



Gender Differences in Anxiety and Speaking English as a Second language among Iranian English Major Students of Payame Noor University

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ABSTRACT

Despite the fact that foreign language speaking anxiety is a common phenomenon in the teaching of English as a foreign language in Iran, this study aims to investigate anxiety of speaking English as a second language among Iranian male and female English major students of Payame Noor University. The study was conducted on a sample of 150 male and female English major students from Payame Noor University. This study attempts to identify potential sources of anxiety relevant to the students' affective needs or concerns in Payame Noor University through the use of an in-depth qualitative questionnaire. As the pre-administered questionnaire findings indicate, the differences in the level of language anxiety exhibited by the participants seem to vary by gender. Using various studies by previous researchers of language anxiety as a theoretical guideline for data collection and analysis, this study also discusses some of the influences or impact of anxiety-provoking factors on second language learning, along with some implications for further research on language anxiety.

Key words; Anxiety, Speaking Anxiety, Second Language Learning

INTRODUCTION

Anxiety is a negative way to present human feelings. When we are anxious, we feel nervous, worried, and fearful. We struggle, tremble, perspire, and our hearts beat quickly. In general, anxiety can be defined as a complex concept dependent upon not only on one's feelings of self-efficacy but also appraisals concerning the potential and perceived threats inherent in certain situations (Tobias, 1986). In simple words, anxiety is usually associated with unpleasant feelings and is similar to fear (Lader, 1975).

Anxiety in communicating in a second language, especially when that language is English can have a debilitating effect and can influence students' adaptation to the target environment and ultimately their educational goals. There is also agreement that anxiety is related to performance (Balachandran & Skully, 2004; Tobias and Everson, 1997), and that anxiety has been shown to have a debilitating effect on learning and achievement (Gaudy and Spielberger, 1971; Tobias, 1980).

In the past two decades, there has been a great deal of research in second language anxiety. Second language anxiety is defined as a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to using a second language for communication beyond the classroom. Most people will experience language anxiety. Even though 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 second language is important especially when that second language is English. English is the most widespread and important language in the world today. It is a major language of international business, diplomacy, science and the professions. English is also an official language or the official language of many international and professional organizations. It is used not only for communication between native speakers of English but also between non-native speakers.

Even though English does not have the greatest number of first-language speakers in the world, it is the most widely used language. The importance of learning, understanding and speaking English fluently is necessary for careers especially when applying for jobs with multinational companies (MNCs). This is because MNCs hire people from different countries and cultures and they use English as a medium of communication.

The need for effective oral communication skills is crucial in the business world as there are many MNCs located all around the globe. However, for the past few decades, business graduates have been criticized by employers for their lack of communication skills (Greathouse, 1986; Dearlove, 1996). Curtis, Winsor and Stephens (1989) in one survey of personnel managers found that communication skills are more important for applicants in obtaining entry-level positions than are their technical skills, grade point averages or their degrees.

Among the communication skills deemed to be core managerial competency is the ability to make effective presentations (Fandt, 1994; Whetten and Cameron, 1998; de Janasz et al., 2002). Thus, because of the importance of English in the world today, especially for business graduates, this study analyzes the anxiety

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level of university students in Iran. However, due to the time constraints, this study focuses only on students of Payame Noor University.

The implications of the study are discussed and a number of recommendations are made to assist students in dealing with their anxiety level. This study assumes that the language anxiety is debilitating and investigates the possible causes of anxiety using qualitative methods.

Research Questions

This study is also made in order to answer the research questions:

1. Do gender differences have an impact towards the level of anxiety of students in university?
2. What are the possible causes of anxiety and of speaking English in Public?

Literature Review

Defining Language Anxiety: In general, Spielberger (1983) defines anxiety as the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness and worry associated with the arousal of the nervous system. However, in attempting to define language anxiety, Scovel (1978) argues that it should be born in mind that even though we all know what language anxiety is and we all have experienced feelings of anxiousness, anxiety is still not easy to define in a simple sentence. "It is associated with feelings of uneasiness, frustration, self_doubt, apprehension, or worry" (as cited in Brown, 2000, p. 151). To put it in another word, anxiety can be generally associated with "threats to self _efficacy and appraisals of situations as threatening" (Pappamihiel, 2002, p.331).

