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Examining EFL students' foreign language speaking anxiety: The case at a Turkish state university

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Abstract

The present study examines EFL students' Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety (FLSA) and its possible reasons as well as some solutions to it. The participants were 147 Turkish students at the English preparatory program of a state university. A questionnaire was administered to the students from each proficiency level to explore their FLSA. The findings revealed that EFL students experience a moderate level of FLSA. Furthermore, female students seem to be highly anxious while speaking. Another striking point is that students' FLSA increases when communicating with a native speaker compared to with class members. As to the proficiency level of the students, FLSA does not seem to rest upon this aspect. This study concludes that encouraging EFL learners to participate in authentic contexts such as study abroad programs and addressing FLSA by appealing to both genders could be more contributory to language development and communicative competence of the learners.

1. Introduction

Learning a foreign language embodies cognitive as well as affective features on the part of the learners. Anxiety is one of the most frequently observed problems in relation to the affective domains in language learning process. This obstacle is mostly seen in speaking classes (Gardner &MacIntyre, 1993; Horwitz&Horwitz&Cope, 1986;Humphries, 2011; MacIntyre, 1999), where students need to process linguistic inputs and produce their thoughts at the same time (Harmer, 2004).

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These difficulties lead many researchers to look into this popular problem and try to cure it. Studies on language anxiety have mostly presented detrimental impacts on language learning performance and communicative competence (Heng&Abdullah&Yosaf, 2012; Kayaoğlu&Sağlamel, 2013; Wu&Lin (2014);Yalçın&İnceçay, 2014) and researchers have still been trying to propose new ways to minimize its effect in language classrooms.

1.1. Literature review

One of the most major barriers learners have to overcome in language classes is anxiety (Dörnyei, 2005; Ehrman, 1995; Harmer, 2004; Öztekin, 2011; Wang & Chang, 2010).). This problem usually appears once speakers assume their oral performance to be wrong, stupid or incomprehensible (Brown, 2001). Horwitz et al. (1986), being the first scholars to deal with anxiety in language learning, explore speaking anxiety in relation to foreign language anxiety which is defined as "a distinct complex of self perceptions, feelings and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (p.127). Resting upon some empirical data and background evidence, they develop a theory on language learning anxiety. This foreign language anxiety theory has three interrelated components; communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. Communication apprehension is defined by Horwitz et al. (1986) as "a type of shyness characterized by fear of or anxiety about communicating with people" (p. 127). Fear of negative evaluation means "apprehension about others' evaluation, avoidance of evaluative situations, and the expectation that others would evaluate oneself negatively" (p. 128). Finally, test anxiety includes the tests and examinations during language learning and refers to "a type of performance anxiety stemming from a fear of failure" (p. 128).

Dörnyei (2005) adds that two important anxiety distinctions are usually made in the literature: beneficial/facilitating *vs.* inhibitory/debilitating anxiety. As the names suggest, beneficial anxiety triggers action and excitement and it paves the way for success; however, debilitating one places a barrier in front of a successful performance. Scovel (1978) notes that an ordinary individual has both facilitating and debilitating anxiety at the same time. Such type of combined anxiety motivates the individual for any new phenomenon in language learning.

Pertaub, Slater, and Carter (2001) postulate that anxiety usually comes out when the speakers need to deliver a public speech or communicate with a foreigner since they have a fear of being judged or humiliated by the other people. Although people are aware that this nervousness is irrational, they cannot help feeling the anxiety, which can result in depression, distress, and frustration (Pertaub, Slater, and Carter, 2001. Horwitz et al. (1986) put forward that such an anxiety easily emerges in foreign language speaking process and might multiply when communicating with a native speaker of that language. Given this irrational fear on the part of the learners, substantial number of studies have been carried out to explore foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA).

1.2. Empirical studies on foreign language speaking anxiety

Based on Foreign Language Anxiety concept proposed by Horwitz et al. (1986), many researchers have conducted various empirical studies on foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA), which is the most commonly experienced hurdle in language classes. Some of these studies seem to be overlapping results; whereas some present quite distinctive findings in relation to the key factors of FLSA.

Öztürk (2009) investigated the level, determining factors of foreign language speaking anxiety and students' perceptions of it in a Turkish EFL context. 383preparatory program students at a state university participated in the study. The data regarding the level of EFL speaking anxiety were collected through a questionnaire, next randomly selected participants (N=19) were interviewed to collect in-depth data on speaking anxiety. The results of the quantitative data showed that students experienced a low level of EFL speaking anxiety; however, interviews suggested that most of the students perceive speaking skill as a major cause of anxiety. Pronunciation, immediate questions, fears of making mistakes and negative evaluation were also highlighted as other causes of EFL speaking anxiety. Gender also seemed to play a pivotal role in FLSA; specifically, females regard foreign language speaking as more nerve-wrecking.

