# THE EFFECT OF ANXIETY ON IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS SPEAKING SKILL

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**ABSTRACT:** *Speaking skill is necessary for everyone who wants to learn second / foreign languages. Feelings of anxiety and nervousness are common among second/foreign language learners. Different learners with different level of anxiety use different strategies while speaking a foreign language. Existence of such feelings in the learners may prevent them from achieving the desired goal. Some speak in front of others without any anxiety, but some delay this activity until learn enough knowledge, and some delay it forever and never speak a foreign language. The aim of present study is to investigate the relationship between anxiety and English speaking skill among Iranian EFL learners. To achieve this aim 100 of EFL learners who learn English in language learning institutions in Ilam province are investigated. The instrument used in this study to measure student's foreign language speaking anxiety is the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz (1986), and the results of speaking grades which are qualitative data from the interview with learners is used as another kind of questionnaire to measure learners speaking. To analyze the scores SPSS software was used. The results show that English learning anxiety has a significant moderate negative correlation with the English achievement of the students in this study, the participants of this study as EFL learners usually have levels of anxiety, and the higher the FLCAS score is, the low English speaking is, so by reducing the level of anxiety of learners English speaking can be improved.*

**KEYWORDS:** Anxiety, Speaking Skill, Proficiency, EFL Learner.

## INTRODUCTION

Communication skills are important tools in our lives, and are essential for the development, maintenance, and transmission of culture from one generation to the next. The main goals of English teaching are to develop learners' basic communication abilities and their interest in learning English. In every English teaching institution, four language skills of listening, reading, speaking and writing are taught. Learners are expected to be able to speak English in class and out of the class in social situations. Nothing can be achieved without effectively communicating with others. All human interactions are a form of communication. Learning second Language does not occur in isolation; it occurs in a situational and social context and is used to express social and functional meanings. Speaker uses his linguistic competence and communicative competence for successful communication (Gu Yueguo, 1998, p.49).

Oral language is an important component of language development, especially in the area of ESL (Cummins, 1994). It is common thought among learners that speaking is harder than other skills of learning English and it may be more important than other skills. Levelt(1993) state that, talking is one of dearest occupations, people spend hours a day conversing, telling stories, teaching, quarreling … and, of course, speaking to other people. Speaking is, moreover, one of

the most complex cognitive, linguistic and motor skills. It is used in spontaneous communication, in giving and getting information, for teaching and learning orally.

In order to be a good speaker, one needs to have enough knowledge about subject matter, the purpose for which he wants to speak and communicate, information about context in which he speak. The concept; speak foreign language is an activity that needs more knowledge, more thinking, interaction with other people is sometimes concern with shyness among learners of EFL. Speaking in the foreign language is an anxiety-producing experience for most of the students (Young 1990). A focus on speech events allows us to consider the ways in which speech activity is embedded in situations. Emphasis on oral aspects of language means that students have to learn to understand what others speak and try to speak out what they want to express in a foreign language class.

Importance of language as interaction between humans known as input and interaction has been investigated by researchers and the ways people make their conversations, has been used as a way to collect data for their studies. When language is seen as a cognitive and cultural artifact, something that humans have because of living with and through language, from this perspective, language competence is synonymous with language use and language acquisition is both influenced by and influences the contexts of its use (Goodwin, 1995). An approach to understanding learning as participation will focus on the visible, social and situated way that participants working together make meaning or learn and on how learners learn to participate in interactions in ways that succeed over a broad range of situations (Greeno, 1997).

Language learning researchers have been interested in understanding language learning and assessing competence by examining learners' ability to use the language being learned for social practices, often, in real-world contexts. From this perspective, a learner's goal or target for study might be considered some degree of interactional rather than purely grammatical competence (Cekaite, 2007; Cicourel, 1974; Hall, 1993, 1995; Hellermann, 2006; Kanagy, 1999; Kramsch, 1986; Markee, 2000; Young, 1999, 2000, 2002; Young & Miller, 2004). The ability to speak fluently presupposes not only knowledge of language features, but also the ability to process information and language (Harmer, 2001).

