Managing Communication Anxiety among Foreign Language Learners in Conversation Classes

Asst. Lect. Amal Hadi Alkhalidi

Department of English language: Collage of Education for Girls Kufa University

Abstract. *The study delves into speaking anxiety among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students, exploring the hurdles faced in their speaking abilities. With a focus on the factors influencing speaking performance, the research investigates the impact of anxiety on effective communication in English language classes. Conducted at the Department of English for Girls, University of Kufa, the investigation aims to identify speaking AnxietyAnxiety as a pivotal determinant shaping learners' attitudes in English language classes. Employing a descriptive qualitative methodology, the research administered a closed-ended questionnaire in paper format to students. The questionnaire, designed to elicit responses through predefined options where participants indicated their choices by ticking designated columns, examined various aspects influencing speaking performance and evaluated the effectiveness of strategies in enhancing English proficiency among EFL students. The findings reveal the presence of anxiety factors within the classroom environment, stemming from reasons such as students' lack of confidence, fear of verbal errors, and reluctance to communicate proficiently in English.*

Moreover, the study highlights EFL learners' communication challenges in English language classes. Moreover, the present study explored the construct of speaking-in-class AnxietyAnxiety of KUFA EFL undergraduate students. It aimed to identify speaking anxiety as an essential factor in learners' attitudes towards English. It also tried more specifically to find out the situations that provoked fear.

Key words: *Anxiety, English Conversation, Foreign Language, and Learners.*

1. Introduction

The present researcher entered English Conversation classes hoping that students would interact meaningfully and enthusiastically in English. However, what was found was the reverse of what it should be among university students. When posed a question or asked to do any speaking activity, most of the students became a crowd of silent onlookers while some mumbled in their answers. At first, this incapacity to perform in class led to the researcher's imprecise perception that 'the student lacks either some necessary aptitude for learning a language or sufficient motivation to do the necessary work for a good performance' as suggested by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986, p. 127). In fact, it might have been AnxietyAnxiety that played its negative role here. As a result, the communication that the investigator looked forward to was unintelligible input and non-feedback output.

One of the most significant challenges for ESL/EFL teachers is providing students with a learner-centred, comfortable classroom environment where students are free to communicate. In their efforts to create such an environment, the issue of student anxiety and its consequent adverse effects on learning and performance seems to pose a challenge to all language teachers, as it can potentially hamper optimal learning and teaching in the classroom. Thus, our first and foremost important task

as ESL/EFL teachers is to better understand the nature of student anxiety in terms of when, where, how, and why students feel anxious before addressing effective ways of anxiety reduction (Spielman & Radnofsky, 2001).

There are some reasons for teachers to think about why students are anxious, as H.D. Brawn points out, Inability to pronounce words and sounds well, not knowing the exact meaning of words or a whole message, incapacity to understand and respond to questions, Reputation of English language class as a place for failure, Peer criticism, not understanding course goals or necessities Testing, especially oral Testing Previous unsuccessful language-learning experience (TESOL, p.73). Anxiety is described as "a subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system" (Spielberger, 1983, p. 1).

This study aims to describe and explore the nature of language learning anxiety from the perspective of interviewing a group of EFL undergraduate university learners and offer language department administrators, foreign language coordinators and instructors, and prospective teachers an overview of this new language anxiety research. Therefore, the study tries to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the levels of speaking-in-class AnxietyAnxiety among students in the English Conversation course?

2. What are the student's attitudes towards speaking in English Conversation classrooms and their self-ratings of English-speaking ability?

2. Literature review

A few years ago, Phillips (1992) also investigated the relationship between AnxietyAnxiety and the quality of oral performance in the S.L. She found statistically significant negative correlations between scores on the FLCAS and oral exam grades, and in addition, found that students with higher levels of language anxiety speak hesitantly and produce fewer utterances and fewer target structures and dependent clauses than the students who have low levels of AnxietyAnxiety. MacIntyre and Gardner (1994b) reported similar skilful effects of language anxiety on learners' output. MacIntyre and Gardner (1994b, p. 300) point out that "anxious students were judged to have lower Fluency, lower Sentence Complexity, and less of a French Accent."

2.1 Definitions of Anxieties

According to Horwitz (2016), in the academic realm, AnxietyAnxiety about language acquisition is intricately linked to a multifaceted emotional condition marked by apprehension, tension, and disquietude that individuals undergo when confronted with language learning endeavours or circumstances. This anxious state may materialize in diverse manners, including apprehension over errors, a lack of self-assurance in linguistic competencies, and unease in linguistic interaction settings. Horwitz asserts that language learning anxiety is a multidimensional concept shaped by individual, interpersonal, and situational elements that influence the process of acquiring language skills and the effectiveness of communication.

