

THE ROLE OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM ANXIETY IN ENGLISH SPEAKING COURSES

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to investigate the correlation between the students' foreign language anxiety levels and their achievement in speaking courses. It starts with a discussion on the causes and effects of anxiety and then presents the study carried out with the participation of the freshman students studying at the Department of English Language Teaching (ELT), Faculty of Education, Dicle University. The results indicate that there is a significant relationship between anxiety and the students' achievement in the speaking course.

Introduction

Anxiety is one of the affective variables in human behavior along with self-esteem, extroversion, inhibition and empathy (Brown, 1994), which influence how an individual will respond to any situation (Gardner and MacIntyre, 1993). Spielberger defines the affective variables as the converse of cognitive variables; in other words everything, which impinges on language learning unrelated to cognition (1983).

Until rather recently, the literature on anxiety was scattered and difficult to interpret, often presenting more questions than answers. As mentioned by Scovel in his literature review in 1978, four early studies were conducted by Chastain (1975), Swain and Burnaby (1976), Tucker, Hamayan and Genesee (1976) and Kleinmann (1977), related to anxiety in foreign language learning context. The results were not consistent, perhaps due to the intricate and complex nature of language learning process, or the inconsistency of measuring instruments (MacIntyre, 1999).

The majority of the early studies did not focus specifically on anxiety, but included anxiety as one of several affective variables. Gülmez (1982) examined the factors that affected foreign language success among the preparatory students studying English. Anxiety was not a variable in the study. However, the results of the study showed that it might contribute to individual differences in foreign language courses. Savaşan (1990), on the other hand, scrutinized how students would respond to three affective factors: global and situational self-esteem, trait and state anxiety and instrumental and integrative motivation. The study resulted that half of the subjects experienced state anxiety while learning a foreign language.

So far, three approaches to the study of anxiety have been identified as the trait, state and situation specific perspectives (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991a). Trait anxiety is a permanent predisposition to be anxious whereas state anxiety is related to some particular event or act. A third type of anxiety is called situation specific anxiety, which refers to anxiety experienced in a well-defined situation (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991a). Situation specific constructs can be seen as trait anxiety measures limited to a given context (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991b). Situation specific studies can offer more

to the understanding of anxiety because various aspects of the situation can be queried. A key difference is that subjects are tested for their anxiety in limited circumstances such as taking a test, speaking in public, writing examinations, performing math or participating in a language class. Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) has recently been identified as distinguished from other forms of anxiety by Horwitz et al. (1986), who developed the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), a standard instrument for the purpose of testing an individual's response to the specific stimulus of language learning. They asked language students questions about anxiety related to factors such as speaking in language class, exams in language courses and the effects of the instructors' attitudes.

Recently, it has been widely accepted that, for some students, anxiety plays a prominent and painful role in the process of learning a second language (Horwitz et al., 1986; Young, 1990; MacIntyre and Gardner 1991a, 1991b, 1991c). This claim is supported by the words of anxious students who may express their concerns with statements like "I dread going to Spanish class... I hate it when my teacher calls on me to speak. I freeze up and can't think of what to say or how to say it" (Young, 1990, p.539), or "I feel like my French teacher is some kind of Martian death ray. I never know when he'll point at me" (Horwitz et al., 1986, p.125). Anxious students may avoid doing their homework and attempt to avoid being called on by sitting in the back row of the classroom. They are less likely to volunteer answers and to participate in oral classroom activities (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991b). They also tend to avoid difficult linguistic structures that more relaxed students would be willing to attempt.

In the studies related to foreign language anxiety, students generally reported that speaking in the foreign language classroom produced the highest level of anxiety. Phillips (1999) stated that the large majority of language students confessed to some degree of nervousness related to the speaking skill. Similarly, Horwitz et al. (1986) reported that speaking was a major source of anxiety expressed by most of the students who visited their learning skill center for help. In her study in 1990, Young investigated the students' perspectives on anxiety and speaking. The results of her study revealed that, in a language class, the students feel most anxious when they have to speak in front of their peers.