In addition, Gregersen (2005) argues that learners who feel anxious in their foreign language learning may find their study less enjoyable. In case of the conducted studies on foreign language anxiety (e.g., Aida, 1994; Macintyre, et al., 1997), a review of literature has shown that foreign language anxiety is negatively related to foreign language learning. However, in the light of the studies directed at examining the correlation between anxiety and language learning thus far, the overall findings are fairly inconsistent and contradictory. For example, Young (1991) reviews sixteen studies investigating the relationship between anxiety and language learning and demonstrates inconsistent results both within and across these studies. Accordingly, as Young maintains "research in the area of anxiety as it relates to second or foreign language learning and performance is scattered and inconclusive" (p. 426)

Anxiety in speaking: Public speaking anxiety is very common among both universities students and also the general population. It is a feeling of panic associated with physical sensations that are all too painfully familiar to those affected such as increased heart and breathing rates, increased adrenaline, over-rapid reactions, and a tension in the shoulder and neck area.

Almost 20% of university students face the problem of public speaking anxiety (McCroskey,1977). He also defined anxiety in broad-based as "an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons". The apprehension of speaking before a group of individuals remains a problem in the twenty-first century. According to Krannich (2004), the fear of delivering a speech or a presentation ranks as the number one fear among most people, including students as well as adults from many diverse backgrounds. Ayres, Hopt and Peterson (2000) referred communication anxiety related with the delivering of speech or the fear or anxiety associated with anticipating the delivery of a speech.

According to Phillips (1991), "it is clear that fear of speaking in public is different from anxiety about social contact". True communication apprehension means that the sufferers see more value in keeping quiet in all circumstances (even in conversation) than they do from talking. Speech anxiety is a much targeted fear. "Our sense of public speaking anxiety is closer to what psychologists and psychiatrists refer to as a phobia rather than a free-floating anxiety" (Ayres and Hopf, 1993). It is an anxiety-based response not unlike the wide range of phobias that can be found in the areas of psychology and psychiatry.

Causes of Anxiety: There are various causes of anxiety. According to one article, there ten top causes for anxiety in public speaking. The first one is lack of preparation. The second cause of anxiety is the feeling that the students have either too many points to cover in the allotted time period. The third cause is worrying that the audience will be overly critical. Fear about not entertaining or arousing the interest of people and they will walk out is the fourth causes of public speaking anxiety. Speakers who compare their perceptions to audience expectations and public speaking anxiety are revealed when audiences' expectations are perceived greater than the speaker's ability (Ayres, 1986). Perceived audience expectations influence a speaker's level of anxiety as audiences to play a role in public speaking anxiety. The fifth cause is students' intend to emulate other speakers rather than being themselves. Other possible causes of anxiety can be the fear of potential negative outcomes and stuttering or difficulty to finding words. The next cause is where students spend too much time over-preparing instead of developing confidence in their own natural ability to succeed. The last two causes are dislike in being the centre of attention and also low self-confidence. Ayres, Schliesman and Sonandre (1998), in their research, found that students who feel they have skill deficiencies in public speaking apprehension often experience anxiety.

While, in the context of speaking English as a second language, Young (1991) listed six potential causes of language anxiety which include both personal and interpersonal factors, learners' beliefs about language learning, instructors' beliefs about language teaching, instructor-learner interactions, classroom procedures and language tests. However, to date, findings by Horwitz et al. (1986) have been the most influential. They identified three causes of language anxiety, that is, communication apprehension, test anxiety

and fear of negative evaluation. Based on these three components they also designed a Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) comprising thirty-three items. This scale was later used widely by researchers to measure foreign language learners' anxiety and examine the effect of anxiety on learning in different contexts.

METHODS

Research population

For the purpose of this study, the target population is the English major students. The reason for this population was chosen is because the title of the project requires the study of anxiety and speaking English as a second language among Iranian male and female English major students of Payame Noor University.

Research sample

The samples in this study were selected through non-probability sampling in which the samples are selected on the basis of convenience. The procedure that is used is convenience sampling which comprises units or people most conveniently available. These samples were chosen from students of Payame Noor University. Survey data were collected from 150 English major students of Payame Noor University.

Data Collection procedures

Two procedures were used in conducting this research project, collection of secondary and primary data.

Primary data: For the purpose of this research, the primary data is collected through a self-administered questionnaire. Secondary Data: Some of the secondary data that are used in this research are from journals, website, articles, books, and newspaper cuttings. Data Analysis Procedures: The data is analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS). The results are then transformed into quantitative measurement.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As stated earlier, the samples are the students of Payame Noor University and 150 samples are selected. The questionnaire was developed based on the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FCLAS) where the researcher changed the proposed scale in order to make it suitable for the current study.