Speaking in a second language needs the development of a particular type of communication skill. Oral language, because of its circumstances of production, tends to differ from written language in its typical grammatical, lexical and discourse patterns. Teachers of English may experience the same situation in which the students are unwilling to speak. There are, of course, many factors causing this problem. Students may feel lack of confidence to speak as the result of not knowing what to say. Some others may state that they are short of words to say in conversation. The rest might tell the teacher that the topic of the conversation is not interesting.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Language Anxiety Studies in General

In the past two decades, there has been a great deal of research in language anxiety. It is defined as a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to using a language for communication beyond the classroom. Most people have experienced language anxiety. Even if anxiety might not be the most important reason for failure or success in learning, we cannot ignore its affection. It cannot be denied that learning a language is

important especially English language, since it is the most widespread and important language in the present world.

Different scholars looked at anxiety in different ways. The findings of Marwan (2007) on Indonesian students' foreign language anxiety, shows that most of the learners experienced a certain degree of anxiety in their language learning. Factors like lack of confidence, lack of preparation and fear of failing the class were the primary causes of anxiety. According to Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986), foreign language education is a process, which involves learners' self- perceptions, beliefs, and behaviors particular to environments of foreign language learning. People who do not have difficulty to expressing themselves and comprehending others in their native language have difficulty doing the same in a foreign language, and they perceive all kinds of acts to show in a foreign language as a threat to their self-perception.

To determine the relationship between various socio-psychological variables like attitude, motivation, anxiety and instrumental orientation on performance in English as a second language a research was conducted by Latif, et al (2011). Its results indicate that all of the four variables were significantly correlated with learners' performance in the English course. It showed that anxiety has a negative impact while attitude and instrumental orientation have positive impacts on performance. Other researchers have different opinions about anxiety, and tried to find affective factors of anxiety and ways to remove the negative anxiety and to improve the speaking skill which is an important skill in language. Zhang (2001) and Hilleson (1996) have stated that when students perform activities that require productive skills, they experience considerable amount of anxiety.

Koch and Terrell (1991) found that even within classes using the Natural Approach – a language teaching method specifically designed to reduce learners' anxiety – learners were more comfortable participating in some activities, such as pair-work and personalized discussions, than others. In almost all cases, any task that was judged "comfortable" by some language learners was also judged "stressful" by others. They conducted a detailed analysis of learners' emotional reactions to specific types of classroom activities and instructional techniques. Their participants rated oral presentations, skits, and role playing as the most anxiety-producing. Koch and Terrell concluded: "Consequently, activities and instructional techniques should not be thought of as intrinsically 'good' or 'bad' but rather 'useful' or 'not recommended' for certain students at particular levels of language.

**Foreign Language Anxiety and EFL Learning Skills**

Some studies investigated the relationship between anxiety and other skills of English language. Writing anxiety occurs because of language complexity in general and complexity of writing as a skill in particular (Bruning & Horn, 2000; Schweiker-Marra & Marra, 2000). For investigating anxiety in writing, Selma Kara in a study asked the participants to write at least two paragraphs explaining and describing their attitudes and state their reasons of failure and the reasons of anxiety in writing courses. The student paragraphs were analyzed and their reasons were itemized and a Likert-type response format was adopted. The four factors corresponded to the writing itself and writing course, writing skill, teacher and course book. The results of the study are categorized into four. These are reasons related to how learners feel towards writing activity, writing as a skill, teacher and course book. Those learners who were asked to write paragraphs and those who answered the writing anxiety reasons scale claimed that they have writing anxiety and may fail because they do not have writing habit and they

occasionally wrote in their previous experience and they are not used to writing and express themselves in writing because in their previous education they were familiar taking tests. Learners thought that they lack necessary strategies like organizing ideas, gathering information, combining ideas. Moreover, they thought that their English is not enough to express themselves clearly.

