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Causes of Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety Through the Eyes of Non-Native Language Speakers

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Abstract

Despite the fact that the globalised world of the 21st century offers numerous possibilities to non-native speakers of a foreign language to use it every day, speaking is still considered as one of the most stressful and anxiety-provoking skills by foreign language learners. The main aim of this work is to offer a closer perspective on foreign language speaking anxiety and its causes among non-native language speakers. We offer a meta-analysis of 10 studies, which especially focus on factors that affect foreign language learners so that they feel anxious when speaking a foreign language.

Keywords: Foreign language anxiety. Foreign language speaking anxiety. Speaking. Causes. Non-native language speakers. Foreign language learning.

Introduction

Thanks to globalisation and technological progress, the 21st century offers numerous possibilities for foreign language learners to practice and develop their foreign language skills. However, despite the possibilities to use it every day, speaking is still considered as one of the most stressful and anxiety-provoking skill by foreign language learners (Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope, 1986; Price, 1991).

When it comes to foreign language (FL) learning, it can be affected by several personality traits of learners, for instance, extraversion, self-esteem, risk-taking, inhibition, and anxiety (Dörnyei, 2005). In the context of foreign language teaching and learning community, one of the most researched variable is foreign language anxiety (FLA), which is also referred to as second language anxiety (SLA) by certain authors (e.g. Horwitz, 2001).

Foreign Language Anxiety

Anxiety as such can be defined as “a mental and physical state characterized by specific emotional, physical, cognitive and behavioural

symptoms” (Kráľová, 2019, p. 24). It is an adaptive reaction of the human body, which leads to its mobilisation and thus helps it to defend against, attack, or avoid the stimulus, which causes anxiety (Kráľová, 2019). Anxiety can be caused by previous external or internal triggers (Ibid.) and can be influenced by various factors, such as biological, psychological, social, etc. (Doubek and Anders, 2013). The researchers distinguish two basic types of anxieties:

- **Specific anxiety** (Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope, 1986) or **state anxiety** (Horwitz, 2001). It occurs among individuals in specific situations, for example, when they are using a foreign language. It is a temporary state, since it is a response of the human body to a certain stimulus (Spielberger, 1983).
- **General anxiety** (Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope, 1986) or **trait anxiety** (Horwitz, 2001). It occurs among individuals, who are generally anxious in various situations. This type of anxiety is a relatively stable personality trait (Scovel, 1978).

Foreign Language Anxiety

With regard to foreign language (FL) acquisition, the learners might experience foreign language anxiety (FLA), also known as second language anxiety (SLA) – which is related to their negative emotional reactions towards FL learning (Horwitz, 2001). FLA is considered a complex phenomenon, which is affected by several dimensions, such as self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours of FL learners related to FL learning (Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope, 1986).

Foreign language anxiety (FLA) has been discussed by numerous authors as the emotion, which is most often related to FL learning (Horwitz, 2010; Dewaele, 2013; Dewaele and MacIntyre, 2014, 2016; Gkonou, Daubney, and Dewaele, 2017; MacIntyre, 2017; Kráľová and Kamenická, 2019; learning English as a foreign language (EFL), Kamenická and Kráľová, 2021). FLA decreases the motivation to learn and is considered a disturbing burden, when it comes to FL learning and the learning process as such (Gardner, 1985; Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope, 1986; Gregersen and MacIntyre, 2014). Due to the fact that FLA can be caused by various factors, it can be considered **both as a stable personality trait and a temporary state**. MacIntyre and Gardner (1989) defined language anxiety as **situation-specific anxiety**, which is a result of language difficulties and unpleasant experiences – which make an anxious individual anticipate further ones. The FL learners can thus find themselves in a vicious circle. As a consequence of FLA, they can have a hard time, when it comes to processing linguistic material (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1994). This can result in disrupted language development (Dewaele, 2002, 2007, 2010) and can make FL learners unwilling to communicate using the target FL (MacIntyre, Baker, Clément,

and Donovan, 2003). Furthermore, low academic success can be another result of FLA (Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope, 1986; Aida, 1994). Moreover, since anxious people tend to try to avoid stressful situations, they postpone the tasks, which they find difficult and as a result, feel even more confused. To add, anxiety itself can become very stressful to the individual, who experiences it, too.