The study conducted by Heng, Abdullah and Yosaf (2012) examined dimensions of language anxiety in alignment with the major sub-constructs proposed by Horwitz et al. (1986). Data for this study was obtained through a survey questionnaire administered to 700 students before an oral communication test. Findings revealed that most

of the students experienced a moderate level of oral communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. Therefore, researchers placed an emphasis on promoting beneficial/facilitating anxiety while decreasing the inhibitory one. To achieve this, they contended that teachers will make the main contributions to the decrease of FLSA.

Similar to these studies, Dalkılıç (2001) explored the relationship between students' foreign language anxiety levels and their achievement in speaking courses drawing her research on the scale *Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA)* by Horwitz et al. (1986). 126 Turkish freshman EFL learners were recruited as participants and qualitative and quantitative data were collected. The findings of the study indicated that there was a significant relationship between the students' anxiety levels and their success in speaking classes. In addition, female students were more anxious during oral communication.

Tianjian (2010) also investigated the speaking anxiety of Chinese EFL learners as well as the relationships of speaking anxiety with other domains, including trait anxiety, unwillingness to communicate, language achievement, speaking self-efficacy, language class risk-taking, and language class sociability. The findings of the study indicated that over 50% of the students reported undergoing moderate or high levels of speaking anxiety. Moreover, this affective problem did not differ significantly over gender, but differed significantly over proficiency groups. Personality factors were also found to be the primary grounds of speaking anxiety; and mutual impacts occur between language achievement and speaking anxiety.

Despite a great number of studies in literature carried out to evidence the level of EFL speaking anxiety experienced by learners in different contexts (Heng& Abdullah &Yosaf, 2012; Huang, 2004; Humphries, 2011; Mahmoodzadeh, 2012; Öztürk, 2009; Tianjian, 2010; Wu-Lin, 2014; Yalçın&İnceçay, 2014), they reported inconsistent results with respect to FLSA levels (Heng&Abdullah &Yosaf,2012; Huang, 2004; Öztürk, 2009;Saltan, 2003) and its relationship with gender (Bozavlı&Gülmez, 2012; Öztürk, 2009 Tianjian, 2010). Also, very few studies in Turkey (Balemir, 2009) have examined the relationship between proficiency level of the students and their FLSA. Lastly, whether EFL students speak with a native speaker or in front of their peers was also observed to have significant association with FLSA (Pertaub, Slater, and Carter, 2001), which has been as-yet unexplored in the context of Turkey. To this end, the present study aims to identify some potential underlying reasons for this affective barrier at an EAP context in Turkey and try to put forward practical solutions to it in line with the findings.

2. Methodology

2.1. Aim of the study

The primary aim of this study was to explore EFL students' foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA) and its relationship with students' background at tertiary level. The study was carried out in the School of Foreign Languages (SFL) Department of Basic English (DBE) at Middle East Technical University (METU), Ankara, Turkey. The study seeks answers to the following questions:

- Do the students in English preparatory program experience foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA) in language classrooms? If so, what is the level of it?
- Does the level of foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA) differ according to gender?
- Is there a significant difference in terms of FLSA among the students according to their proficiency levels?
- Do EFL students' FLSA differ depending on whether students speak with a native speaker or in front of class?

2.2. Participants and setting

The participants in the study were 147 EFL students studying at DBE in academic year 2014-2015. The number of female participants was 62 while the number of male participants was 85. The ages of the participants range from

17 to 29. Although they were all learning English in the preparatory program of the university, the students were from different departments such as psychology, economics, engineering, chemistry, physics and teaching.

The DBE aims to enable the students, whose level of English is below the proficiency level, to acquire basic language skills so that they can pursue their undergraduate studies at the university without major difficulty. To achieve this aim, the department runs a two-semester intensive program putting emphasis on reading, writing, listening and speaking in an integrative way. Students are placed in four groups according to their levels of English: upper-intermediate, elementary, intermediate or beginner. At these different levels, speaking is tested indirectly in midterm exams or pop-quizzes, but not directly in a test context. As for speaking, specific class hours are not allotted since instructors teach macro skills in an integrative program. Students are allowed to speak as much as they can in class hours.

2.3. Data collection instruments

The instrument of this study is mainly an EFL speaking anxiety scale. This questionnaire was adapted from Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986). Foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA) questionnaire was designed by choosing 18 items from 33 items of FLCAS. These items were also used by Saltan (2003) and Öztürk (2009) and found to be directly related to foreign language speaking anxiety. The *Cronbach's Alpha* for these items was found as .93, suggesting very good internal consistency reliability for the scale.

In the present study, the items in the survey were used to reveal whether students experience speaking anxiety and the degree of it at METU. The questionnaire has two parts. The first part of the questionnaire includes information about the participants' demographic background and their exposure to English. The second part, consisting of 18 Likert-scale items, is mainly about the students' foreign language speaking anxiety.