This paper examines the role of foreign language classroom anxiety in speaking courses. The study has four main purposes: to measure the FLCA levels of the freshman students studying at the ELT Department of Dicle University; to find out the correlation between the students' anxiety levels and their achievement levels in speaking course; to obtain a detailed description of the causes and effects of FLCA by using the students' insights as a source of information and to learn the students' strategies for coping with their anxieties. The following research questions are addressed in the study:

- 1- What is the foreign language anxiety level of the freshman students studying at the Department of English Language Teaching, Faculty of Education, Dicle University?
- 2- Is there a correlation between the students' foreign language anxiety levels and their achievement levels in speaking course?

- 3- What are the causes and effects of foreign language anxiety in speaking course?
- 4- What do the students do to cope with anxiety?

Method

Subjects and Instrumentation

The sample of the study consisted of 126 students at the freshman class of the ELT Department of Dicle University, Education Faculty. Since eleven students did not want to participate in the study, the total number of the subjects was 115- 41 males and 74 females. The participants were number-coded to assure confidentiality.

The anxiety level of the freshman students was measured by the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale, which was developed by Horwitz et al. in 1986. The scale was translated into Turkish by two lecturers working at the Department of Educational Sciences of Dicle University. Then, the translated versions were compared and, in order to evaluate the accuracy of the translation, two different lecturers back-translated the scale into English. Each item was, then, compared with the original scale and finally, a pilot study was conducted before the Turkish version of the FLCAS was administered to the students.

As the instrument was developed with respect to western culture, each item was examined carefully concerning its adequacy for Turkish culture. As a result of this examination, it was found that the items were valid across different cultures and that no changes were necessary on the FLCAS, because the literature review suggested that it was administered to students from many different nationalities. For example, the instrument was administered to Chinese, Korean and Turkish students learning English as a foreign or second language (Yan, 1998; Truitt, 1995 cited in Yan, 1998; Gülsün, 1997 respectively). Similarly, American students learning Spanish, Japanese, French and German were also administered the FLCAS (Horwitz, 1986; Aida, 1994; Donley, 1997; von Würde, 1998 respectively).

According to the report by Horwitz (1986), the internal reliability measure of FLCAS showed an alpha coefficient of .93, test-retest reliability over eight weeks showed an $r=.83$ ($p<.001$), and the predictive validity coefficient for final grade was .49 ($p<.003$, $n=35$) in two beginning Spanish classes and $-.54$ ($p=.001$, $n=32$) in two beginning French classes. Other studies using the FLCAS also yielded high reliability scores. For example, in a study by Aida (1994), the FLCAS showed an internal reliability of .94.

The internal reliability of the translated version of the FLCAS was computed by Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The results indicated that the internal reliability of the instrument was .90. For each item, the internal reliabilities and the corrected item-total correlations were also computed. The internal reliability scores ranged between .89 and .91, which showed that all the items in the instrument maintained high internal reliabilities.

Another source of data was an interview protocol, generated from a pilot study, during which the students were asked questions about the effects of anxiety on their performance. The answers given by the students were taken as a basis for the interview protocol prepared by the researcher. Based on the students' scores obtained from the

FLCAS, the high, moderate and low anxiety groups of students were determined and six students were chosen randomly from each group. The selected students, who agreed to participate in the study, were interviewed according to the interview protocol. The interview was semi-structured: the interview protocol was used only as a general guide; for each interviewee the order of the questions was altered, some questions were omitted, and new questions were added depending on the flow of the responses. Each interview was recorded with the consent of the participant. The researcher then transcribed the recordings. Since this study is part of a much larger study, only the answers of the questions related to the speaking anxiety will be presented.

It is crucial to note that the subjects of the study were also administered a demographic information sheet, prepared by the researcher to get some background information about the students that participated in the study. These factors included age, gender, high schools, locations, language learning periods, parents' educational levels, occupations and income levels. The students' FLCA levels were compared to these factors. According to the results, the only significant difference could be found between the anxiety levels of the male and female students. In other words, the findings indicated that female students were significantly more anxious than males. No statistically significant relationship could be found between the students' anxiety levels and the other factors mentioned above.