Kráľová (2019) discusses two types of foreign language anxiety – skills-based and systems-based. These types can be further divided into several subtypes, as addressed by various authors:

1. skills-based foreign language anxiety:

- **reading** (Oh, 1992; Saito, Horwitz, and Garza, 1999; Sellers, 2000; Argaman and Abu-Rabia, 2002),
- **listening** (Goh, 2000; Kim, 2000; Elkhafaifi, 2005; Zhai, 2015),
- **writing** (Cheng, Horwitz, and Schallert, 1999; Hilleson, 1996; Cheng, 2002),
- **speaking** (Steinberg and Horwitz, 1986; Young, 1990; Woodrow, 2006).

2. systems-based foreign language anxiety:

- **vocabulary** (Van Patten and Glass, 1999; Sheen, 2007),
- **grammar** (Van Patten and Glass, 1999; Sheen, 2007),
- **pronunciation** (Price, 1991; Phillips, 1992; Baran-Łucarz, 2011; Baran-Łucarz, 2014).

As suggested by Woodrow (2006), FLA strongly affects oral performance. Concerning the speaking skill, the more anxious the learner is, the less personal, interpretive, and shorter continuous speech he/she produces (Steinberg and Horwitz, 1986). Furthermore, the more anxious the learner is, the longer mid-clause pauses he/she produces (Djigunovic, 2006). To add, a difference in reactions in FL oral communication was reported by Gregersen and Horwitz (2002) between learners who anxiously tried to avoid mistakes during their talking and those, who were less anxious and continued talking despite the fact that they did mistakes.

Speaking in a foreign language is often sensed as threatening to individuals' self-concept, self-identity, and ego, which they have formed in their first language (Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope, 1986). Therefore, FLA can be considered as one of the factors that can affect individuals emotionally to such an extent that they perceive learning of a foreign language negatively. FLA is associated with feelings of fear, tension, and uncertainty. When it comes to language skills, several authors addressed foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA), in particular, with regard to speaking as the most stressful language skill (e.g. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope, 1986; Price, 1991; Kráľová and Malá, 2019).

Research Analysis

Since speaking is considered the most anxiety-provoking language skill, in the context of foreign language learning, we will try to answer the following question:

What are the causes of the foreign language speaking anxiety of non-native foreign language speakers?

In this part, a meta-analysis of 10 studies, which deal with non-native speakers of foreign languages will be offered.

Study 1

Authors: Karatas, H. – Alci, B. – Bademcioglu, M. – Erfin, A.

Year: 2016

Research questions:

1. Is there a significant difference between female and male students' FL speaking anxiety?
2. Is there any significant difference in students' FL speaking anxiety in terms of receiving English preparatory training?
3. Is there a significant relationship between students' FL speaking anxiety and the kind of high school they graduated from?
4. Is there a difference in students' FL speaking anxiety when it comes to their language levels?

Participants: 488 English preparatory students (320 males, 168 females) at Istanbul Technical University

Instruments: Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety Questionnaire based on a 5-point Likert scale (developed by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope, 1986 – adapted in Turkish by Saltan, 2003)

Results:

1. Female students experienced more FL speaking anxiety than males.
2. There were no significant differences between participants' FL speaking anxiety levels when it comes to the differences in English preparatory training they received.
3. There were no significant differences between participants' FL speaking anxiety levels when it comes to the differences in the high schools they graduated from.
4. Language proficiency level did not have any effects on the students' levels of FL speaking anxiety.

Study 2

Author: Luo, H.