2.1.1 Drive Theory

Drive theory is similar to Yerkes Dodson Law in that arousal could lead to more significant information processing and enhanced performance; too much arousal, however, could lead to confusion, blocking out information, and decrements in performance.

2.1.2 Facilitating/Debilitating AnxietyAnxiety

Anxiety is not always negative. Anxiety that improves performance is called facilitative Anxiety; AnxietyAnxiety; Anxiety that impairs performance is called debilitative AnxietyAnxiety.

2.1.3 Anxiety Definitions and Instruments

In most of the early studies on students' AnxietyAnxiety, researchers established the existence of AnxietyAnxiety in the second language classroom and investigated its effect on S.L. performance.' While some of this research suggested a relationship between AnxietyAnxiety and S.L. performance,

other findings indicated no such relationship. In many early studies on AnxietyAnxiety among students, the presence of AnxietyAnxiety in English language classrooms was identified, and researchers examined its impact on language learning performance. Some studies hinted at a possible link between AnxietyAnxiety and language performance, while others found no such association. Early research highlighted contradictory outcomes regarding the effects of anxiety on language learning and performance. For instance, AnxietyAnxiety was found to be negatively linked to certain language skills but not others.

Furthermore, anxiety was observed to be connected to proficiency in one foreign language rather than another, with the nature of this relationship varying among studies. This complexity in findings was compounded by differing research goals, definitions, and conceptual frameworks, making comparing results challenging. Issues such as the alignment of anxiety definitions with chosen observable behaviours for measurement and the appropriateness of anxiety types to study objectives further complicated interpretation and generalization.

Moreover, early studies often needed to provide clear and consistent definitions of anxiety and adequately explain its relationship to language learning. Scholars like MacIntyre and Gardner (1988) underscored the diverse definitions of AnxietyAnxiety and their corresponding measurement methods. However, these variations did not fully capture the spectrum of anxiety experienced by language learners, necessitating more precise definitions and assessment instruments to gauge foreign language anxiety accurately. Notable scales like the French Classroom Anxiety Scale (FCAS), Revised by Gardner (MacIntyre 1988), and the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) have played crucial roles in measuring and validating anxiety constructs in language learning contexts.

MacIntyre and Gardner (1991c) have proposed the following hypothesis to explain language anxiety:

During the first few experiences in the foreign language, AnxietyAnxiety plays a negligible role in proficiency since, even if AnxietyAnxiety is present, it is not the foreign language anxiety that has been discussed to this point. Anxiety experienced at this time would be based on trait anxiety, test anxiety, communication apprehension, novelty anxiety, etc., that are not necessarily specific to the language learning situation. Anxiety aroused in this context, as a result of early language experience, would best be called state anxiety. After several experiences with the second language context, the student forms attitudes specific to the situation and about learning a new language. If these experiences are negative, foreign language anxiety may begin to develop. As negative experiences persist, foreign language anxiety may become a regular occurrence, and the student begins to expect to be nervous and perform poorly. (p. 110)

MacIntyre, P. D. (2000) likely discusses the impact of affective factors on foreign language learning. Affective factors refer to emotions, attitudes, and motivations that influence language acquisition and proficiency. These factors play a crucial role in language learning success and can affect learners' engagement, confidence, and overall performance. In his work, MacIntyre may explore how positive emotions, such as enthusiasm and interest, versus negative emotions, like AnxietyAnxiety or fear, can shape language learning outcomes.

Furthermore, the author might delve into the connection between motivation and language learning, highlighting how learners' drive and goals impact their progress. Understanding the affective domain in language learning can help educators create supportive and conducive learning environments that cater to learners' emotional and motivational needs.

MacIntyre's research underscores the significance of addressing affective factors in language education and offers insights into how teachers can foster a positive affective environment to enhance students' language learning experiences.