Results

The data obtained from this study consist of both quantitative and qualitative findings. As mentioned before, the foreign language anxiety levels of the subjects were determined by the administration of the FLCAS. The possible anxiety scores for this scale range from 33 to 165. The results of the data analysis reflected that, for the subjects of the present study, the anxiety scores ranged between 55 and 145.

In order to answer the second research question, the students' FLA scores were compared to their overall grades in speaking courses. As can be seen in Table 1, the mean scores of the anxiety levels have a range between 69.20 and 115.50 for the speaking course. It can also be seen that the anxiety scores correlate inversely with the students' achievement levels in speaking course. In other words, the anxiety levels of the students decrease as their grades become higher.

Table 1
The Students' Anxiety Levels and Speaking Course Grades.

<u>Groups</u>	<u>Grades</u>	<u>f</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>
1	Absentees	4	115.50	17.99
2	(Between 0-49)	25	96.40	16.94
3	(Between 50-59)	37	93.78	18.89
4	(Between 60-69)	22	91.09	17.06
5	(Between 70-79)	14	89.28	20.87
6	(Between 80-89)	8	86.25	22.46
7	(Between 90-100)	5	69.20	9.52
Total		115	92.45	19.23

The lowest mean scores were obtained by the students whose grades were the highest, between 90 and 100 (M=69.2). The highest mean scores, on the other hand, belonged to the four students in Group 1 (M=115), which consisted of the students who did not attend any of the oral exams.

Two analyses, the analysis of variance and Scheffé test were performed to find out whether the differences among the anxiety scores of the groups were significant or not. Table 2, which presents the results of the analysis of variance shows that there is a significant difference between the groups at the .05 level.

Table 2
The Results of ANOVA

Source	D.F.	Sum of Squares	Mean Squares
Between Groups	6	5772.24	962.04
Within Groups	108	36384.24	336.89
Total	114	42156.48	

F=2.85 $F_p=0.01$ $p<0.05$

The results of the Scheffé test, displayed in Table 3, showed significant difference between Group 7 and three different groups, 1, 2 and 3. The findings obtained from both the analysis of variance and Scheffé test reflected that the students with the highest grades were significantly less anxious than the students with the lowest grades.

Table 3
The Results of the Scheffé Test.

Groups	Grades	M
1	Absentees	*115.50
2	(Between 0-49)	*96.40
3	(Between 50-59)	*93.78
4	(Between 60-69)	91.09
5	(Between 70-79)	89.28
6	(Between 80-89)	86.25
7	(Between 90-99)	*69.20

$p<0.05$

Qualitative Data Analysis

This part of the data analysis presents the results of the qualitative data obtained from the answers of the students given to an interview protocol. At the first stage of the analysis, the students' responses to each interview item were coded, then the overlapping parts were found out, and some categories were obtained according to the codes. Since the students' anxiety level was an important factor, the answers were evaluated for the Low Anxiety (LA), Moderate Anxiety (MA) and High Anxiety (HA) groups.

Question 1- Do you generally feel confident or nervous when you are speaking in your language class?

Most of the interviewees reported that they felt anxious when they had to speak in English classes. Among the 17 students from the three anxiety levels, only four (two

students from low-anxiety and two students from middle-anxiety group) said that they felt comfortable when they had to speak in English class. It was interesting that even in the low anxiety group, three students felt nervous when they had to speak English in class. In the high anxiety group, five students reported that they always felt nervous. None of the students in this group felt comfortable when speaking in the language classes.

Question 2- (if the answer to the previous question is “I feel nervous”) Why do you feel nervous?

Thirteen students involved in the qualitative part of the study mentioned a feeling of nervousness. When asked about the causes of their feelings, two students did not give any reasons. Table 4 displays the answers of the remaining students.

Table 4
Causes of Anxiety in Speaking Courses.

