



Strategies to Overcome Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety: A Study Conducted at the Faculty of Languages, Cultures and Communication, South East European University

Shpresa Hasani¹

Merita Ismaili²

Received: 10 June 2022 / Accepted: 30 June 2022 / Published: 24 November 2022
© 2022 Shpresa Hasani & Merita Ismaili³

Doi: 10.5281/zenodo.8154560

Abstract

Considering that speaking is a productive skill, the target of each language learner is to develop and enhance it. Very often language learners struggle to improve their speaking abilities due to the speaking anxiety (SA). According to many researchers speaking anxiety is a very complex and multidimensional phenomenon which occurs in different learning settings. If not approached and directed accordingly SA might hinder student's ability to use the target language, being reluctant to participate in classroom activities. In this context, language teachers rarely manage to identify the anxious students and the reasons for their lack of motivation and low speaking performance. This study aims to identify the strategies for reducing students SA and provide teachers with tools that can be used with language learners to overcome it. It also examined the characteristics of anxious students and in which way the SA can be identified and managed. The study included a mixed method design using qualitative and quantitative data. The data were obtained through an

¹ Faculty of Languages, Cultures and Communication, South East European University, Email: sh.mustafai@seeu.edu.mk

² Language Centre, South East European University, Email: merita.ismaili@seeu.edu.mk

³ This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, adaptation, and reproduction in any medium, provided that the

original work is properly cited.



adapted questionnaire based on Horwitz's "Foreign Language Anxiety Scale" (FLCAS, 1986) and semi-structured interviews done at the end of the semester. The findings of the research will help EFL teachers to use strategies that reduce the SA in foreign language classes. By utilizing these techniques, they can help learners to navigate their learning progress and increase their self-confidence.

Keywords: *Speaking anxiety, overcoming fear, language progress*

Introduction

Foreign language anxiety and its impact on learner's language performance have been discussed by many researchers. As Horwitz (2001) has pointed, anxiety affects language learner's oral proficiency. Considering that learners are at the core of the learning process, their psychological state is very important. Affective variables like motivation and attitude play a crucial role in their language learning process. Anxiety is one of the most prevalent and complex emotions, and it has been studied extensively over the last three decades. Anxious language learners identify speaking as the most stressful skill. This study will concentrate on the impact of speaking anxiety in language learning in an oral communications course with fourth year university students. Anxiety, according to many researchers, is a sensation that might lead to decrease in students' language performance. Anxiety, if it is excessive, might be an obstacle in attaining students' language goals. As a result, anxiety is considered as one of the most influential barriers that has an impact on students' language proficiency (Bailey & Daley, 2000). Learners who feel anxious may have lower achievement levels and may lack motivation to progress in their language learning performance. The goal of the study was to investigate which speaking activities used in Conversational English class helped students to decrease their speaking anxiety.

2. Review of literature

2.1 What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a common feeling that occurs in a variety of settings. It is the feeling that occurs when students are unable to cope with a certain situation. This state is very common when students have to do a public presentation for the first time, or while speaking in front of other students. Anxiety

is defined as a feeling of unease, worry, or fear brought on by the prospect of something dangerous. Anxiety, according to Khan and Zafar (2010), is a broad, unpleasant, and vague feeling of apprehension. As Barlow (2002) defines it is "a future-oriented mood state in which one feels ready or prepared to attempt to cope with anticipated unfavorable occurrences" (p.64). Almost all of these definitions of anxiety have one thing in common: they all involve the fear of being threatened by a real or imagined scenario or situation. When students are worried, it can be difficult to pinpoint the source of their struggle or the nature of the upcoming event or situation. Anxiety is characterized by uncertainty about the possibility of a threat. In some situations, anxiety is considered to be normal because it serves as a 'productive alarm system,' activating when we anticipate a danger or threat (Cowie et al., 2011). This warning, according to researchers, aids us in responding to and coping with a potential risk or threat. Furthermore, anxiety is transient, meaning it lasts just a brief time before dissipating or becoming tolerable once the expected threat has passed (Daubney, 2002).