Cheng, Horwitz and Schallert (1999) looked at the relationship between language anxiety and writing. They found that second language writing anxiety, as operationalized by the SLWAT (Daly-Miller Writing Apprehension Test), appears to be a language-skill-specific anxiety because it not only had a higher correlation with writing achievement but also had significant predictive ability in this aspect only. They suggested, therefore, that the anxiety generally associated with language classes and writing anxiety were clearly distinguishable. Kim (2002) found that writing performance anxiety was due to finding the right vocabulary and lack of confidence in meeting the instructor's expectations. The results of a study which investigated the possible relationships between foreign language writing anxiety, gender, year of writing experience, writing self-efficacy, and actual writing by Hui-Fang Shang (2013) in Taiwan, showed that students generally appear to be anxious when writing in English; anxiety is quite pervasive in EFL writing classrooms no matter how many years students have learned English writing in the past. Male students who feel more anxious score higher on the writing test than female students. Low anxious students self-estimate to have higher writing efficacy and actual writing competence than high apprehensive students.

Gregersen and Horwitz (2002) looked at the relationship between foreign language anxiety and perfectionism. They found that anxious language learners and perfectionists may have a number of characteristics in common (e.g., higher standards for their English performance, a greater tendency toward procrastination, more worry over the opinions of others, and a higher level of concern over their errors) and that these characteristics have the potential for making language learning unpleasant as well as less successful for them than for other students.

Price (1991) interviewed highly-anxious students to gain insight into the subjective experience of language anxiety. One of the interviewees stated: "I'd rather be in prison camp than speak a foreign language." In general, the interviews were consistent with the foreign language anxiety construct identified by Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986). The participants spoke about their test anxiety, communication apprehension, and fear of negative evaluation. All of them identified speaking the target language to be the greatest source of anxiety.

**Studies in Iran**

Formal instruction of EFL in Iranian educational system starts from the first year of junior high school (Papi & Abdollahzade, in press). Dominant method of EFL teaching in Iran is emphasis on learning new lists of vocabulary, explicit teaching of grammar, and reading and translating the texts followed by doing some drills and exercises.

In a study by Khodadady,E., and Khajavy, GH, (2012) which investigate the Role of Anxiety and Motivation in Foreign Language Achievement, the relationship between language anxiety and motivation and foreign language achievement model based on language learning anxiety and motivation was examined among Iranian EFL learners The results of the study showed that a motivation and less self-determined types of external motivation are positively related to language anxiety. Also, intrinsic motivation and identified regulation were negatively related to language anxiety. The application of the structural equation modeling showed that both

anxiety and motivation significantly predict the English achievement of the language learners within an Iranian context.

To investigate the impact of interactional feedback on Iranian EFL learners" anxiety in grammar learning, a study was conducted by Salehi, Z, Jahandar, Sh, and Khodabandehlou,M,.(2013). The results computed and analyzed, and it was explored that interactional feedback had a significant effect on Iranian EFL learners" anxiety regarding grammar learning. In an attempt to investigate the issue of affective variables related to language learning, a study by Mahmoodzadeh, M (2012) focuses on the influence of gender on learners' foreign language anxiety in the Iranian context.  Findings indicated that mixed-gender classrooms can be considered as an anxiety-provoking teaching context in Iran, since the presence of the opposite gender in EFL classrooms was found to cause statistically significant amount of language anxiety among Iranian learners.

## The Main Questions

We live in an educational world where orality is seen as a necessary, positive personal characteristic (Daly, 1991). In most EFL contexts, where students of English have few chances to contact foreigners, anxiety happens to the learners. This study examines the anxiety level of Iranian   learners and probes the possible relationship between anxiety and ESL learning. This study attempts to answer the following questions:

1-What levels of anxiety are present among Iranian foreign language learners?

2-Is there any relationship between foreign language learning and learners anxiety?

