

Communication apprehension in a foreign language: A case of Iranian EFL learners

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Abstract-This study aims at investigating the affects of foreign language anxiety on the communicative skills of listening and speaking of a sample of Iranian EFL students. Using correlation technique, the study found that anxiety negatively influence the performance of EFL learners on listening comprehension and speaking. The results have implications for a more anxiety free atmosphere of language learning to produce more autonomous learners.

Keywords: foreign language anxiety; communicative skills; correlation

1. Introduction

The present study intends to investigate the influence of foreign language anxiety on students' performance over a conversation test, including listening comprehension and speaking. Foreign language learning anxiety has proved to be a good predictor in success or failure in language learning process. Stress impairs our ability to concentrate and to organise our thoughts logically. Instead of concentrating on the task at hand, our thinking tends to be dominated by worries about consequences of our actions and by self-deprecatory thoughts. This important factor has not always been paid attention in foreign language education in Iran. Foreign language test atmospheres are often loaded with test-anxiety created by either the tester or the test.

The prevailing anxiety can stem from three possible sources; 1) the testee; here anxiety is treated as a personality trait in the testee, psychologically termed "trait anxiety", 2) the tester and/or teacher; testers/teachers can directly or indirectly arouse anxiety in both high and low anxious testees, and 3) the test; test administration and the atmosphere of test conduct could affect the degree of anxiety in the testee. It is expected that evaluation of students based on anxiety-producing tests would not be valid and successful because these tests would generate debilitating anxiety for anxious students. Therefore, it is further anticipated that this investigation will shed additional light on the evaluation process itself.

In academic environment in Iran, the situation is even worse. High school curriculum in Iran often exclude communicative aspects of English language teaching. The focus is mainly on reading. Most universities do not often offer a better curriculum except for only a few cases. Consequently, even English graduates most of whom become teachers are not as proficient in listening and speaking as in other language skills.

With respect to anxiety and language skills, listening comprehension and speaking can be more anxiety-

provoking than reading and writing, due to the immediacy of face to face communication. The amount of allotted time is critical, and can create a stressful atmosphere. For anxious students failure to comprehend an intended message may make them freeze up. In return, inability to convey their ideas in English even compound the anxiety triggered in the listening stage. The present study investigates the relationship between Iranian EFL learners' scores on a listening/speaking test and their performance on the foreign language learning anxiety measure. The study is a contribution to more effective teaching and testing of the communicative skills of listening and speaking.

2. Foreign language learning anxiety

A large body of research has demonstrated that language anxiety is the specific type of anxiety that is most closely related to the acquisition of a foreign language (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). MacIntyre and Gardner (1991: 299-302) gave support to the distinction between foreign language anxiety and other forms of anxiety proposing that students with high levels of French anxiety tended to experience more anxiety when engaged in activities specifically involving the use of French. Foreign language anxiety is a complex, multidimensional phenomenon. It can be defined as "the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language context, including speaking, listening, reading, and writing" (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994:288-290).

Anxious students are likely to experience mental block, negative self-talk and ruminate over a poor performance which affects their ability to process information in language learning contexts (MacIntyre & Gardner 1991: 87 a). In this respect, foreign language anxiety acts as an affective filter that results in the students' being unreceptive to language input. Significant number of high school and college-age foreign language students report feeling anxious about some aspects of language learning and the

language classes (Horwitz & Young 1991: 35). According to Horwitz et al. (1986: 125-128), language anxiety manifests itself when students avoid conveying complex messages in the foreign language, when they display a lack of confidence or freeze up in role play activities, and when they forget previously learned vocabulary or grammar in evaluative situations. Indeed, although language anxious students may study more than low anxious ones, their level of achievement often does not probably reflect that effort. In addition, students with high levels of foreign language anxiety often exhibit avoidance behaviors such as missing class and postponing homework (Horwitz et al., 1986).

Horwitz et al. (1986: 127) suggested that foreign language anxiety comprises three components: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Communication apprehension, the anxiety experienced in interpersonal settings, has been found to be related to both learning and recall of vocabulary items. Therefore, students with high levels of communication apprehension appear to be disadvantaged from the outset because basic vocabulary learning and production are impaired. Communication in a foreign language requires a great deal of risk-taking, inasmuch as uncertain and unknown linguistic rules prevail. Indeed, MacIntyre and Gardner (1991: 100 a) found that speaking is the most anxiety provoking of second language activities. The frustration experienced by a student unable to communicate a message can lead to apprehension about future attempts to communicate (Horwitz et al. 1986:132).

With respect to test anxiety, Daly (1991: 10) found that learners experience more language anxiety in highly evaluative situations. Indeed, the more unfamiliar and ambiguous the test tasks and formats, the higher the prevailing level of language anxiety. For high-anxious students, foreign languages, more than any academic subject, require continual evaluation by the instructor.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

The participants comprise 30 intermediate level EFL learners who had enrolled in a Conversation Course in Islamic Azad University of Abadan, Iran. The participants were major in English language Translation and were of both genders, with their age ranged from 18 to 37.

3.2 Instruments

To measure the degree to which participants feel anxious, a 30-item Likert-type foreign language class anxiety (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz et al. (1986) was adopted, modified, translated and implemented. The final exam scores of a conversation course including listening and speaking skills were used to signal the participants' achievement in the listening and speaking skills. The final exam was an oral interview with the students. Each

interview took 10 minutes and were conducted by the first researcher who was the teacher of the course.

3.3 Results and discussion

To answer the research question of the investigation, a correlational analysis was conducted on the participants' scores in the conversation final exam and FLCAS. The correlation was -.665, and was significant at the level of .000. The study went in line with much of the findings in literature, which found a reverse relationship between FLCAS and language proficiency, while extending the literature a step forward in that it found the reverse correlation between FLCAS and the oral communicative skills. The correlation amount which was obtained in this study between the students' scores in listening and speaking and FLCAS (-.665) is a good correlation, which indicates that it is more likely that Iranian students are susceptible to language anxiety.

Those students who reported lower anxiety in the FLCAS received higher scores in both listening and proficiency tests, and contrastively, those who felt tense and anxious were predicted to, and did receive lower scores. Intermediate-level students are likely to experience the most critical period of language learning in terms of anxiety. Intermediate level is a transition which acts as a bridge between elementary and advanced levels. In elementary level, students do not have sufficient experience (positive or negative) in foreign language for anxiety to play a significant role in their performance. Advanced-level students, in contrast, have already passed two stages and have passed the critical periods. They have a great deal of experience in language learning, which can help them overcome much of their anxiety.

4. Conclusion

The finding of this research suggests that foreign language anxiety plays an important psychological role for language students. It is a matter which is directly related to the students' self-confidence and self-esteem. The students' affective reactions and attitudes are likely to influence their decisions to continue studying a foreign language. Research should continue on different aspects of language learning, and if the finding is verified, foreign language teachers must pay close attention to this psychological variable to create a more effective learning environment.

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