The effect of anxiety on the speaking A case study on EFL learners

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Abstract: The study is aimed to investigate the relationship between students' anxiety and their speaking. To this end, 37 upper-intermediate adult (male and female) EFL learners were chosen through convenience sampling. A speaking test was administered which were scored from 0 to 10 and then answered a 33-item 5-point Likert scale FLCAS questionnaire. The results of the study indicated that there is a significant negative relationship between students' anxiety and their communication performance. Consequently, it could be concluded that (high) anxiety was effective (negatively) in the performance of students.

Index terms: EFL, Anxiety, speaking

I.   Introduction

Investigation in to anxiety has been an important aspect of psycholinguistics. Anxiety is considered as one of the factors that affects the performance of language learners. Moreover, people learning English are always judged by their speaking ability. In a recent study, Marcos-Llinas and Garau (2009) suggested that anxiety and in this case foreign language anxiety is the result of language problems that learners may have during their course. MacIntyre and Garder (1991a) pointed out that most of the problems that students encounter during the language learning are due to the foreign language anxiety which hinder learning process as well as the production of the target language. It is also considered a common phenomenon among foreign/second language learners (Saito & Samimy, 1996).

However, the previous studies in the field of foreign language anxiety have focused more on the whole learning process rather than a specific skill in language learning. Young (1992) in a series of interview with linguistic specialist noted that in their point of view speaking in a foreign language increases the level of anxiety much more than other skill do. Liu and Jackson (2008) in their study noted that most of the students are willing to participate in class activities and conversations, but due to foreign language anxiety which is the result of lack of English knowledge, low communication proficiency, and being unprepared, they proffered not to take any risks by speaking in front of other students. Since it is a known fact that the purpose of learning a second language is to communicate and communication is the most important aspect in language learning, it is important to find out how much anxiety can affect the communication performance of language learners. Liu

and Jackson (2008) in their study found out that more than one third of the students were experiencing foreign language anxiety in the language learning process. The main reason for this, as they said, was the fear of being negatively evaluated by other students or by the teacher. Their results showed a significance correlation between foreign language anxiety and the unwillingness to communicate in class.

Generally, the main aim of this study is to investigate the relationship between foreign language anxiety and communication performance (speaking) and to define to what extent foreign language anxiety affects the communication performance among Iranian adult EFL learners.

This study attempts to answer these questions:

● To what extent foreign language anxiety affects adult EFL learners' speaking?

● What is the relationship between foreign language anxiety and speaking ability of adult EFL learners?

II.   Review Of Literature

Researchers and practitioners define anxiety differently. Foreign language anxiety is the different difficulties of understanding, opinion, feelings, and manner regarding to classroom learning which are coming from a specific language learning style (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). They also added that the main concern of studying foreign language anxiety is evaluating performance of students in an academic setting. On the other hand, MacIntyre (1998) defined foreign language anxiety in his study as the concerns and negative feedbacks resulted from learning a non-native second language. Scovel (1986) quoted from McCroskey that anxiety is "an individual

level of fear associated with either real or anticipated oral communication with another person."

Foreign language anxiety is a type of anxiety which only appears specifically in language learning context (Horwitz et al., 1986). In a recent study by Woodrow (2014) there is evidence that the foreign language anxiety is a different kind of anxiety, while Chen and Cheng (2004) suggested that language anxiety have the same symptoms and responses as of any other type of anxieties. It is clear that due to the complexity of foreign language anxiety concept, studies in this field should be conducted in various approaches (Young, 1992). One of the problems with anxiety researches according to MacIntyre and Gardner (1989) is the selection of instrument for measuring the level of anxiety. Mixed and uncertain results are the outcome of studying the connection between anxiety and language learning, which suggest that the concept of anxiety itself is not a simple well-understood construct (Scovel, 1978). Criteria such as course scores, proficiency, and production of language as output level is the main understandable result of foreign language anxiety tests (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991a). Scovel (1978) suggested three ways to measure the anxiety: *behavioral tests*, which the action or the activity of the subject is observed, *subject's self-reports*, which the participant him/herself will report on his/her experience of anxiety, and *physiological tests*, which measures heart rate, blood pressure, and amount of sweating.

In order to study the foreign language anxiety, one can distinguish the anxious students from normal students. Many students at least in some aspects of language learning experience the foreign language anxiety and the reactions of anxious students can be vary from one another (Horwitz et al., 1986). In their study, they suggested that anxious students often complain about the difficulties of recognizing the target language sounds and structures, and understanding the content of the lesson is problematic. Also these students are usually comfortable with written test but they often "freeze" as they are asked to take part in a role-play situation. Moreover, Horwitz et al. (1986) in their study suggested that anxious students avoid using complicated and difficult messages and structures in their speech which is the result of the effect of anxiety on communication strategies of the language learners. Liu (2006) noted that if a high anxious student is asked to present orally in classroom, his tense can be seen in his voice, and his legs will shake during the presentation. Liu concluded that this is one of the reasons that students with anxiety try to avoid participating in class activities and discussions. In her study, Liu found out that more than one-third of the students show the signs of anxiety while presenting orally in English classroom.