Year: 2014

Research questions:

1. Are U.S. college-level CFL learners anxious when speaking Chinese?

2. What is the influence of background variables such as gender, proficiency level, and elective-required status on participants' CFL speaking anxiety?
3. How is CFL learners' speaking anxiety related to their perceived difficulty level of the Chinese language, self-perceived achievement, and self-perceived language learning ability?

Participants: 257 college-level learners (147 males, 110 females) who learn Chinese as a foreign language (CFL) with an age range of 15 to 59 at two large public universities in the U.S.

Instruments:

1. Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety Questionnaire based on a 5-point Likert scale (developed by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope, 1986 – adapted in Chinese by Luo, 2011)
2. Background Questionnaire – in which questions about participants' gender, age, ethnicity, year of college, proficiency level, the estimated grade they expected to get in the Chinese class, rating of their perceived FL learning ability, perception of the difficulty level of the Chinese language on a 5-point Likert scale were included

Results:

1. Participants were not highly anxious about speaking Chinese on average, but frequency analyses showed that a number of participants experienced high levels of CFL speaking anxiety.
2. CFL speaking anxiety decreased as participants' proficiency level increased.
3. Female participants were significantly more anxious in speaking Chinese than male participants.
4. CFL speaking anxiety was found to be positively correlated with a perceived difficulty level of Chinese (as participants who perceive the Chinese language to be less difficult tend to be less anxious) and negatively correlated with self-perceived language learning ability and self-perceived achievement in Chinese classes.

Study 3

Authors: Öztürk, G. – Gürbüz, N.

Year: 2012

Research questions:

1. Does the level of motivation differ among students according to their gender?
2. Do the motivational orientations of students differ according to their gender?
3. Is there a significant difference between female and male students in terms of FL speaking anxiety?

Participants: 383 students (225 females, 158 males) of the Afyon Kocatepe University in Turkey aged between 17 and 22 of various study courses – e.g.

business administration, economics, tourism management, chemistry, physics, and biology (originally 400 questionnaires, however, 17 were not included in the sample as their answers were incomplete)

Instruments:

1. adapted Turkish version of Motivation and Attitude Questionnaire based on a 5-point Likert scale (developed by Dörnyei, 1990, adapted by Mendi, 2009 – edited by authors of this study)
2. Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety Questionnaire based on a 5-point Likert scale (developed by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope, 1986 – adapted in Turkish by Saltan, 2003)
3. Interview carried out in mother language of participants (i.e. Turkish) consisting of three questions (19 randomly selected students – 10 females, 9 males):
 - Why do you want to learn English?
 - How can you define your level of motivation for learning English?
 - Do you think speaking English is an anxiety-provoking factor in the language learning process?

Results:

1. Female participants showed a higher level of FL learning motivation than male participants.
2. Female participants demonstrated significantly higher integrative motivation than male students.
3. Female participants get more anxious than the male participants when it comes to speaking EFL during classes – female participants experienced a moderate level of FL speaking anxiety, while male participants experienced a low level of FL speaking anxiety.
4. Regarding interview findings, it supported the previously obtained qualitative data and illustrated the motivational orientations of research participants:
 - Both genders are aware of the importance of learning EFL in Turkey – males argued that it leads to better opportunities for finding a job and better living standards in the future; females argued that it provides them with opportunities to communicate with foreign people, to travel to foreign countries and to learn about their cultures.
 - Concerning the level of motivation to learn EFL, it was revealed that, in general, female participants are more motivated to learn EFL than male participants. However, in several cases, a decrease in motivation was reported among females.
 - Regarding EFL speaking anxiety, it can be concluded that it is a source of anxiety for both genders during the process of learning. However, female participants get more anxious than male participants when speaking English in the class.

Study 4

Authors: Sadighi, F. – Dastpak, M.

Year: 2017

Research question: What are the main causes of EFL speaking anxiety among Iranian EFL students?

Participants: 154 EFL learners (74 females, 80 males) of English language institutes in Shiraz, aged from 18 to 30.