3-What is the effect of anxiety on Iranian EFL learners speaking?

## METHODOLOGY

### Procedures

### Data

The overall design of this study is survey. Survey is an attempt to obtain data from members of a population to determine the current status of that population with respect to one or some other variables. You can easily gather data from large samples of participants. A questionnaire is one basic way to collect data from a sample. In this study the researcher administered the questionnaire to a sample of 100 English learners in Ilam province, at the English teaching institutes. The Persian translation of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), for gathering data about anxiety level among learners was used, and the results of final speaking grades of learners was used as another kind of questionnaire to measure learners speaking. The purpose of administering these questionnaires was to determine students level of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), and its relationships with the participants English speaking. Finally for the analysis of the data, the statistical software (SPSS) was used.

The English teaching institutes were chosen because first, they are equipped with many facilities, such as language labs and spacious classrooms for teaching English, there is opportunity for practice listening and speaking in classrooms with teachers and other students. The population of the private institutions classes is not dense and every learner has enough time for practice English language skills. It was expected that such facilities would enable the

participants for doing communicative activities better than other schools, and second unfortunately speaking skill among students in schools does not take enough attention by instructors and teachers, so learning English is at the primary levels of English, and by finishing high school, students can say only some simple sentences, so it is make difficult to research in schools.

**Participants**

Considering the main focus of this research is the observation of speaking anxiety experienced by EFL learners in the English language teaching classes, A total number of 100 male and female learners were participated in this study (39 male and 61 female). They were all EFL learners from private ILam English teaching institutes. "Private institutes" is used to emphasize that, these participants are motivated to learn English and pay money to learn English language, and come to this classes for defined purpose. They were selected randomly from learners in some institutes. Their ages ranged from 12(only one extremely exceptional student) to 35 years old.

**Table 3.1 Age Distribution of the Participants**

| category | Mean | median | Range | mode | High limit | Low limit |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Participants age | 16/18 | 14 | 23 | 14 | 35 | 12 |

The number of female participants is more than male participants, and it is totally randomly and without bias. Also this does not mean that the English female learners are more than male learners and they are more interested to learn English, it needs more research, we don't any attention to it in this research.

**Instruments**

In this study, three instruments were used with the purpose of collecting quantitative and qualitative data. The first instrument was an English final achievement exam which was administered at the end of the semester by the institutions to gather students English speaking grades, these grades are qualitative numbers which are collected by interview with students. The next instrument was Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), developed by Horwitz (1986). The Persian version of the FLCAS was translated and used among participants. The other instrument is a background questionnaire Test

The FLCAS has been the best known FL classroom anxiety scale to measure the level of general FL anxiety with a strong speaking anxiety element. Because of its good metric characteristics shown in previous studies, we decided that this widely used scale was also appropriate in the context of our study.  The FLCAS is a 33- item, self-report measuring instrument, which was scored on a five-point Likert Scale. The five points ranged from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree", and was developed to capture the specific essence of foreign language anxiety in a classroom setting, and to provide investigators with a standard measure (von Worde, 2003). With possible scores ranging from 33 to 165, (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = agree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = disagree, 5 = strongly agree and sum of the answers will show the participant score), according to the FLCAS there are three levels of anxiety among learners: Less than 76 points – low anxiety, 76-119 points – moderate anxiety, and More than 119 points – high anxiety.

## Background Information

The background questionnaire aimed to gather the respondents' demographic information about participants of this study such as name, gender, age, education level. In the present study gender is one of the effective variables.

## Performance in English

All the participants' scores in the course final exam taken in the last week of the term were collected as their performance in English. Performance means actual use of English language speaking, particularly in social situations.

## Materials

The books used for teaching the EFL in the institute where data were collected are Interchange series written by Richards, Hull and Proctor (2005). These books are used to teach all four skills of English language in English teaching institutions and learners are engaging in language learning completely, but because of limitations of this study, the researcher just investigate anxiety in speaking among participants.