There are reports that indicate students, especially when they are not prepared for the course, show a higher level of nervousness and self-conscious when they have to speak in foreign language in front of other (Sinnasamy & Abdul Karim, 2014). Another situation where foreign language anxiety shows up is during the tests. It was reported by students that despite that they "know" something; they cannot remember it during the exam (Horwitz et al., 1986).

There are different factors associated with foreign language anxiety. Chen and Cheng (2004) suggested that a student with poor background in English language will consider the language learning experience an unlikable one due to their low grade and not being able to perform good in classroom. These students usually have complex problems in the process of learning a foreign language that lead them to have a higher level of anxiety. MacIntyre and Gardner (1991b) noted that an anxious students' language learning and language production ability can be affected by foreign language anxiety, which is the result of considering the language learning an unpleasant experience. In addition, students' beliefs about second language learning and its cultural factors can increase foreign language anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986). In their research, they considered that communicating in a foreign language in front of other people a risk-taking task for students. This is because students usually self-evaluate while there are not entirely certain about linguistic and cultural standards. Another reason that increases the level of anxiety in students is the teachers who talk fast or have an unusual teaching method (Chen & Cheng, 2004).

Young (1986) suggested that anxiety is a factor that can affect communication performance. Woodrow (2014) found a strong relationship between foreign language anxiety and oral performance in her recent study. Participants recognized the interactions with native speakers as the main reason of anxiety in the study. When a student with language anxiety is asked to put his language skills to test by speaking in a foreign language in front of others, he will develop a sense of self-unconsciousness (Horwitz et al., 1986). Horwitz et al. (1986) also noted that the level of anxiety will arise when the students need to use English outside the classroom.

Lack of concentration, forgetting lessons, sweat, and using avoidance behaviors such as missing a class on purpose or avoid doing the homework are other sign of an anxious student (Horwitz et al., 1986). One of the factors that affect the level of foreign language anxiety is fear and inconvenience of speaking in a foreign language (Sinnasamy & Abdul Karim, 2014). As Yim (2014) pointed out in his recent study, a factor

that leads the students of foreign language to anxiety is the lack of exposure to a context where target language is spoken. It is reported that the students who traveled abroad to a foreign language speaking country, show a lower level of anxiety in classroom (Matsuda & Gobel, 2004). However, Foreign language anxiety doesn't only affect the class oral presentation, but it can affect the whole learning process too (Sinnasamy & Abdul Karim, 2014). In a study on French language learners, there was a clear relationship between foreign language anxiety and foreign language proficiency which exists in both learning and production stages of the language learners (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989).

Based on Alpert and Herber's anxiety scale, there are two types of foreign language anxiety: (a) Debilitative, and (b) facilitative (Young, 1986). The fact that some of the students who show a high level of anxiety will not necessarily show score low in the tests is that there are some types of anxiety that helps the student to improve his skills and keeps him motivated (Marcos-Llinas & Garau, 2009). Scovel (1978) reported that at higher level of IQ, anxiety shows up as a positive factor while at lower IQ it is associated with poorer performance in students. Based on Young (1986) study, facilitating anxiety helps the student to improve his skills during the language learning process, while debilitating anxiety makes a barrier toward learning or improving ones skills. Most common interoperation for anxiety encountered by researchers is debilitating anxiety (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989). Although most of the studies deals with the debilitative anxiety which shows negative relationship between performance and foreign language anxiety, but there are reports on facilitative anxiety as well (Matsuda & Gobel, 2004). Woodrow (2014) noted in her study that anxiety may have negative or debilitative effect on one's language performance.

One of the effective measurement instruments for measuring anxiety is Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope in 1986. This scale depends on three factors: (a) fear of negative evaluation, (b) communication apprehension, and (c) test anxiety (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). Communication apprehension is the shyness and fear about communication in target language. It could be oral communication anxiety, stage fright, or receiver anxiety. Communication apprehension plays an important role in foreign language anxiety. Test anxiety deals with fear of failure that comes to a

student before or during a test. They often set their goal so high and feel failure if they cannot reach that specific goal in exams. It is reported that there is a potential that both communication apprehension and test anxiety can occur in an oral test. Fear of negative evaluation is the fear of students from other's negative critics and evaluation. It is similar to the test anxiety but fear of negative evaluation does not have to be in a test situation to happen. It may happen in everyday social life of a second language speaker. However, Horwitz et al. (1986) suggested that foreign language anxiety doesn't just come from these fears. It can be arising from the certain language learning process which is based on a complex set of feelings, behavior, and self-perceptions.