Instrument: a revised version of the Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety Questionnaire based on a 5-point Likert scale (developed by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope, 1986)

Results:

The most significant sources of FL speaking anxiety among participants of this study:

- fear of doing mistakes (81%)
- fear of being negatively evaluated (78%)
- limited knowledge of vocabulary (72%)
- lack of practice (65%)
- fear of being the focus of attention (62%)
- inability to find proper words to express ideas (59%)
- lack of confidence (48%)

Study 5

Authors: Yashima, T. – Noels, K. A. – Shizuka, T. – Takeuchi, O. – Yamane, S. – Yoshizawa, K.

Year: 2009

Research objectives:

1. to gain insight into Japanese learners' anxiety experience in classrooms through a closer examination of the internal structure of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scales (FLCAS)¹,
2. to replicate the self-determination continuum in Noels et al. (2000) to determine whether Deci and Ryan's self-regulation framework (self-determination theory (SDT): Deci and Ryan, 1985; Deci et al. 1991) is appropriate to examine Japanese learners' classroom-based motivation to learn English,
3. to examine the interrelations between anxiety as measured by FLCAS and intrinsic/extrinsic motivation based on the SDT framework,
4. to investigate whether there are any gender differences in levels of anxiety and motivation.

¹ Studies using FLCAS or adapted versions have assessed anxiety in various FL skills (e.g. Cheng, Horwitz, and Schallert, 1999; Elkhafaifi, 2005; Saito, Horwitz, and Garza, 1999). As reported in the mentioned studies, FL skills such as reading, writing, and listening can trigger anxiety. However, it seems that speaking is the most anxiety-provoking skill of all (Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope, 1986; Price, 1991). Therefore, FL speaking anxiety can be considered a significant part of foreign language classroom anxiety.

Participants: 182 first-year students (78 females, 103 males, 1 unknown) enrolled in EFL classes at a large private university in Japan – including students from faculties of law, economics, commerce, and letters.

Instruments:

1. A Japanese version of FLCAS (Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope, 1986) based on a 5-point Likert scale.
2. A Japanese version of the intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, amotivation subscales of the Language Learning Orientations Scale (LLOS; Noels et al., 2000). Participants were asked to respond to presented statements using a six-point scale, which was based on motivational orientations outlined in SDT (Deci and Ryan, 1985) for learning English.

Results:

1. Foreign language classroom anxiety: a factor analysis yielded five factors, while Factor 1 and Factor 2 were highly correlated but presented characteristics aspects of FL anxiety.

Factors:

- **Factor 1:** a perceived lack of competence in speaking English in comparison to other students – which was associated with a lack of confidence in speaking English
 - **Factor 2:** the physiological reaction to public speaking (e.g. trembling and higher heart rate) together with cognitive responses to stage fright (e.g. forgetting and being confused), which lead to negative affective responses (e.g. nervousness and panic)
 - **Factor 3:** the tendency to feel frightened, nervous, and upset when one does not understand everything in the class
 - **Factor 4:** the anxiety associated with feelings of helplessness combined with a negative attitude towards the English class
 - **Factor 5:** the tendency to feel comfortable in interacting with native speakers of English
2. Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in the Japanese context: Participants in this study reported more self-regulated types of motivation.
 3. Relations between anxiety and motivation: First, the tendency to feel anxious and frightened when one does not understand everything, which is said in the class by the teacher, does not link to a lack of motivation. Second, anxiety from helplessness and a negative attitude towards the English class negatively correlate with intrinsic motivation, which positively correlates with amotivation. Third, the tendency to feel comfortable in interacting with English native speakers positively correlates with intrinsic motivation.
 4. Gender differences in anxiety and motivation: Female students seem to experience higher levels of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation than male students – although they were not any more amotivated

than male students. Regarding self-regulated types of motivation, the gender difference is greater. Concerning total scores for the FLCAS, it can be reported that anxiety level did not differ much between female and male participants. However, a closer examination showed that female students did, however, have significantly higher anxiety about not understanding everything taught in class and that they were less helpless and had a more positive attitude towards the EFL classes in comparison to male participants.