2.2 Anxiety and fear

The term 'anxiety' is frequently used interchangeably with various phenomena such as fear, concern, panic, tension, stress, and phobia, causing confusion. Anxiety can have a variety of meanings and can apply to a variety of different experiences and behaviors (Kim,2000). For some authors, fear and anxiety are indistinguishable, whereas others believe they are distinct phenomena. For example, Khan and Zafar (2010) believe that distinguishing between fear and anxiety is vital because both emotions are common and activated interchangeably. Furthermore, both sensations have stimulating activators and traits in common. Pekrun and Linnenbink-Garcia (2012) in their study present two samples of both anxiety and fear to elucidate the difference among these two emotions. As they define, feeling anxious means to feel nervous and this feeling of anxiety is created by individual's imagination. This kind of state creates visions in their minds that usually are not realistic but still makes them believe that they are in danger. Fear, on the other hand, is an emotional response to an exact, recognized or apparent threat. The sensation of fear in this case is more realistic and vivid and it is not coming as a result of imagination, rather it shows as a natural response. To summarize the differences between anxiety and fear see Table 1 below adopted from Rachman (2004, p.5).

Table 1. Differences Between Fear and Anxiety, from Rachman (2004, p.5)

Fear	Anxiety
Present threat	Expected threat
Emphasis on threat	Indefinable source of threat
Distinction among fear and threat	Vague relation among anxiety and threat
Appears occasionally	Appears often
The tension is defined	The tension is not defined
Threat is recognizable	Threat is undefined
Relied on threat prompts	Unpredictable start
Disappears after the threat	Consistent
Limited threat	Unlimited threat

According to Shang (2013) anxiety is manifested by two distinct systems that are intimately linked to function together. The first one is the rational system, which is related to the thoughts that indicate that something going wrong. The second one is functional system that relates to the physical changes or symptoms that may arise in the body when one is nervous (stomach discomfort, rapid heartbeats, shortness of breath, and changes in face muscles).

2.3 Speaking anxiety

Among the four language skills, speaking is considered to one of the skills that needs more attention. Students in today's language classrooms aim to strengthen their speaking skills by using a variety of methods. According to Shang (2013) one of the most influential variables that affect foreign language learning is speaking anxiety. It has a direct negative impact on students' adaption to the learning environment and their achievement (Horwitz, 2001). Aydin (2008) divided the causes of speaking fear into four categories: personal reasons, classroom teacher behavior, learners' views, and testing and teaching techniques. Speaking anxiety must be addressed in order to achieve an effective language learning (Golchi, 2012).

Barlow (2004) used the Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety Scale (FLSAS) to collect data from 502 EFL students in order to examine the relationship between foreign language speaking anxiety and gender correlation, the period of exposing to foreign language, and students' enthusiasm to

acquire the language. Females were found to be more worried than males, and those who began learning English in kindergarten experienced less worry than those who began later.

Woodrow (2006) used a self-designed questionnaire to investigate the association between foreign language anxiety and speaking performance, as well as the key causes of worry, with 275 advanced English for academic purposes students. Speaking anxiety in a foreign language was found to have a substantial negative link with oral performance. Interacting with native speakers was the main source of worry. Speaking anxiety was found to have a detrimental influence on certain students' ability to communicate in English.

As previously said, while there are many studies in the research that demonstrate the amount of EFL speaking anxiety experienced by learners, few of them provide insight into the distinctive nature of it, and there is a lack of a comprehensive knowledge of this phenomenon in the literature. As a result, the current research attempts to provide a comprehensive explanation of EFL speaking anxiety. This study was directed by the following research questions in light of this theoretical framework and the objectives:

1. Do students enrolled in Conversational English experience speaking anxiety?
2. How do students view EFL speaking anxiety, and what are the most common causes?

3. Methodology

3.1. Design and setting of the study

This study examines the anxiety of speaking in conversational English class. The qualitative and quantitative instruments were used for data gathering. Face-to-face interviews were used to acquire qualitative data, while a questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data.

This research was carried out during winter semester 2022, with students taking the Conversational English course, taken as a required course of their 4th year study curricula.

3.2 Participants

The participants of the study were 28 students, their ages ranged between 22 and 27. They were four year students, coming from three different departments: English Language and Literature, International Communication and Legal Studies.