Categories	Number of Students			Total
	LA Group	MA Group	HA Group	
Conspicuousness	-	1	1	2
Lack of self- confidence	1	-	3	4
Shyness	1	-	1	2
High expectations of others	-	1	1	2
Lack of knowledge	-	1	2	3
Total	2	3	8	13

Note: LA: Low Anxiety; MA: Moderate Anxiety; HA: High Anxiety

Conspicuousness: The term is borrowed from Daly and Buss (1984). According to their explanation, people generally prefer not to be the focus of attention if they think they are engaging in an activity where their competence is low. Their sense of conspicuousness is heightened if they are afraid of making mistakes- for instance at a time when they struggle through the pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary of a new language. As two informants stated:

It does not disturb me so much when I speak in Turkish in class, but in language courses, I have to speak in English, a language different from my mother tongue. This makes me feel anxious.

Interviewee 14 (HA group)

Since I work in Antalya in summer, I have a chance to speak to the native speakers of English. So I can speak English as fluently as the other students in class, yet, I still feel quite nervous when I have to speak the language in front of the teacher and the other students.

Interviewee 9 (MA group)

Lack of self-confidence: One student from the low anxiety and three students from the high anxiety group stated that they generally had a lack of confidence. As an interviewee explained:

I never say a word in any of the courses, because I'm not confident enough.

Interviewee 3 (LA group)

Shyness: Shyness was another personality trait that affected the students' anxiety levels during the speaking courses. Interviewee 5 explained why she felt anxious:

I'm afraid of making mistakes. When I make a mistake, I do not speak for the next two or three hours. I wait until everybody forgets the event.

Interviewee 5 (HA group)

High expectations of others: Some students felt pressurized because of the thought that the other people always evaluated them. To these students, the thoughts of the other people were very important. They always tried to meet the expectations of the others. The statement by one of the interviewees was a good example to the feelings of these students:

I am a graduate of the Anatolian High School and have been learning English for eight years. I know what the others will think if I make a mistake. They will say, "She has been learning English for eight years but she still cannot speak the language".

Interviewee 7 (MA group)

Lack of Knowledge: One of the reasons for the students' anxiety was their lack of knowledge. Some of the interviewees had problems with grammatical structures whereas the others found pronunciation more difficult. Although the problems were similar, it was observed by the researcher that the students in the low anxiety group approached to the subject quite differently from the students in the high anxiety group. For example, some students from the low anxiety group accepted the lack of knowledge as a natural part of the learning process. However, the students in the high anxiety group thought that their lack of knowledge was unforgivable. For example two interviewees stated:

I always have a fear that I won't be able to understand what the others say in English. My knowledge is not enough. Until I have a perfect command of English, I won't speak in the lessons.

Interviewee 16 (HA group)

In speaking lessons, I just sit and wait. I don't say anything because I cannot speak fluently and accurately.

Interviewee 12 (HA Group)

On the other hand, Interviewee 4 in the low anxiety group said she did not have a fear of speaking in the lesson in spite of the fact that her pronunciation and grammar was not perfect. She thought she could make practice if she tried to speak in the lessons.

Question 3- What are the effects of this feeling?

The students' answers for this item were classified and three categories emerged as a result of the classification. The categories and the number of the responses for each group can be seen in Table 5.

Table 5
Effects of Anxiety in Speaking Courses.

Categories	Number of students			Total
	LA Group	MA Group	HA Group	
Reticence	1	2	3	6
Failure in exams	-	1	1	2
A feeling of guiltiness	-	-	2	2
Total	1	3	6	10

Note: LA: Low Anxiety; MA: Moderate Anxiety; HA: High Anxiety

Reticence: The most common result of anxiety was the reticence of the students. Six students, who had different levels of anxiety, stated that they generally did not volunteer answers even if they knew the correct answer. Some students only gave answers when the instructor called them on. For example, one of the students noted:

I never give answers in the lessons unless the instructor calls me on. If s/he insists on my answering, I try to say a few words but I feel very tense and nervous.