## Data Analysis

After the researcher distributed the translated Farsi version of the FLCAS questionnaires to the participants and they answered the questions. The questionnaires and the final English speaking grades of the students were collected for data analysis using the SPSS software version 16. The descriptive data consisting of the mean, the standard deviations and the standard error of means was found to gain the test anxiety level. To find any significant differences between the anxiety levels of the EFL learners at language institutes, and to find any relationships between the speaking scores and the test anxiety level, a Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient and significant levels were computed.

## RESULTS

### What Levels of Anxiety are Present Among Iranian Foreign Language Learners?

Descriptive Statistics

|  | N | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| stress | 100 | 50.00 | 119.00 | 81.2400 | 14.65642 |
| Valid N (list wise) | 100 |  |  |  |  |

**Table 4.1 Distribution of participants stress**

| Variable | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Low stress | 42 | %42 |
| Moderate stress | 58 | %58 |
| High stress | 0 | 0 |
| Total | 100 | %100 |

The results showed that the minimum score of the overall language learning anxiety was 50, and the maximum was 119, and the median was 81.24. The obtained results were divided into

three levels; according to normal distribution assumptions, students whose scale according to the FLCAS there are three levels of anxiety among learners:

Less than 76 points indicate low anxiety, 76-119 points indicate moderate anxiety, and more than 119 points shows high anxiety. Moreover, the results showed that there were no points more than 119, so, in this research there were not high anxiety among participants, but more than half of the participants felt moderate stress, and other participants felt low anxiety while learning the English language. Therefore, the first null hypothesis which stated that there are no levels of anxiety among Iranian EFL learners was rejected.

**Is there any relationship between foreign language learning and learners anxiety?**

**Table 4.2 Descriptive Statistics of participants stress and speaking**

|  | Mean | Std. Deviation | N |
|---|---|---|---|
| stress | 81.2400 | 14.65642 | 100 |
| speak | 91.5200 | 7.09884 | 100 |

**Table 4.3. The correlation between FLCAS scores and final English exam scores**

|  |  | **stress** | **speak** |
|---|---|---|---|
| stress | Pearson Correlation | 1 | -.175 |
|  | Sig. (2-tailed) |  | .082 |
|  | N | 100 | 100 |
| speak | Pearson Correlation | -.175 | 1 |
|  | Sig. (2-tailed) | .082 |  |
|  | N | 100 | 100 |

To find the relationship between English language learning anxiety and English learning, Pearson Product Moment Correlation was used based on the English language anxiety scores obtained from the FLCAS and the final standardized English exam of the participants. The results are shown in Table 4.2 and 4.3. As can be seen from Tables, the total FLCAS scores had a significantly moderate negative correlation (r=-.175, p<.01) with the total final English exam scores of the participants. According to Cohan and Holliday's (1982) , correlation coefficients under .19 are very low, from .20 to .39 are low, from .40 to .69 are modest, from .70 to .89 are high, and from .9 to 1.00 are very high. It meant that the respondents with lower English language learning anxiety were likely to achieve higher scores on the final English exam, and students with higher English language learning anxiety tend to obtain lower scores on the final English exam. Therefore, the second null hypothesis which stated that there is no relationship between foreign language learning and learners anxiety was rejected.

**What is the effect of anxiety on Iranian EFL learners speaking?**

**Table 4.2 Relationship between stress and speaking skill**

| Hypothesis | N | Pearsons coeficient | Significant (sig) |
|---|---|---|---|
| The relationship between stress and speaking | 100 | *-%223 | %02 |