Analysis for Part B: Adoption and Perception of Speaking English Anxiety

Statement 6: In classes, I forget how to say things I know. It can be concluded that female respondents experienced more anxiety compared to male respondents in terms of forgetting to say things they know even though the result is quite similar. From 75 female respondents, 22 or 29.3% agreed with the statements, and

20 male respondents (26.7%) agreed that they sometimes forget how to say things they know in class.

Statement 7: I tremble when I'm going to have to speak in English. This statement was developed in order to analyze whether the respondents tremble when they have to speak in English. Out of 75 female respondents, those who agreed with the statement accounted for 20 students (26.7%). Only two strongly agreed (2.7%) that they were trembling when they had to speak in English in class. It can be concluded that the majority of the male students are less anxious compared to female students as only 20.0% agreed with the statement.

Statement 8: I start to panic and am confused when I have to speak in English without preparation. The result is quite similar for both genders. 36 female respondents agreed with the statement (48.0%), while, for male respondents, 37 (49.3%) agreed that they feel anxious when they have to speak in English without preparation. It can be concluded that, in terms of speaking English without preparation, male students experienced slightly lower anxiety compared with female students.

Statement 9: When I speak English, I feel like a different person. This statement was developed in order to identify whether either or both genders felt that they are being somebody else when they speak in English. It can be summarized that most male students feel that they are a different person when they speak in English while 17 agreed with the statement (22.7%), while 15 of the female respondents (20.0%) agreed with the statement which makes them less anxious about being somebody else.

Statement 10: Even when I'm prepared to speak English, I get nervous. In this statement, the researcher wanted to determine whether the students are still nervous if they had prepared to speak in English (ie; during presentations, interviews, etc.) and which gender experienced more anxiety. Female respondents are more anxious compared to males with 40.0% being nervous even though they had prepared. Only 29 male students agreed with the statement (38.7%).

Statement 11: I'm afraid that my lecturers are ready to correct every mistake I make. More female students were afraid that their lecturers would correct their mistakes in class with 17 (22.7%) agreeing with the statement. This is because they are afraid of being embarrassed for being corrected in front of others. Meanwhile for male students, only 16% are afraid of being corrected. Male students are usually not afraid of being corrected in front of others as they usually perceive it positively.

Statement 12: It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in class. From figure 4.12, female students tend to be more anxious compared to male as 20 (26.7%) agreed that they feel embarrassed when they want to

volunteer answers in class. In contrast, male students more willingly volunteered answers in class as they are more confident in themselves with only 17 of them (22.7%) agreeing with the statement.

Statement 13: I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in class. This statement was developed in order to analyze whether the students feel confident when they were speaking in class and to identify which gender has more self-confidence. It can be seen that both genders have the same percentage of 26.7%. But, there are minor differences that show that female students lacked self confidence in term of expressing themselves in English with 7.3% strongly agreeing with the statement.

Statement 14: I always feel that the other students are speaking better than I do. This statement also shows that female respondents have higher anxiety levels compared to male respondents with 37 (49.3%) tending to agree with the statement. In contrast, only 26.7% or 20 male respondents feel that the others are speaking better than they are. The reasons for this might be because male students usually perceiving the situation positively and they have more confidence in their ability compared to female students.

Statement 15: I am afraid that the other students will have a bad perception at me when I speak in front of the class Perception of others is one of the major stressors of speaking English.

In the findings, it can be analyzed that female students tend to keep thinking about the perceptions of others with 48.0% agreeing that they are afraid of others' perceptions. Only 37.7% of male respondents agreed with the statement thus as a conclusion, female students have a higher anxiety level compared with male students.

Analysis for Part C: Open- Ended Questions

Question 16: How do you feel exactly when you had to speak in English while communicating with other persons and in front of a large group?

This question was developed in order to identify causes of anxiety of students when they had to speak in English. Out of 150 questionnaires that were distributed, only 50 of the respondents answered this open – ended question. Thus, the result of this finding is based from the answers given by the respondents. For better understanding, the researcher identified the causes given by the respondents through an open-ended questionnaire. It was divided into seven different causes of anxiety and the causes identified are;

- i. Nervous/panic/shy
- ii. They rarely speak English
- iii. Afraid of audience
- iv. Poor in English Language (in terms of grammar, pronunciation, etc)
- v. Speaking with people who are fluent in English
- vi. Lack of self-confidence
- vii. Afraid of perceptions of others.