3.3. Data collection instruments

3.3.1. Foreign language speaking anxiety questionnaire

Horwitz et al. (1986) developed the Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety Questionnaire (FLCAS), which consisted of 33 items. Only 25 items were determined to be directly connected to foreign language speaking anxiety. As a result, these items were selected in a foreign language speaking anxiety questionnaire (see Appendix) to evaluate if students had speaking anxiety and which was its impact in their speaking performance.

3.3.2 Interview questions

Following a thorough review of the literature, the researchers devised an interview strategy to gather in-depth information about EFL speaking anxiety among language students. The interview methodology comprised of five open-ended questions that aimed to provide useful information for this study because the questions allowed students to express themselves freely. Furthermore, the researchers expected these interview questions to provide qualitative support for the statistical analyses. The interviews were semi-structured, and participants were given prompts to urge them to elaborate on their ideas. The questions were piloted with 28 students, and their feedback was used to improve the clarity and understandability of the questions.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. The level of EFL speaking anxiety

The first research question of the study examined whether the students were anxious in Conversational English class and which was the level of SA that the students experienced. To measure the level of speaking anxiety, a questionnaire having 25 items was used. From the collected responses 14 students demonstrated a high level of speaking anxiety; 8 presented a moderate level of speaking anxiety, and only 6 participants showed a low level of foreign language speaking anxiety.

4.2. Students' perceptions of EFL speaking anxiety

Question 1: Do you consider speaking an anxiety provoking factor in language learning process?

The first question analyzed the students' perceptions related to speaking anxiety and its influence on their language performance. During the interviews, the students were asked whether speaking was an anxiety provoking factor for them in Conversational English class. The majority of students stated that speaking is an anxiety provoking factor in language classrooms. Interviewee 18, who regarded speaking as an anxiety provoking factor, indicated that:

“In my opinion anxiety is a provoking factor in language learning. Whenever I want to speak in the lesson, my heart starts to beat very fast and I feel as if I am going to faint. Because of this, I can't finish my sentences most of the time and I feel uncomfortable.”

Another student, Interviewee 15, told that:

“I think speaking is the most anxiety provoking activity in the lessons. While I am speaking, I get anxious and make a lot of mistakes. As I make mistakes, I lose my enthusiasm and do not want speak again.”

Most students in the language acquisition process see speaking as an anxiety-provoking activity; therefore, the findings suggest that speaking is a source of anxiety. The samples of participants' interviews prove that the majority of students feel anxious when speaking. The main factors that make them feel anxious are fear of making mistakes, being laugh at and fear of negative evaluation.

Question 2: While speaking English which situations cause anxiety?

The goal of this item was to identify the scenarios in which students feel stressed or anxious while speaking English. The students mentioned a variety of scenarios and reasons, and the majority of them mentioned that there are many reasons that lead to anxiety while speaking English. Students described the following situations: forgetting or not remembering appropriate words, not being prepared in advance for speaking, incorrectly pronouncing the words, being exposed to immediate questions, speaking in front of the class, knowing the turn is coming, and not being able to make sentences. Table 1 shows the frequency of each of these circumstances.

Table 1. Situations causing anxiety for students while they are speaking English

Codes	Frequency
When I forget or cannot remember appropriate words	18
When I cannot link sentences	8
When my turn to speak is approaching	12
When I have to speak in front of the class	11
When I'm asked questions that require immediate response	15
When I'm not prepared for the topic discussed	16

Based on this finding, students taking Conversational English class stated that forgetting certain words in English is the key cause of their speaking fear. Students also listed that they feel very uncomfortable when asked immediate questions, forcing them to respond without preparation. They pointed that they need time to prepare their responses and need to familiarize themselves with the topic discussed, in order to feel more at ease and relaxed when speaking English.

Question 3: Can you identify the reasons why you feel anxious?

Based on the results of this question, it is clearly seen that the reasons for foreign language speaking anxiety mainly result from individual factors. Among these individual factors, the code “I lack vocabulary to express myself” has the highest frequency. Regarding this issue, Interviewee 6 stated that:

“We need to speak in a language that we do not use outside of classroom. I mean, it is very difficult to express myself in this language. I know many words in English, but when it comes to using them, I feel stacked. For this reason, I get anxious when I speak and I think that is quite normal.”

