing the vegetative system, clearing the mind, and bringing it an open receptive style to assist learners in obtaining the best outcome. A stressful environment could arise from the teacher's teaching style or the performance or attitude of students in the classroom (Lozanov, 1979).

4.1.2. Topical Knowledge

2	The unfamiliar topics	13.2	25.6	17.1	38	6.2
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Nearly half of the respondents (44.2%) agreed or strongly agreed that the unfamiliar topics create inhibition for them. This common response is conforming to Bachman and Palmer (1996) whose statement was to focused on topical knowledge. As stated by them, the student's existing knowledge of topics being presented to discuss is considered a crucial factor affecting speaking skills. Adolescent learners' topical knowledge enables learners to use the language, grows as their experience of the universal knowledge grows, and as they develop cognitive and social maturity. Hence, it is vital to use topics relevant to their age and their background knowledge.

4.1.3. Severe Correction from English Teacher

3	The severe error correction from teacher	9.3	24.8	8.5	41.1	16.3
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A considerable number of students (57.4%) concurred that the manner of the teacher's correction causes inhibition for students when they learn speaking skills. This factor attained a Mean Score of 3.3. In language teaching, it is undeniable that error correction is an indispensable part of teaching speaking skills as through correcting mistakes and providing essential feedback, teachers show and respond to their students if they have grasped the topic. Through that process, teachers may do some reinforcement or revision on the following lessons. Nevertheless, it is also more important for teachers to pay attention to how to correct their students' errors appropriately, especially for sensitive age groups.

This is the reason why students are often reluctant in raising their voice to speak because their mind is controlled by the negative thoughts. When being asked about their opinion, one student reasoned:

[...] "I want to have some of my mistakes corrected as it gives me a basis for improvement as long as my teacher's feedbacks are not so harsh. Whenever I come up with an idea, before I raise my hands, I would think about whether it is safe to talk. I think my teacher should be friendlier in the ways she gives us comments, particularly when she asked about the previous lessons."

(Student Interview, June 5th, 2021)

All of the three teachers being interviewed admitted that correction plays an important role in encouraging students to talk. One teacher clarified:

[...] "One of the main dilemmas for us as English teachers giving conversation groups is error correction. It's always tricky to know when and if to correct students and how to go about it especially students who are at puberty. I have to say that they are very sensitive."

(Teacher Interview, June 3rd, 2021)

From what was discussed above, both students and teachers agreed that error correction is very important. Although teachers are aware of the influence of their feedbacks on students' learning process, a significant number of students reported that it is the teacher's severe correction that makes them inhibited in learning English speaking skills.

4.1.4. Students' Negative Personalities

4	The lack of confidence	0.8	0	3.9	48.1	47.3
5	Students' reticence	10.9	22.5	7.8	44.2	2.3
6	Keeping silent and passivity as typical characteristics of Vietnamese people	14	20.2	23.2	37.2	5.4

One of the major obstacles learners have to overcome in learning is their negative personalities preventing them from developing their English speaking skills.

Firstly, up to 93.4% of the participants stated that the lack of confidence is the reason for inhibition in learning speaking English. This option made up the most exceptionally high mean score (M=4.41). Also, a large number of students (58.9%) acknowledged that they are reticent. It means that they are reserved and reluctant to communicate. This choice received a mean score of 3.29. Then, the research participants also thought that the typical characteristic of Vietnamese people affects them. More than 42% of students were in agreement with the option that inhibition during their learning happened because keeping silent and passivity are typical characteristics of Vietnamese people. This choice for the “cultural constraints” got a mean score of 3. From the information provided, it can be implied that the biggest hurdles of the students are their inconfidence, passivity, and reticence which stop them from speaking courageously.

4.1.5. Students' Self-perception

7	The low self-perception of competence in English	2.3	16.3	3.9	49.6	27.9
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Nearly four-fifths (79.8%) of the participants believed that they have no aptitude for learning English. This selection has a remarkably high mean score of 4.07. There was also a great agreement (46.5%) between students towards the reason “low self-perception of competence in English creating inhibition.” As previously mentioned, the complex stage of adolescent learners induces egocentrism, which in turn leads to increased self-consciousness, self – regulation, and greater inhibition (Krashen, 1981). It means that learners are pessimistic about their language ability and they tend to accept it. In general, many Vietnamese students would not believe that they could be successful in learning a foreign language. This lack of belief has made students less confident to speak in the target language because they do not want to make mistakes. One student remarked that:

[...] “I believe that I am not gifted in learning English because I invest quite a lot of time to master my English but it turned out that I am very weak at this subject.”

(Student interview, May 27th, 2021)

If students spend much time mastering English but they fail in achieving their objectives, they would be discouraged. Lozanov (1979) claimed that “learning is a matter of attitude, not aptitude”. His idea echoed that to have fruitful learning, especially in learning a language, each learner needs to approach all tasks with determination, tenacity, and above all plenty of enthusiasm. They should not hold a pessimistically pre-conceived attitude that they cannot perform the assigned tasks. However, they should always have the I-can-do-it perspective and then they can surely improve the study outcome.