For these questions in this part, the students circled the options from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) in order to show their degree of agreement with the statements. In order to prevent any potential language barriers from disrupting the implementation of the questionnaire, it was given to the students in Turkish.

2.4. Data collection procedure

After examining the instrument with a professor and a PhD candidate in the ELT department at Hacettepe University, the researcher firstly administered the questionnaire to155 students at Middle East Technical University,Department of Basic English (DBE) in the fall term of 2014-2015 academic year. The instrument was distributed to the students with the help of the colleagues of the researcher. Each instructor administered the questionnaires in his/her class after being informed by the researcher about the important points regarding the study and questionnaires.

To collect quantitative data through student questionnaires, cluster random sampling was used to select the classes that the questionnaires were administered to. To put it in another way, as there are four proficiency level groups, two classes were chosen from each level as participants.

2.5. Data analysis

After conducting the normality test, seven students were excluded from the analysis because of their missing data or being outliers. The data were analyzed through descriptive and inferential statistics. The researcher used descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations…) to show the level of speaking anxiety among the students. In addition to this, inferential statistics were employed to find out if any significant differences or correlations existed among variables or groups.

3. Findings

3.1. Analysis of the first research question

To measure the level of speaking anxiety, a questionnaire having 18 items was used. Since the questionnaire is a 5-graded Likert scale, the total score ranged from 18 to 90. First, total scores for each student's FLSA were calculated. A total score more than 60 demonstrated a high level of speaking anxiety; a total score ranged from 31 to 60 presented a moderate level of speaking anxiety, and participants who had a total score less than 30 showed a low level of foreign language speaking anxiety.

To determine the level of foreign language speaking anxiety of the participants, the mean scores for all participants' total anxiety scores were calculated. The results presented in Table 1 reveal that the students at METU-DBE students experience a moderate level of foreign language speaking anxiety (M=43.95; SD =14.09).

Table 1.The level of foreign language speaking anxiety

The level of FLSA	N	Mean	SD
	147	43.95	14,09

In addition to this, foreign language speaking anxiety level of students, the frequencies and percentages of low, moderate and high speaking anxiety levels were computed through descriptive statistics. The results of this analysis demonstrated that 69.4 %of the students, which is more than a half, experience a moderate level of FLSA. It is also seen that 15.6% of the participants demonstrate a low level of FLSA while 15 % of students experience it at a high level.

Table 2.Percentages and frequencies of participants' foreign language speaking anxiety

FLSA Levels	Frequency	Percent
High	22	15
Moderate	102	69.4
Low	23	15.6
Total	147	

3.2. Analysis of the second research question

In order to explore if the female and male METU-DBE students differ from each other in terms of their foreign language speaking anxiety, an independent samples t-test was conducted. The results indicated a statistically significant difference between female students' (*M* = 47.18, *SD* = 14.76) and male students' (*M* = 41.6, *SD* = 13.18), *t*(145)= 5.577, *p* = .017, *d* = 0.4 overall scores with a moderate effect size. The finding implies that female students at DBE/METU seem to be more anxious in terms of foreign language speaking anxiety. The results are illustrated in Table 3:

Table 3.Gender difference for FLSA

	Gender	N	M	SD	MD	t	Df	p	d
Gender Difference for FLSA									
	Female	62	47.18	14.76					

Male	85	41.6		5.57	2.407	145	.017*	0.4
			13.18					
Total	147							

3.3. Analysis of the third research question

A one-way between-groups analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to explore the impact of the proficiency level on FLSA score in the questionnaire. Subjects were divided into four groups according to their proficiency level (1=beginner; 2= elementary; 3=intermediate; 4: upper-intermediate). According to the results of ANOVA, there was not a statistically significant (p=.654) difference at the p< .05 level in FLSA scores for beginner students (*N*=38; *M*=44.42; *SD*= 13.21), elementary students (*N*= 34; *M*= 46.29; *SD*=14.86),intermediate students (*N*= 37, *M*=42.92; *SD*= 12.59) and upper-intermediate students (*N*= 38, *M*=42.39; *SD*=15.79) , F(3, 143)= .542, p=.654. FLSA does not seem to depend on the proficiency level of the students. The results are presented in Table 4:

Table 4.FLSA across proficiency level groups

FLSA across proficiency level groups	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	p
Between Groups	326.509	3	108.836		
Within Groups	28696.158	143	200.672	.542	.654
Total	29022.667	146	108.836		

3.4. Analysis of the fourth research question

In order to explore whether there is a difference between speaking with a native speaker or in front of the class in English on the part of the students, a paired samples t-test was performed. As illustrated in the table, there was a statistically significant difference (p=.000) between speaking with a native speaker (*M* = 2.86 *SD* = 1.24) and speaking in front of the class (*M* = 2.38, *SD* = 1.16), *t*(146) = 4.478, *p* <.001. The effect size (*d*= .03) indicated a small effect size. Considering these numbers, the students seem to be more anxious when speaking with a native speaker compared to speaking in front of their peers. The results are presented below:

Table 5.The FLSA Difference between speaking with a native speaker or in front of other students

Native vs Class	N	M	SD	MD	T	df	p	d
Speak with a Native Speaker	147	2.86	1.24		4.478	146	.000*	
				,476				.03

Speak In	147		
front of			
Other Students		2.38	1.16

4. Discussion

The results of the first research question revealed that EFL students undergo a moderate level of FLSA. This result is in line with most of the previous studies Balemir (2009) and Heng&Abdullah &Yosaf (2012), Saltan(2003), Tianjian (2010)in that even the moderate level of this anxiety is alarming and needs to be dealt with care. This level might seem acceptable at first glance; however, this affective problem could discourage students from expressing their thoughts in English, affect their willingness to communicate (Wu&Lin, 2014) and hinder the development of communicative competence in the long run.

The second question as to the gender difference on FLSA presents that female students seem to be highly anxious when speaking. Such a gender difference seems to be parallel with the previous studies, but still gender influence on FLSA is a thorny issue. To illustrate, Heng, Abdullah and Yosaf (2012), Saltan (2003) and Tianjian (2010) refer to no difference in terms of gender. This might stem from the teachers' attitude towards the students. However, in order to analyze it in a deeper way, qualitative data could shed more light onto the issue. On the other hand, when significant difference with respect to gender was found in empirical studies, mostly females seem to be more anxious (Bozavlı&Gülmez, 2012; Dalkılıç, 2001; Huang, 2004;Öztürk, 2009). This hesitation to speak or the anxiety level on the part of the females might derive from the cultural background of Turkish society, meaning that they cannot express themselves confidently in a social context compared to males or males might have more facilitating anxiety (Dörnyei,2005).

The third question's results pinpoints that proficiency level of the students does not impact students' anxiety level. This result is contradictory to such previous studies as Tianjian (2010) in the sense that lower level students seem to be more anxious. However, the present study is in accordance with the results of Balemir (2009), meaning that level of the students is not a significant factor on FLSA. This might result from the fact that students are not tested directly on speaking at all levels of the department.

The last finding points out that speaking with a native speaker makes a difference compared to speaking in front of a class. Speaking with a native speaker appears to pose more threat on the part of the speakers, therby leading them to more hesitation when the foreign language learners need to communicate with them. This result is in congruent with some of the previous studies such as Heng&Abdullah &Yosaf (2012) and Woodraw (2006). There reason for this finding could be the fact that students do not have the opportunity to come across a native speaker to have a meaningful as well as authentic conversation. Such a lacking might result in more fear of negative evaluation (Horwitz et al., 1986) compared to interacting with peers or speaking in front of them. The learners might think that native speakers of English are more critical of their interlanguage and they might view the native speakers as perfect and ideal users of English.

5. Conclusion

This study investigated foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA) and its possible relationship with the participants' background. The results revealed that METU preparatory program students experience moderate level of FLSA, which paves a path for practitioners to guide and break down this affective barrier for communicative competence. Specifically, they could set project work where students can feel relaxed as they could get prepared beforehand and they can speak in real-life like situations. Teachers might also use indirect praises such as nodding in the classroom not to distract them much with the direct appreciation (Mahmoodzadeh, 2012). It is also of great importance that teachers need to create atmospheres where s/he can scaffold students towards their oral competence. This could be achieved through attaching more importance to improving pragmatic knowledge as well as

communicative competence of the students in all classes, not just in speaking sessions. This might also enable students to interact with the native speakers much more easily.

Another striking finding of the present study is that female students are more anxious than male students while speaking English. To address this problem, as Tianjian (2010) puts forward, teachers might deal with the interlanguage of each gender and try to examine the reason for language barriers for both parties. In such a way, they can set relevant tasks in which female students could feel the urge to speak as much as males do since students usually speak without fear once they feel so involved and motivated for a topic.

The final prominent result is that students feel more anxious when speaking with a native speaker rather than their peers. To help out students to overcome this feeling, they can be encouraged to take part in authentic conversations with native speakers in more informal contexts such as chat blogs, social networking or they could participate in exchange programs where they can conduct real projects and make meaningful conversations.

In the light of the results of this study, teachers need to employ different strategies appealing to each gender to decrease their anxiety levels. They also need to provide opportunities for students to communicate with native speakers as well as other non-native speakers of English so that they can get used to real oral interaction and in such a vein, teachers could raise awareness of the concepts of intercultural communicative competence and English as a lingua franca. All in all, FLSA needs to be dealt with great care to be able to contribute to students' competence at all levels to a great extent.

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