3. Relationship between Anxiety and Language Output

Most of the studies discussed up to this point have examined the relationship between AnxietyAnxiety and some indicators of language output.' Recently, MacIntyre and Gardner (1991b) examined, from an information-processing perspective, the effects of language anxiety on input. In this study, anxiety

was measured through a variety of anxiety-related tests (social evaluative anxiety, state anxiety, and language anxiety). The study showed that only language anxiety was associated negatively and significantly with French performance on the thing category test and a digit span test6 in the S.L. versus the native language. These findings suggest language anxiety negatively affects the processing of language input. If AnxietyAnxiety affects input, this means that AnxietyAnxiety impedes a learner's ability to process new language. In other words, it hinders language acquisition. In a later study, MacIntyre and Gardner (1994a) examined the effect of AnxietyAnxiety on language performance at three stages of learning: input, processing, and output. This is the second study to attempt to induce anxiety, in this case, with the presence of a video camera. For each experimental group in this study, learners' anxiety increased with the presence of the camera, and their corresponding performance at all three stages decreased. The researchers (1994a, p. 16) argued that "anxiety arousal at earlier stages of processing will create cognitive deficits that can be overcome only when the individual has an opportunity to recover the missing material, that is, return to the Input and/or Processing stages." Knowledge of the debilitative effects of AnxietyAnxiety on learner performance is essential for the design of pedagogical techniques to reduce negative emotions in S.L. learners and thereby increase the effectiveness and efficiency of S.L. learning. The contention that language anxiety can negatively affect language input is alarming in that it reduces what a learner can hope to process as usable "intake" from what the instructor provides.

4. Method

The study took a sample of kufa university students who registered for English department , of which the present researcher was one of the instructors. This study could help to make KUFA EFL university students aware of the factors that might impede their English-speaking performance so that they could find suitable ways to overcome their anxiety problems. As English will definitely be used for occupational purposes when these students leave the university and enter working circles, it is important to ensure that they can perform well in English. As investigators, we will figure out the levels of anxiety in English language conversation courses as well as discuss students' attitudes and ratings of their ability to communicate without anxiety. Finally, we will discover why these issues are in English language conversation courses . A researcher uses a descriptive qualitative method via a Questionnaire given to students in papers with a list of questions. The type of questionnaire was closed, and a questionnaire was presented as responses that provided a tick within a column. The study participants were 30 fourth-grade students in the English Language Department of the College of Education For Girls. They were chosen from three classes with different levels that appeared during the questionnaire. In addition, their ages were also different by 5 to 10 years between them, on which the respondents expressed their perspectives on English-speaking AnxietyAnxiety by responding to either (5) strongly agree, (4) agree, (3) neither agree nor disagree, (2) disagree, or (1) strongly disagree. To interpret the analyzed data, the following criteria were established:

4.1 Research Instrument

In this research, the questionnaire was designed to address speaking English anxiety and was designed by graduated students. The questionnaire has 10 questions and 5 options for students to choose from. The students were 30 especially from the fourth stage.

4.2 Procedure

The questionnaire was presented to students at the university in the English language department and for the fourth stage, in particular, to identify the problems students face through communication. It was presented in the form of papers, and the students were given sufficient time to answer the questions and clarify them analyzed to obtain descriptive statistics in terms of the extent of the anxiety problem encountered by the students in the five domains mentioned earlier

4.3 Collecting Data

The data collection technique in this research is by distributing questionnaires to the research samples. These techniques will be combined to meet the purpose of this research and describe possible

explanations. The questionnaire consists of question items that have five options. The questionnaire was piloted in a four-year class of students at the University of Kufa, College of Education for Girls.

NO.	Questionnaire	SD	D	N	A	SA
1-	I don't worry about making mistakes in the English conversation class.					
2-	I tremble when I know that I'm going to be called on in the English conversation class.					
3-	It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in English.					
4-	It wouldn't bother me at all to take more English classes in the same academic term.					
5-	During the English conversation class, I find myself thinking about things that have nothing to do with the course.					
6-	I keep thinking that the other students are better at languages than I am.					
7-	I am usually at ease during tests in my English conversation class.					
8-	I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in the English conversation class.					
9-	I worry about the consequences of failing my English conversation class.					
10-	I don't understand why some people get so upset over English conversation classes.					

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the scale consisting of ten statements and five alternatives that measure AnxietyAnxiety, the research topic focuses on measuring the trait of AnxietyAnxiety among English language learners in conversation classes. To analyze the data, the one-sample t-test (T.T.) compares the sample's mean anxiety scores with the scale's hypothetical mean. The sample consists of 30 students, and according to the provided table, the first column represents the number of students in the sample (30), the second column represents the mean of the sample (3303), and the third column represents the standard deviation (5.344), which indicates the degree to which individual scores deviate from the mean.