Based on the literature review and the previous studies in the field of foreign language anxiety, it is hypothesized for this study that there will be a notable negative relationship between foreign language anxiety and communication performance among Iranian adult EFL learners.

III. Methodology

For the purpose of this research, 37 upper-intermediate adult (male and female) EFL learners were chosen through convenience sampling. This study adopted a correlational method in order to calculate and find the relationship between the two variables. In this study, foreign language anxiety is the independent variable and speaking is the dependent one. Also, for the sake of limitation of the results, a control variable of Iranian Adult EFL learners had been set.

A. Participants

For this study, a sum of 37 adult EFL learners (18 male & 19 female) aged 18 to 28, participated. They were upper-intermediate level language learners who were randomly selected from 2 different private language institutes in Tehran. Participant were studying English as foreign language for 2 years in average.

B. Materials

The materials used to conduct this study were Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) which is a 33-item five-point Likert scale questionnaire developed by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) used to measure the level of anxiety of individuals, and a set of 5 minutes discussion topic sentence adopted from IELTS speaking test samples. Speaking tests were score from 1 to 10. Table 1 shows the list of IELTS topics used in this study.

Table 1

	Topics		Topics
1	What do you like to do together as a family?	11	Which place would you really like to visit? Why?
2	Do you get along well with your family?	12	What's the best place you've ever visited?
3	If you could change your job or profession, what would you do?	13	How do you think computers have changed the world?
4	Describe the company or organization you work for.	14	What are some advantages of the Internet? What are some disadvantages?
5	What kind of school did you go to as a child?	15	Do you think writing email has strengthened or weakened people's writing skills?
6	Do you think your country has an effective education system?	16	Describe a friend. How long have you known each other? What do usually do together?
7	Describe your hometown. What's special about it?	17	What do you feel about smoking in public places?
8	What's the weather like in your country? Does the weather affect your mood?	18	What are some of the advantages of marriage? What are some of the disadvantages?
9	Describe your home. What kind of building do you live in?	19	What are some of your hobbies? When did you first develop this hobby?
10	Have you ever been to a wedding? Whose wedding was it? Describe the wedding ceremony.	20	Which is the most popular place to shop in your hometown?

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Test Scores	40	3.00	10.00	6.5000	2.36426

Table 3

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Item 1	3	8	11	11	7
Item 2	7	11	11	10	1
Item 3	3	7	13	12	5
Item 4	5	7	10	10	8
Item 5	6	16	13	4	1
Item 6	2	10	15	7	6
Item 7	1	15	13	8	3
Item 8	6	11	14	7	2
Item 9	6	9	9	9	7
Item 10	4	10	13	10	3
Item 11	3	12	10	8	7
Item 12	5	11	9	10	5
Item 13	4	11	10	8	7
Item 14	4	11	16	7	2
Item 15	3	11	11	10	5
Item 16	4	9	12	8	7
Item 17	3	10	13	8	6
Item 18	3	12	15	8	2
Item 19	1	6	15	15	3
Item 20	4	12	14	6	4
Item 21	4	8	10	13	5
Item 22	4	12	16	6	2
Item 23	3	9	14	11	3
Item 24	4	14	10	10	2
Item 25	2	8	12	10	8
Item 26	1	5	18	12	4
Item 27	2	8	14	10	6
Item 28	4	10	17	7	2
Item 29	1	11	12	10	6
Item 30	1	7	16	11	5
Item 31	3	8	12	11	6
Item 32	3	10	15	8	4
Item 33	3	8	12	11	6

IV.   Results & Discussion

The summary of the result can be found in table 4. It is clear that there is a significance correlation between test score and 31 out of 33 items of the questionnaire. For example there is a strong correlation between test score of the students and item 7 of the questionnaire (r=741 and α<0.01). This indicates that the correlation between the two variables are strong and negative, which matches the results of the previous studies and therefore our hypothesis is accepted.

The results in table 4 shows that the students' communication performance, which was evaluated via a speaking test, are negatively related with the answers in their questionnaire. That is the more anxious a student, the poorer communication performance and therefor lower test score. It can be explained based on the result of the table 4 that the debilitative anxiety has the most effect on students' communication performance.