Study 6

Author: Çağatay, S.

Year: 2015

Research questions:

1. Do the students in the English preparatory program experience foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA) in language classrooms? If yes, what is the level of it?
2. Is there any difference in the level of experiencing FLSA when it comes to gender?
3. Is there a significant difference in FLSA according to participants' FL proficiency levels?
4. Does FLSA differ when participants speak with a native speaker or in front of the class?

Participants: 147 EFL learners (62 females, 85 males), aged from 17 to 29, from various departments – i.e. psychology, economics, engineering, chemistry, physics, and teaching.

Instruments: Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety Questionnaire based on a 5-point Likert scale (developed by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope, 1986 – adapted in Turkish by Saltan, 2003)

Results:

1. Participants do experience moderate levels of FLSA.
2. When it comes to gender differences, a minor difference was found – as female participants reported experiencing more anxiety when speaking a FL than males.
3. No significant difference in FLSA was found when it comes to different FL proficiency levels.
4. Participants reported experiencing FLSA more when speaking to native speakers than when speaking in front of the class.

Study 7

Authors: Han, T. – Tanrıöver, A. S. – Şahan, Ö.

Year: 2016

Research questions:

1. Does the EFL teachers' L1 background have an impact on learners' attitudes towards FLSA?

2. Is there any significant difference in attitudes towards FLSA in EFL classes taught by native English speaking teachers (NEST) and non-native English speaking teachers (Non-NEST) among male and female participants?
3. What are the students' opinions towards their FLSA in EFL classes taught by NESTs and Non-NESTs?
4. What are the teachers' (both NESTs and Non-NESTs) opinions about FLSA experienced by their students in their EFL classes?

Participants: 48 participants (15 females, 33 males) of different EFL proficiency levels

Instruments:

1. The questionnaire about learners' attitudes towards FL anxiety was administered – it was adapted from Young (1990) and was administered in learners' mother language (i.e. Turkish – Bozavli and Gulmez, 2012).
2. An interview with semi-structured open-ended questions was conducted with 12 randomly selected students.

Results:

1. No significant difference between students' attitudes towards FLSA they experience in EFL classes taught by NESTs and Non-NESTs was found. However, five of interviewed students claimed they prefer lessons with a Turkish teacher.
2. No correlation between students' attitudes towards anxiety and their gender was found.
3. Regarding the interview conducted, both teachers and students agreed that peer pressure and the fear of making mistakes is the primary source of FLSA. Moreover, according to four participants, it is the teachers' attitude towards mistakes that acts as a strongly demotivating factor.
4. When it comes to preferred feedback strategies, teachers prefer self-correction and peer correction. However, learners consider peer correction as another possible source of FLSA anxiety; therefore, they prefer to be corrected by their teachers.

Study 8

Authors: Abrar, M. – Failasofah, F. – Fajaryani, N. – Masbirorotni, M.

Year: 2016

Research questions:

1. Do students of a teacher-training study programme experience FLSA? If yes, what is their FLSA level?
2. Are there any FLSA differences based on gender?
3. Are there any FLSA differences based on proficiency levels of participants?

Participants: 72 second-year Indonesian students of a teacher-training study programme of a public university in Jambi (54 females, 18 males)

Instruments: a questionnaire with 13 close-ended questions written in English, where a 5-point Likert scale was used

Results:

1. It was revealed in the questionnaire that participants experienced a high level of FLSA during the EFL speaking activities.
2. The study reported that male learners experienced more FLSA than female learners.
3. According to the differences found in questionnaire answers, proficiency level does play a significant role in determining FLSA.

Study 9

Author: Koçak, M.