In addition to this, it is found out that “being afraid of making mistakes” and “lack of self-confidence” are other individual factors which are stated by students as basic reasons for speaking anxiety.

Question 4: Are you worried when you make mistakes while speaking?

The answers for this question indicated that more than half of the students were concerned about making mistakes while speaking English. Seventy percent of these students reported that they are mostly anxious about making pronunciation errors, while thirty percent are concerned about making vocabulary errors. Based on this, it may be inferred that accurately pronouncing vocabulary items in the classroom can be a source of EFL speaking anxiety for language learners. Students try to pronounce things correctly while speaking in a classroom setting, and they are aware that mispronouncing a vocabulary item is rather likely.

Question 5: Do you hesitate to speak considering the reaction of your peers on your speaking performance? Why? Why not?

The fifth question aimed to investigate whether students worried about the reactions or evaluation of their friends while speaking English. The students' answers indicated that one of the factors causing speaking anxiety is the reaction or evaluation of their classmates. The results depending on the answers of students to this question are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Students' concern related to making mistakes during speaking task

	Frequency
"Yes, I worry a lot about making mistakes"	18
"I sometimes worry about making mistakes"	8
"I do not worry about making mistakes"	2

The results demonstrated that the majority of the students' worry about the reactions of their friends, especially when they have to speak in front of others. They reported that they care what their friends do or say, are they going to tease them if they make mistakes, therefore they cannot focus on speaking and hesitate to participate in speaking tasks. The perception of students and their evaluation on student's speaking performance causes anxiety provoking situations, and this negative effect should be minimized in the classroom setting.

5. Conclusion

The present study was carried out to investigate English language SA among fourth year university students. The results revealed that among the factors that made the students feel anxious are speaking without preparation and asking immediate questions. The indicators that identified the students' anxiousness are the lack of language proficiency, fear of being teased by their peers and fear of making mistakes. The study suggest that teachers should allow their students time to prepare for speaking rather than asking them questions and waiting for an answer right away. Furthermore, teachers should have more information about their students' personal and educational backgrounds in order to provide better anxiety prevention. Students should be reminded in the classroom that making mistakes while speaking is natural, and that these mistakes should be viewed as learning opportunities. In addition, the teacher should reduce the evaluation and negative reactions of other students in the classroom in order to create a more genuine atmosphere. When students feel anxious the teachers can be of great help in assisting them to overcome it. They need to identify the anxious students, diagnose the major causes and prepare activities that will decrease their level of anxiousness. Teachers can consider designing practice-based and collaborative activities, placing students in smaller groups and creating a positive classroom environment. Speaking is a language skill that develops gradually and it requires a lot of practice. The way speaking is assessed is also another factor that prevents its development. Teachers should not concentrate on corrective feedback, but rather create opportunities where students will express themselves freely and without hesitation. Therefore, regarding teaching speaking, language teachers might consider the following suggestions:

- lower level students are more inclined to experience anxiety while speaking due to the lack of vocabulary retention.
- giving constructive feedback and designing structured assessment practices play a critical role in decreasing the level of students' speaking anxiety.
- long exposure to anxiety-generating teaching practices are considered as a disadvantage when it comes to overcoming student's speaking anxiety.

Teachers need to be aware of their mentoring role in the classroom and adjust their interaction with students and teaching practices accordingly. Teacher-oriented student anxiety can be prevented through carefully designed training sessions where teachers are encouraged to

understand and reflect on students' emotional states by implementing variety of methods that lead toward successful and productive learning.