Table 4

		Test Score			Test Score
Item 1	Pearson Correlation	-.729**	Item 18	Pearson Correlation	-.639**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	40		N	40
Item 2	Pearson Correlation	-.626**	Item 19	Pearson Correlation	-.373*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000`		Sig. (2-tailed)	.018
	N	40		N	40
Item 3	Pearson Correlation	-.556**	Item 20	Pearson Correlation	-.474**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		Sig. (2-tailed)	.002
	N	40		N	40
Item 4	Pearson Correlation	-.741**	Item 21	Pearson Correlation	-.676**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	40		N	40
Item 5	Pearson Correlation	-.328*	Item 22	Pearson Correlation	-.657**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.039		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	40		N	40
Item 6	Correlation	-.648**	Item 23	Correlation	-.583**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	40		N	40
Item 7	Pearson Correlation	-.549**	Item 24	Pearson Correlation	.239
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		Sig. (2-tailed)	.138
	N	40		N	40
Item 8	Pearson Correlation	-.378*	Item 25	Pearson Correlation	-.604**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.016		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	40		N	40
Item 9	Pearson Correlation	-.770**	Item 26	Pearson Correlation	.207
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		Sig. (2-tailed)	.200
	N	40		N	40
Item 10	Pearson Correlation	-.665**	Item 27	Pearson Correlation	-.609**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	40		N	40
Item 11	Pearson Correlation	-.316*	Item 28	Pearson Correlation	-.639**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.047		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	40		N	40
Item 12	Pearson Correlation	-.690**	Item 29	Pearson Correlation	-.627**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	40		N	40
Item 13	Pearson Correlation	-.654**	Item 30	Pearson Correlation	-.546**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	40		N	40
Item 14	Pearson Correlation	-.490**	Item 31	Pearson Correlation	-.498**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001		Sig. (2-tailed)	.001
	N	40		N	40
Item 15	Pearson Correlation	-.573**	Item 32	Pearson Correlation	-.539**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	40		N	40
Item 16	Pearson Correlation	-.710**	Item 33	Pearson Correlation	-.647**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	40		N	40
Item 17	Pearson Correlation	-.546**	*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed). **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000			
	N	40			

Of all the correlation that were found in the results of the present study, all but two (item 24 and item 26) were negatively correlated in a significance level. Item 24 and 26 however were correlated positively and not at a significance level. Table 5 shows the frequency of the questionnaire item 24 and 26 answers across the test score (minimum score = 3 and maximum score = 10). Based on the data in the table 5, we can suggest that even the students with higher scores had, in some degree, an anxiety which was facilitative, meaning that the anxiety itself help them to focus more on the matter and improve their communicative performance.

Table 5

		Test Score							
		3.00	4.00	5.00	6.00	7.00	8.00	9.00	10.00
		Frequency							
Item 24	Strongly agree	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	1
	Agree	2	1	2	1	1	1	4	2
	Neither agree nor disagree	2	1	1	1	2	1	1	1
	Disagree	2	1	2	0	1	2	2	0
	Strongly disagree	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0
Item 26	Strongly agree	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
	Agree	2	0	2	0	0	1	0	0
	Neither agree nor disagree	3	2	2	1	1	2	4	3
	Disagree	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	1
	Strongly disagree	0	1	0	0	2	0	1	0

For answering our first research question, we can suggest that there is a significance correlation between the speaking test score and the students' anxiety in classroom. The communication performance is highly correlated with test score. This correlation lead us to answering second research question. The correlation we found in the result was negative between test scores and questionnaires in 31 out of 33 items. This indicates that anxious students tend to have lower scores and poorer communicative performance ability.

V.   Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between foreign language anxiety and communication performance and was determine to what extent, foreign language anxiety affects the communication performance among Iranian adult EFL learners. We tried to answer the following question by correlating the test scores on a sample IELTS speaking test and the FLCAS questionnaire which is dedicated to measure students' anxiety. The finding of this research indicated that there is a strong negative correlation between the two variables, which matched the results of previous study on communication performance and students' anxiety. The finding of this research can help the teacher to identify the reason why some students cannot get higher score in their speaking test and why their communication performance are not improving. They also can try to turn the debilitative anxiety which is a barrier to students' improvement into facilitative anxiety which helps students improve their communication performance.

There are some limitations with this study that should be addressed. First, the number of participants in this study was few. A replication of this study in a larger community can improve the reliability of the results and the generalization of the results would be easier and more reliable. Second, the setting of this study was in Iran, where the students have little or no exposure to the foreign language they are learning. This can be the result of lower self-esteem when they are trying to speak in a foreign language. The result in a setting where the exposure to second/foreign language is easier and more common could be different. And third, this study just investigated the relationship between communication performance and anxiety, there was no treatment performed in the classroom in order to reduce the students' anxiety. A study where there is a teaching method was used for reducing the anxiety can help the teacher during speaking courses either to reduce the overall students'

anxiety or turn that anxiety from debilitative to facilitative anxiety.

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10/25/2016