4.2. Teachers' Roles in Lessening Inhibition in English Classrooms

Research question 2 aimed at figuring out the roles of teachers, which can help upgrade the student's oral communication skills in English-speaking classes by employing interview techniques. The interviews were conducted to give a detailed account of both teachers' and students' views about the issue.

In the opinion of the respondents, teachers appear to create vital techniques to make students talk. As shown in the interview responses, some major teaching techniques are believed to be vital for reducing students' inhibition, namely, the teacher's teaching techniques and the manner in motivating students, giving mistake correction, and creating a friendly environment.

4.2.1. Apply a Variety of Teaching Techniques to Motivate Students

Firstly, The interview data showed that seven out of ten students had a common agreement that teachers can help students to engage in the lessons in the classroom by applying a variety of teaching techniques. For instance, the listed expressions below show the students' attitudes toward their problems. "As what I have experienced, there are times when we could not get teachers' ideas or instructions, and in such cases, I think a teacher can use synonyms and gestures to describe and convey their ideas to the students." Or in another worthy response coming from S5: "I believe teachers can do a lot to help us talk more in the classroom.". We are more enthusiastic to speak out or give answers to questions if we have some idea about the topics...., sometimes we just keep silent as the discussed topics are unfamiliar to us". Together with the students' responses, here is a technique shared by T3: "teacher should increase and maintain the motivation of students by the types of tasks

during discussion section. I realize that when I organize group works or pair works...students are more willing and more passionate to speak. "Again, great care should be taken to make sure that the task is in line with the students' ability to deal with the tasks, and when they have strong motivation, they assume that they have a clear objective that must be reached. ... T4". The finding proves to the same argument with the previous researcher that the teacher played a vital role in arranging and choosing suitable communication tasks for students to carry out. Compton (2007) claimed that content and context are two important factors that determine one's level of students' inhibition in the classroom.

4.2.2. Correction Mistakes

All four teachers taking part in the interview admitted that correction plays a vital role in encouraging students to talk. One teacher clarified:

[...] "One of the main dilemmas for us as English teachers is error correction. It's always tricky to know when and if to correct students and how to go about it. I have to say it is somehow sensitive. I must admit that there are times I am a little angry with them because of their "fossilized" mistakes. However, in most cases, I try to keep calm to correct my students' mistakes in a positive manner. "

Besides, talking about error correction, the T2 teacher shared a technique on this issue: "I don't address every error as I want students to have the confidence to speak and always try. I address common errors once they have finished or they pause for help". This is also compatible with previous research. Language teachers can encourage their students to speak by helping them establish positive attitudes towards speaking errors (Truscott & Hsu, 2008). Accordingly, the teacher's "right appropriate and reasonable" techniques in giving feedback and correcting mistakes can help reduce students' inhibition. Also, teachers should know when to give feedback and how to comment properly.

4.2.3. Create a Friendly and Positive Manner in Teaching

From the findings, most of the respondents rated "friendly and loving" as the most preferred quality of a teacher, this quality becomes extremely important for teachers engaging the adolescent students. For them, a teacher must have motherly love for their students. Expressing their comments on the matter, students gave comments in the interview like this:

According to S8, "Because of our less confidence, we hope teacher should concern the feeling of students."

Giving idea on this issue, T5 shared his strategy:

"By acting friendly in the first place, secondly there are a few strategies to "BREAK THE ICE", a teacher must be able to guess who the best students are and use them as an example for the others (without favoring them too much). Obviously, in a language classroom, friendliness and love, and patience can be "recipes" to eliminate the stressful teaching and learning atmosphere that is believed to be one of the major factors causing the inhibition. A friendly teacher can give a healthy boost to a student's personality development. The result goes in line with Zarrinabadi's (2014:294) who also found that teachers' could reduce students' inhibition by building a friendly learning environment that is encouraging and supportive.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In an English- speaking classroom, teachers need to realize the causes of a student's never-ending inhibition and silence. A reason for this could be that speaking inhibition is not seen as a problem concerning language teaching since it can be considered a social difficulty. This speculation is based on the result in the study in which both the teachers and students thought that keeping silent is a typical feature of Vietnamese people. Moreover, the characteristics of a speaking inhibited person can also be mistaken for negative personalities of the learners like a lack of confidence, reticence, and passivity. In fact, those personality traits are just one reason that causes inhibition. Apart from this factor, inhibition also results from a stressful learning environment, weak topical knowledge, the difficulty of the tasks, severe correction by English teachers, students' low self-perception, the fear of inadequacy and embarrassment, poor listening ability. To sum up, the causes of inhibition need to be addressed in particular settings and some solutions need to be put in action to reduce this negative affective factor among students when it comes to speaking lessons. Through this research, a teacher should aware that they partly make their students inhibited. To reduce inhibition, they need to create a friendly learning environment and comment positively. As for students, they should be conscious

about their attitude toward learning English, their listening ability, and their negative affective factors during the process of learning. For the schools and administrators, they should focus on textbook and curriculum design to meet the learners' background and needs.

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