Year: 2010

Research objectives:

1. to define the cause of FLSA at Anadolu University
2. to define what can be done by the teacher to help the learners with overcoming their FLSA

Participants: 20 EFL learners of the same class studying at the preparatory school of Anadolu University in Turkey

Instruments:

1. a questionnaire consisting of 5 open-ended questions
2. oral interviews consisting of 4 questions, with 8 randomly chosen participants (6 of them feel anxious when speaking EFL, 2 of them feel very comfortable)

Results:

1. Causes of FLSA: insufficient vocabulary, followed by insufficient grammar and syntax knowledge, fear of failure, lack of opportunities for practice, inability to speak despite having enough knowledge to do so, not wanting to make the teacher wait.
2. To decrease the level of learners' FLSA, the teacher implemented more speaking activities, grammar and syntax practice exercises, and vocabulary tests with common collocations. The learners reported that the implemented activities enabled them to feel more comfortable, and, as a result, this led to the FLSA decrease.

Study 10

Authors: Azarfam, A. A. Y. – Baki, R.

Year: 2012

Research questions:

1. What are the factors that cause FLSA?

2. What are the EFL teachers' and learners' perceptions of FLSA experienced by learners themselves?
3. Which strategies can be used to decrease FLSA?

Participants: 6 participants – divided into two groups: 3 college EFL students studying in Malaysia and 3 experienced EFL teachers

Instrument: in-depth semi-structured interviews with three EFL learners and with three experienced EFL teachers

Results:

1. EFL learners' experienced the following types of FLSA:
 - anxiety over inability to communicate in class,
 - anxiety over producing perfect and faultless sentences,
 - anxiety over making errors in speaking,
 - fear of being called on,
 - fear of asking questions.
2. EFL teachers' perspectives:
 - to a certain extent, FLSA can have a positive or facilitating effect on EFL learning,
 - speaking is the language skill, which causes anxiety more than any other skill, although listening provokes anxiety, too,
 - FLSA affects students in such a way that they are less responsive – which results in poor interaction,
 - teachers suggested group work, games, and lively atmosphere in the class as factors that can decrease FLSA.

Discussion

To answer the question “What are the causes of foreign language speaking anxiety of non-native foreign language speakers?”, it can be concluded that the authors of the presented studies agreed on the following causes of FLSA:

- gender – which brought most contradicting results: females are more anxious than males (study 1, 2, 3, 6); there is not much difference in anxiety among genders (study 5 and 7); males are more anxious (study 8);
- language level/proficiency – there is not much difference among different levels (study 6 and 8); anxiety decreases when proficiency increases (study 2);
- perceived difficulty level of the foreign language (study 2, 5);
- FLSA was found to be negatively correlated with self-perceived language learning ability (study 2);
- FLSA was found to be negatively correlated with self-perceived achievement in FL classes (study 2);
- fear of making mistakes and peer pressure (study 4, 7, 10);
- fear of failure and negative evaluation (study 4, 9);

- lack of vocabulary knowledge and not understanding everything said in the class (study 4, 5, 9);
- lack of practice (study 4, 9);
- fear of being the centre of attention and public speaking (study 4, 5, 10);
- inability to find proper words to express ideas (study 4, 9, 10);
- lack of confidence and helplessness (study 4, 5);
- native and non-native speakers – learners feel more comfortable with non-native foreign language speakers (study 5, 6); no significant difference in FLSA in learners when it comes to native and non-native users of FL (study 7) – but learners still prefer a teacher who has the same L1.

Despite several contradictory research findings, clear tendencies can be observed. Concerning the contradictory research data, it is important to emphasise that FLA is a complex phenomenon, which is impossible to generalise – especially due to the fact that it is a psychological phenomenon experienced by human beings, whose personality traits differ. It is strongly affected by individuals' feelings, beliefs, self-perceptions, and behaviours related to FL learning, as suggested by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986).

Conclusion

Foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA) is a common issue among non-native foreign language speakers. All of the research presented agreed on its presence, however, its possible causes varied. In some cases, the findings were even contradictory. When it comes to FLSA, the most contradicting is the role of gender. The most addressed causes are the fear of making mistakes in front of peers, fear of being the centre of attention, public speaking, inability to find proper words, and lack of vocabulary knowledge.

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