References

- Aydin, S. (2008). 'An Investigation on Language Anxiety and Fear of Negative Evaluation Among Turkish EFL Learners', *Asian EFL Journal*, 30(1), pp. 421-444.
- Bailey, P., Onwuegbuzie, A., & Daley, C. (2000). 'Correlates Of Anxiety At Three Stages Of The Foreign Language Learning Process', *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 19(4), pp. 474-490.
- Barlow, D., (2002). *Anxiety and its Disorders: The Nature and Treatment of Anxiety and Panic*. New York: The Guilford Press
- Cowie, R., Sussman, N., & Ben-Ze'ev, A. (2011). 'Emotion: Concepts and Definitions', in:
- PDaly, J., Caughlin, J., & Stafford, L. (1997). 'Correlates and Consequences of Social Communicative Anxiety', in J. Daly., J. McCroskey., J. Ayres., T. Hopf and D. Ayres (Eds.), *Avoiding Communication: Shyness, Reticence, and Communication Apprehension* (2nd ed), pp. 21-71, Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press. Petta and R. Cowie (Eds.) *Emotion-Oriented Systems*, pp.8-31, Berlin: Springer.
- Daubney, M. (2002). *Anxiety and Inhibitive Factors in Oral Communication in the Classroom: A Study of Third Year English Language Specialist at the Catholic University in Viseu*, Universidade Católica Portuguesa, Departamento de Letras, available at <http://hdl.handle.net/10316.2/23685>, last accessed 09/06/2019.
- Gardner, R., & Lambert, W. (1972). *Attitudes and Motivation in Second Language Learning*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Golchi, M. (2012). 'Listening Anxiety and its Relationship with Listening Strategy Use and Listening Comprehension among Iranian IELTS Learners', *International Journal of English Linguistics*, 2(4), pp. 115-128.
- Horwitz, E. (2000). 'It Ain't Over' til it's Over: On Foreign Language Anxiety, First Language Deficits, and the Confounding of Variables', *The Modern Language Journal*, 84(2), pp.256-259.

- Horwitz, E. (2001). 'Language Anxiety and Achievement', *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 21, pp.112-126
- Kaplan, R., McCordick, S., & Twitchell, M. (1979). 'Is It the Cognitive or the Behavioral Component Which Makes Cognitive-Behavior Modification Effective in Test Anxiety?', *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 26(5), pp.371-377
- Khan, Z., & Zafar, S. (2010). 'The Effects of Anxiety on Cognitive Processing in English Language Learning', *English Language Teaching*, 3(2), pp.199-209
- Kim, J. (2000). 'Foreign Language Listening Anxiety: A study of Korean Students Learning English', unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, The University of Texas, Austin.
- Pekrun, R., & Linnenbink-Garcia, L. (2012). 'Academic Emotions and Student Engagement', in S. Christenson., A. Reschly and C. Wylie (Eds.) *Handbook of Research on Student Engagement* (pp. 259-282), New York, NY: Springer.
- Shang, H. (2013). 'Factors Associated with English as a Foreign Language University Students Writing Anxiety', *International Journal of English Language Teaching*, 224 1(1), pp.1-12.
- Woodrow, L. (2006). 'Anxiety and Speaking English as a Second Language', *RELC Journal*, 37(3), pp.308-328.

APPENDICES

Appendix A

Table 1. Preliminary 25-Item PSCAS

Item No	Statements adopted with minor adaptation in wordings	Opinion				
		(5) Strongly Agree	(4) Agree	(3) Undecided	(2) Disagree	(1) Strongly Disagree
1	I never feel quite sure of myself while I am speaking English.					
2	I tremble when knowing that I am going to be called on to speak English.					
3	I start to panic when I have to speak English without a preparation in advance.					
4	In a speaking class, I can get so nervous I forget things I know.					
5	I feel confident while I am speaking English.					
6	I feel very self-conscious while speaking English in front of other students.					
7	I get nervous and confused when I am speaking English.					
8	I am afraid that other students will laugh at me while I am speaking English.					
9	I get so nervous when the language teacher asks me to speak English which I have prepared in advance.					
10	I have no fear of speaking English.					
11	I can feel my heart pounding when I am going to be called on.					
12	I feel relaxed while speaking English.					
13	It embarrasses me to volunteer to go out first to speak English.					
14	I face the prospect of speaking English with confidence.					
15	I enjoy the experience of speaking English.					
16	The more speaking tests I have, the more confused I get.					
17	Certain parts of my body feel very tense and rigid while speaking English.					
18	I feel anxious while waiting to speak English.					
19	I want to speak less because I feel shy while speaking English.					
20	I dislike using my voice and body expressively while speaking English.					
21	I have trouble to coordinate my movements while speaking English.					
22	I find it hard to look the audience in my eyes while speaking English.					
23	Even if I am very well-prepared I feel anxious about speaking English.					
24	I keep thinking that other students are better at speaking English than I.					
25	I always feel that the other students speak English better than I do.					