**Title:**  EFL Speaking-in-class Anxiety

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**Introduction**

Being able to use the language to communicate effectively and meaningfully is sure the main concern and one of the fundamental goals in foreign language classes and for foreign language learners acquiring and mastering the language. Yet for those learners acquiring English as a foreign language who are experiencing learning a new language in classroom context without having access to the real-life flow of language outside the class, the learning process can pose several affective problems to the learners one of which frequently cited by such students as the most frustrating debilitative factor is ‘speaking anxiety’ or as Horwitz et al. (1986) call it ‘communication apprehension’, “the apprehension experienced when a situation requires the use of a second language with which the individual is not fully proficient” (Gardner and MacIntyre, 1993:5).

In another study, foreign language anxiety has been defined as a set of “self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process” (Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope 1986,128). Such a uniqueness might in turn be the result of unfamiliarity and inadequate command of the target language (Sparks and Ganschow; cited in Horwitz, 2001).

According to Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986), there are three components of foreign language anxiety: Comprehension apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety. Communication apprehension is associated with feeling worry and uneasiness using the target language in front of others due to insufficient speaking skills mastery. Those who are afraid of being negatively evaluated by others, viewing insufficient mastery of language and committing errors while using the target language as a threat to their developing ego, are consequently reluctant to communicate and participate in language activities. And finally there are other students for whom speaking in the target language in class is considered as a test not an opportunity for active meaningful practice and improvement (Ely, 1986). In fact there are many learners experiencing such negative feelings while using the target language orally in the class since it’s the most “anxiety-provoking aspect in a second language learning situation” (Cheng, Horwitz, and Schallert, 1999: 420).

According to Kitano (2001) teachers should support students emotionally with positive stimulating comments and try to create a “sense of community in the classroom” to help them perceive the language learning experience not as a competitive but a cooperative one.

Although foreign language speaking anxiety is a common phenomenon experienced by a majority of foreign language learners, there are still many teachers who generally attribute lack of students’ cooperation in speaking activities to such factors as lack of motivation or “poor attitude” (Gregersen, 2003:30) without being concerned about their degree of speaking anxiety. Moreover , while there are numerous theoretical findings about general language anxiety, few studies have specifically focused on the foreign language speaking anxiety sources and even more importantly on providing evident practical implications, recommendations and strategies to address the issue. Therefore, the present study has been focused on first investigating and discovering the sources of students’ speaking anxiety and then to present some practical solutions to tackle the problem thus helping students overcome their speaking anxiety to be able to communicate much more freely and comprehensibly in the target language.

**Methods**

In order to examine the degree and causes of the students’ speaking-in-class anxiety, the translated and modified version of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) designed by Horwitz et al. (1986) was administered to the students during different sessions of their academic courses in a week. The questionnaire had been translated by the researcher into students’ mother tongue (Persian) in order to alleviate the existence of any ambiguity comprehending the questions. Besides, some of the items referring to the test anxiety and anxiety over using the language outside the class with native speakers were deleted from the original questionnaire to match the context and purpose of the research.

Before answering the items, students were informed about the nature of the questionnaire, the purpose of the study and its utmost effect in helping the students reduce their speaking-in-class anxiety in order to make them perceive the importance and practical value of the research and to feel much more responsible answering the items. Besides, the researchers themselves were present during the answering phase to provide necessary explanations to the individuals if needed. After gathering the data, the results were analyzed by the researchers to investigate the degree of students’ speaking-in-class anxiety, and to get an estimate of the overall number of anxious students in the whole population of EFL students in the University of Zabol.

Besides, an open-ended questionnaire was given to the same students a week later to find out much more precisely about the possible causes of their being anxious or not; discovering those anxiety-provoking factors resulting in their building inhibitions toward speaking English in class and what they believed was needed to be done to alleviate the problem.

The questions in the open-ended questionnaire were as follows:

1. I feel/don’t feel anxious when I have to speak English in class because…..
2. I like/don’t like participating in class discussions because……..
3. I think what makes/will make me speak freely and voluntarily is/would be…
4. If I want to give some recommendations to help me and my classmates speak English better, I would say…….

Again in order to alleviate any problem of misunderstanding and ambiguity, the questions were translated to the students’ mother tongue (Persian) and they were asked to feel free writing the answers in Persian if they preferred to do so.

Analyzing the answers to the open-ended questions could provide an extraordinary chance to compare the high and low anxiety students’ attitudes toward English oral performance in the class, their fears and their needs. Besides, it helped to find out fundamental practical guide in terms of effective strategies to be carried out by high-anxiety students to help them improve their speaking skills.

Considering the last question, very useful recommendations and inquiries were illuminated which can help teachers perceive those gaps that exist and those needs that students feel necessary to deal with.

**Results**

In order to get an estimate of the degree of students’ speaking-in-class anxiety, the translated and modified version of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) designed by Horwitz et al. (1986) was administered to the students with 15 items removed from the original questionnaire dealing with those factors like worrying about grades, test anxiety and feeling discomfort using English outside the class with native speakers to match the context and research goal. Before answering the items, the researcher while distributing the questionnaires provided students with necessary explanations and guidance on how to fill the items and tried to make them aware of the value and the overall purpose of the project to build some rapport with the participants and make them feel much more responsible and willing to participate truly in the project.

After gathering the data though the questionnaires most students seem to consider performing in front of others, fear of making mistakes, volunteering answers and getting nervous while speaking as the main stressors in the process of speaking. Still other factors like fear of forgetting the previously prepared speaking topics and loss of confidence too had gained primary importance among other factors.

In order to answer the second research question investigating the existence of any significant difference between male and females regarding their speaking-in-class anxiety, the two groups’ questionnaires were separated, analyzed and compared together and interesting results emerged.

From among the whole 120 participants filling out the questionnaires there were 73 females out of which 53 (about 72% of the whole female population) turned out to be highly anxious during oral performance in class and the rest 20 (about 27%) were appeared to be among the low-anxiety group. The 47 males were likewise divided to two groups of high (33 participants=70% out of whole male population) and low-anxiety (14 participants=29%) based on their answers to the items in the questionnaire. Running an independent sample t-test between the means of the two groups (38.69 for males an 39.52 for females) no significant difference between the two groups were appeared ( P=0.48)

Considering the last research question, interesting results emerged out of students’ recommendations which can help both teachers and students to improve the overall language learning process. Creating a more friendly atmosphere in which everyone has got a chance to succeed without being afraid of making mistakes and being negatively evaluated by the teacher and other students can help anxious students to overcome negative feelings and attitudes toward oral practices in class and make them much more willing to cooperate and practice speaking through actual use of the language with their peers and teachers in class.