In order to answer this question, when data was collected, a significant negative relationship was found between second language speaking anxiety and oral performance. As it is shown in table 4.2 there is a significant relationship between stress of the participants and their speaking skill. According to pearsons coefficient (-%223) there is level of significance %2 between stress and speaking skill. This significant relationship is 95 percent and the error coefficient is 5 percent. The negative correlation between anxiety and learners' oral performance shows that the higher the students' level of anxiety, the lower their oral performance scores are. It means that in this study those learners who have moderate stress will not a good language learners and they will not very successful in speaking skill, while the learners who have low stress are more successful language learners. The results show that English learning anxiety has a significant moderate negative correlation with the English learning of the students in this study. Therefore, the third null hypothesis which stated that the anxiety has no effect on Iranian EFL learners speaking skill was rejected.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of the present research are likely to support other studies, by asserting that foreign language anxiety is a common debilitating feeling which affects students in a variety of ways, particularly during speaking activities: First, the participants of this study as EFL learners usually have levels of anxiety. The results show that English learning anxiety has a significant moderate negative correlation with the English achievement of the students in this study. Therefore, it can be concluded that anxiety plays a debilitative role in language learning. The persistence of the problem, in spite of being addressed by a large body of research, suggests that the issue of language anxiety still needs to be researched in more detail regarding its nature, causes, impact and treatment.

The findings indicate that the higher the FLCAS score, the more anxious the respondent reportedly felt; In understanding the relationship between anxiety and speaking in English language learning, it is important to distinguish the role of anxiety in language learning from its role in language performance. Research has shown that the effects of anxiety can adversely affect a person's ability to acquire a second language, particularly speaking. Woodrow (2006) found that anxiety can adversely affect oral communication for students speaking English, while MacItyre and Gardner (1989) concluded that anxiety leads to deficits in learning and performance. The level of anxiety decreases at high speaking grades and the students who have higher scores are less anxious than the ones who have lower marks

## CONCLUSION

Although this research has provided a valuable insight into language anxiety from both statistical and descriptive aspects, the methods employed were implemented in previous studies and were used in an attempt to better understand the phenomenon of how anxiety affects the acquisition of a second language, the phenomenon, because of its complicated nature, requires further exploration from a variety of perspectives and approaches. This study, conducted through individual and the results of participants speaking final grades, was an attempt to apprehend the true nature of the phenomenon from a different perspective. The findings show that most learners have experienced a certain degree of anxiety in their EFL learning. Factors like lack of confidence, lack of preparation and fear of failing the class have become the

primary causes of their anxiety. All these negative factors can influence their effort to learn English and may consequently inhibit their learning, and therefore cause them to do poorly on their English achievement. Anxiety causes physical and psychological problems, affects motivation, concentration and achievement negatively, increases errors in learning process, prevents to transfer their real performance and studying efficiently and decreases the interest towards language learning. High levels of anxiety can discourage students from participating in classroom activities or studying at home, and may even cause them to lose their self-confidence and motivation for learning English. Anxiety is still proven to be a major factor affecting foreign language learning.

The most anxiety provoking skill in EFL is speaking skill. Almost all participants of the research acknowledged that people feel anxious and nervous while speaking English in front of others. Some EFL learners even expressed that they feel 'stupid' when they cannot speak English well. Every factor or situation that creates possibilities or enhances the chances to speak in front of others is likely to cause language anxiety for EFL learners. This situation could be either classroom interaction with other students, or giving a short talk in any public situation. However, learning ways to provide EFL students the time to speak in the classroom need to be considered as viable practices in the context of peer and adult support.

Students can experience strong emotive reactions such as nervousness and confusion, trembling, and panic when speaking. What seems to distinguish speaking is the public nature of the skill; this poses a threat to peoples' self-concept, self-identity, and ego, which they have formed in their first language as reasonable and intelligent individuals (Horwitz et al., 1986).

Learners have many problems and difficulties in learning English language, like grammar, pronunciation, English word-class system, etc., which were commonly thought to impede the fluency of the EFL learners and hence, were perceived to be major obstacles in achieving the desired performance goals in English language. When learners' processes of using an English speaking are not regularized due to lack of practice, either in the classroom or in the society, these difficulties are cause trouble for the EFL learners.

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