Interviewee 17 (HA Group)

Failure in exams: For some students, the effect of anxiety was so crucial that they failed in the exams. Anxiety affected the students' success levels in two ways. First, the instructors thought that the student was not interested in the lesson and gave him/her low marks. One student, for example, said:

As I don't volunteer in the lessons, the teacher thinks that I don't pay attention to what he says. Sometimes he simply thinks that I don't know anything.

Interviewee 7 (MA Group)

The second effect of anxiety on the achievement levels of the students was seen during the oral exams. As mentioned before, in each term, the students are required to have two oral exams, in which they have to answer the instructor's questions. For most students, this was the most anxiety-provoking situation, because they had to become face to face with the instructor. The following remarks belonged to students with high levels of anxiety:

During the exams, I can't speak at all but I can give the answers to the questions after leaving the room. Last term, I failed the speaking exams just because I didn't know what to say when I became face to face with the teacher.

Interviewee 15 (HA Group)

For some students, the effect was much more crucial because these students did not even find the courage to enter the examination room. As the following informant

reported:

In the day of the exam, I waited in front of the exam room. The instructor had told us to enter whenever we felt ready. She wanted to give us time for preparation. I waited till the end of the exam but did not find the courage to enter. The same thing happened in all of the three exams. Finally, I failed.

Interviewee 17 (HA Group)

A feeling of guiltiness: Another result of anxiety was a feeling of guiltiness. For example, one of the students first connected her silence to the fact that her knowledge was not as good as her classmates' but later she explained that some of the students, whose level of proficiency were the same as hers could speak in the lessons more often. The result was a feeling of guiltiness.

I don't think that everybody in the class has a good command of English but they are confident and they try to speak even if they are not sure. I think about the answers during the lesson but never find the courage to give an answer. After the lesson, I feel weak and guilty.

Interviewee 12 (HA Group)

Question 4- What do you do to cope with this feeling?

Six categories were obtained as a result of the analysis of the answers given to the item about the students' coping strategies. Table 6 gives the categories and the number of the students who gave responses that fell into each category. The figures in the table total more than seventeen because some of the students mentioned more than one coping strategy.

Table 6
Strategies to Cope with Anxiety.

<u>Categories</u>	<u>Number of Students</u>			<u>Total</u>
	<u>LA Group</u>	<u>MA Group</u>	<u>HA Group</u>	
Doing nothing	-	1	1	2
Avoiding the task	2	1	1	4
Performing the task	2	-	-	2
Making practice	2	2	1	5
Self-encouragement	3	1	1	5
Preparing before the lesson	-	2	2	4
Total	9	7	6	22

Note: LA: Low Anxiety; MA: Moderate Anxiety; HA: High Anxiety

Doing Nothing: Two students (one from the moderate anxiety group and one from the high anxiety group) told that they were aware of the problem but they did not do anything to change the situation. Some of them thought that it was the teacher's responsibility to make them involved in the lesson. For example, one of the informants stated:

I want to feel more comfortable in the lessons but I don't do anything. I think it is the instructor's responsibility to provide a relaxed atmosphere and make all the students involved in the lesson.

Interviewee 7 (MA Group)

Avoiding the Task: The students who mentioned an avoidance behavior generally used different methods in order to avoid being asked questions in the class. Interviewee 12, for instance, said she did not look at the instructor in the eye, because this might mean that she was ready to answer. Another student, Interviewee 14 reported that he didn't sit in the front row:

I prefer sitting in the back row because it is a good place to hide. The instructor generally stands in front and does not see me.

Performing the Task: Although some students preferred avoiding the task, some others coped with their anxieties by performing the tasks. It was interesting to see that this strategy was mostly used by the students from the low-anxiety group. For instance, one student noted:

Although I feel nervous, I try to say a few words. After the first attempt, it becomes easier to go on.

Interviewee 5 (LA Group)

One student used the strategy in a rather different way; he performed the task for not being called on by the teacher.