The t-test of the difference between the average scores of speaking anxiety among sample members and the hypothesized average of the scale

the sample	Average of the sample members	standard deviation	Hypothetical mean	T value		Degree of freedom	significance level 0.05
				Calculated	Tabulation		
30	33.30	5.344	30	3.382	2.042	29	D

From this, it is clear that the research sample does not have a statistically significant level of speaking anxiety in class among female students of English as a foreign language, and the researcher believes that this is due to

Case Processing Summary

		Total				Included	
	Percent	N					N
	100.0%	30	0.0%	0	100.0%		30

Cases

Report

VAR00001

% of Total N	% of Total Sum	Geometric Mean	Harmonic Mean	Std. Error of Skewness	Skewness	Std. Error of Kurtosis	Kurtosis	Variance	Last	First	Range	Maximum	Minimum	Sum	Std. Error of Mean	Grouped Median	Median	Std. Deviation	N	Mean
100.0%	100.0%	32.88	32.46	0.427	0.196	0.833	0.204	28.562	44	35	20	44	24	999	0.976	33.50	33.50	5.344	30	33.30

One-Sample Statistics

Std. Error Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	N	
0.976	5.344	33.30	30	VAR00001

One-Sample Test

Test Value = 30

95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		Mean Difference	Sig. (2-tailed)	df	t	
Upper	Lower					
5.30	1.30	3.300	0.002	29	3.382	VAR00001

Furthermore, the research compares the calculated and tabular values to interpret the results. If the calculated value is greater than the tabular value, it indicates the presence of anxiety among English language learners. Additionally, the degrees of freedom are determined by subtracting one from the sample size.

Based on the conclusions drawn from the analysis, it is evident that factors contributing to anxiety exist within the learning and acquisition of a new language. These factors include students' lack of self-confidence, fear of making verbal mistakes, and environmental influences such as the reputation preceding language learning. The study highlights the importance of considering individual differences and implementing strategies to address AnxietyAnxiety in the language learning and teaching process.

To summarize, Upon interpreting and analyzing the results derived from the T.T. test, it is evident that anxiety factors exist within the classroom environment when learning a new language. These factors stem from various causes, including students' lack of self-confidence and the fear of making verbal errors like stuttering. Additionally, our study indicates the presence of AnxietyAnxiety due to environmental factors such as a pre-existing reputation. This reputation could manifest as intimidation, lack of student support, and instilling fear regarding the complexity of the learning process. Consequently, learners often carry the influence of others' experiences and perceptions into their language acquisition journey, unaware that language learning experiences can vary among individuals due to unique learning styles and individual differences. These nuances should be duly considered in the process of teaching and learning. The research findings indicate that there is a significant and noticeable level of AnxietyAnxiety among English language learners. students may feel anxious about speaking in front of the class, especially if English is not their first language. They might fear making mistakes or not being understood. The analysis demonstrates the presence of AnxietyAnxiety based on the higher mean score of the sample compared to the hypothetical mean of the population. Moreover, the calculated value from the t-test and the comparison with the tabular value provide additional evidence of the existence of AnxietyAnxiety among the students. English language classes often involve group work or pair activities. Students with social anxiety may feel uncomfortable interacting with classmates or participating in group discussions.

Teachers can help students cope with anxiety by creating a supportive and encouraging environment, providing constructive feedback, and offering strategies for managing stress. Students need to recognize their anxiety triggers and develop coping mechanisms to overcome them.

Reference

1. Horwitz, E. K., & Cope, J. (1986). Foreign language classroom anxiety. The Modern Language Journal, 70(2), 125-132.

2. Horwitz, E. K. (2016). Becoming a Language Teacher: A Practical Guide to Second Language Learning and Teaching.

3. MacIntyre, P. D., & Gardner, R. C. (1994). The effects of induced AnxietyAnxiety on three stages of cognitive processing in computerized vocabulary learning.Canadian Modern Language Review, 51(1), 169-190.

4. MacIntyre, Peter D., & Gardner, Robert C.(1991). Effects of Language Anxiety on Input Processing: An Information-Processing Perspective, (1) 110.

5. MacIntyre, Peter D. (2000). The Role of Affective Factors in Second Language Learning.

6. Phillips, E. M. (1992). The effects of language anxiety on students' oral test performance. The Modern Language Journal, 76(1), 14-26.

7. Spielberger, C. D. (1983). Manual for the state-trait anxiety inventory. Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press.

8. Spielmann, G., & Radnofsky, M. (2001). Learning language under tension: New

9. Directions from a Qualitative Study. *The Modern Language Journal, 85*, 259-278.

10. Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) International Association. 73