There are two types of questions asked by the instructor. Some of the questions are just for introduction and do not require a previous knowledge. The others are more complex and cannot be answered without a preparation. I generally answer the first type of questions. The instructors think that I'm very hard working and they call the other students for the second type of questions.

Interviewee 2 (LA Group)

Making Practice: Five students told that they tried to provide chances for making practice outside the class. Those students sometimes spoke the language with their classmates. Some students made practice with their family members:

My brother is a student of the Anatolian High School (where the instruction is in English). I try to speak English with him at home.

Interviewee 15 (HA Group)

Working in tourism companies was another way of making practice, widely accepted by the students. Three students said, in summers, they worked in the southern cities of Turkey. Their self-confidence increased a lot because they had a chance to speak to the native speakers of English. Two students from the high anxiety group also planned such an activity and reported that their anxiety level would be lessened if they had a chance to work in tourism companies. As one interviewee noted:

In order to get rid of this feeling, I should go to the south and find a job for the summer so that I can talk to the tourists. I think I will do this next summer.

Interviewee 13 (HA group)

Self-encouragement: This term was first used by Oxford (1990). Self-encouragement was one of her recommendations offered to the students in trying to reduce their anxieties. She suggested that positive self-talk might be a good way of reducing anxiety and a person might also encourage himself to take judicious risks in order to learn and reward himself for doing well in the target language.

Some of the interviewees who contributed to this study used self-encouragement as an effective way of reducing anxiety. Three students in the low anxiety group used the strategy to feel more comfortable. As the following informants stated:

I try to think positively. I say "I have been learning English for so many years. There is nothing to be afraid of."

Interviewee 1 (LA Group)

At the beginning of the term, I felt very nervous in the speaking lessons. Later I managed to convince myself that making mistakes was quite natural.

Interviewee 5 (LA Group)

Preparing before the Lesson: Four students mentioned this strategy, which was judged to be highly effective by them. They used this strategy especially in the lessons in which the teachers followed a textbook. For some students, who had a habit of studying for every lesson beforehand, speaking lessons caused an extra level of anxiety because the teacher did not use a textbook and they did not know what to study. One of them explained the problem:

If the teacher uses a textbook, I sometimes volunteer answers in class but I don't feel so nervous. Because most of the time, the questions are written in the textbook and I know what to expect. But without a textbook, I don't know what the instructor will ask, because the subject suddenly changes.

Interviewee 15 (HA Group)

Some other students said they tried to prepare for the answers when the instructor was talking to the other students. Although this strategy seemed to be helpful, for some students it could be another source of anxiety. As Interviewee 16 from the high anxiety group stated:

I always try to prepare for the answer when the other students are talking. Unfortunately, until I finish my answer, the subject changes.

Conclusion

The results obtained from the study indicated that there was a significant relationship between the students' anxiety levels and their success levels in speaking courses. The findings also suggested that the feeling of anxiety might be the result of many different factors such as conspicuousness, lack of self-confidence, shyness, lack of knowledge and high expectations of others. The effects of anxiety were also quite diverse; some students remained silent during the whole lesson. Some others, who also remained quiet in the lessons, felt themselves guilty because they could not speak the target language like their friends. For most students, the most important effect was their failure in the oral exams.

The students used some strategies to cope with their anxieties. These might be helpful to reduce anxiety in other language learning situations. The students from the low anxiety group used some effective strategies such as self-encouragement and positive self-talk. These students continuously repeated to themselves that errors were quite natural in language learning process and that they can learn from their mistakes. Making practice and preparing before the lesson were also effective strategies used by language learners.

The study also revealed that the instructor's role in reducing the anxiety levels of the students could be quite important. The instructor should show an understanding for the anxious students and try to make them feel more comfortable by assuring them that making mistakes is a natural part of language learning. Since most of the students think that the other students do not have such a feeling, it may be useful to inform them that the other students may also have the feeling of anxiety but they use some strategies to cope with it. It is possible to deal with the problem by preparing workshops, presentations or seminars for the students. It can also be useful to give the topic of the lesson beforehand so that the students who want to prepare for the subject can study before the lesson.

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