It can be concluded that the majority of the students are afraid of the perceptions of others when they speak in English where 30 out of 50 respondents indicated the same answer. With a percentage of 60%, perceptions of others are placed as the major cause of anxiety and of speaking English. Most of the students were concerned about various kinds of evaluative situations in which their knowledge and performance of English will be monitored by people around them. They are conscious about the facial expressions of other students and also of the lecturer. They are afraid if their audiences look bored and confused, and cannot understand the information they are trying to deliver.

Many of them commented on the classroom situation in a negative manner, for example they would try to avoid eye contact with the lecturers, fearing they would be called on to answer some questions in front of other students, even if they were sure of the topics being discussed. They were afraid of being embarrassed in front of their friends especially if their answers were criticized.

The second cause that can be identified is a lack of English proficiency with 40% of the respondents writing a similar answer. Some of them said that they were weak in English, some were afraid of making mistakes in terms of grammar, pronunciation and arranging of words, and also their perceived lack of knowledge about the class subjects that they were studying. But the most frightening classroom situation experienced by most of the students is when their perceived lack of English proficiency is combined with their lack of knowledge or "unpreparedness" of the topics in question. These factors contribute to their level of anxiety.

The next factor is audience, with 36% of the respondents writing the same answer. This is because they feel anxious when there are too many people in the audience and are afraid of being tongue-tied in that situation. The fourth factor is of rarely speaking English with 17 out of 50 respondents choosing it as one of the causes of language anxiety.

Feeling shy, nervous or panicky also contributes as one of the causes of speaking English anxiety with 24% of the total respondents agreed on the same answer. The results were similar with lack of self confidence with 12 respondents said that they believe they do not have the confidence to express themselves in English. The last factor that caused anxiety when speaking in English is when speaking with people who are fluent in the language (32%). One of the students wrote that he feels anxious when he had to speak with people with a higher status as he believes these people are proficient in their English. There was also one student who wrote that she felt her confidence was lowered when she had to speak with foreigners.

CONCLUSION

To identify whether gender differences has an impact on the level of anxiety: 1) In classes, I forget how to say

things I know. It shows that compared with male students, female students experienced much more anxiety. 2) I tremble when I'm going to have to speak in English. The researchers found that most of the female students were more anxious than male students. 3) I start to panic and am confused when I have to speak in English without preparation. It can be concluded that male students tend to panic and become more confused when they had to speak in English without preparation. 4) When I speak English, I feel like a different person. The result of this statement shows that male students tend to feel like they become somebody else when they speak in English.

5) Even when I'm prepared to speak English, I get nervous. The result of the finding shows that female students experienced nervousness and panic even when they were prepared to speak English.

6) I'm afraid that my lecturers are ready to correct every mistake I make. In this finding, the researchers identified that female students felt fear that their lecturer would correct their mistake directly in class thus embarrassing them in front of their friends.

7) It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in class. It can be concluded that male students experienced less anxiety when it comes to volunteering answer in English in class.

8) I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking English in class. It can be concluded that there are similarities between both genders in terms of being confused of their own capabilities when they had to speak in English.

9) I always feel that the other students are speaking better than I do. In this statement, the researcher found that female students tend to think about their friends who are much better than them in English, thus experiencing lower self-confidence.

10) I am afraid that the other students will have bad perceptions at me when I speak in front of the class. It can be concluded that female students felt more anxious about the perceptions of others when they have to express themselves in English in class. Based on the overall findings, it can be concluded that female students tend to be more anxious compared with male students.

To identify causes of anxiety while speaking English in public

Based on the analysis from the open-ended questionnaire, the researchers identified several causes of anxiety in speaking English. Seven major causes were identified which had similarities with previous studies. Among the seven major causes, the highest stressor of speaking in English was the perceptions of others. This has been supported by Pappamihel (2002), where in one of her interview processes, one participant in her study said that one cause that made him feel anxious was being afraid that the other students will laugh at him when he says something in a class.

Thus, from the findings, it can be concluded that English language anxiety is multi-dimensional where it affects students differently depending on the context of the situation. The respondents' anxiety levels vary depending on the situation. This result is also supported by the study of Pappamihel (2002) where she finds that English language anxiety is of a dynamic nature where it can possibly affect students in many different ways.

Pedagogical Implication

For the purpose of this study, the researcher gives several suggestions in dealing with second language anxiety. According to Rolls (1998) and Kim (2005), there are various strategies which can be used in coping with second language anxiety. The first strategy is to recognize your own feelings of second language anxiety. It is vital to identify your own feelings as in the process we will be able to recognize the causes of our anxiety. Just because people are nervous, it does not mean they have poor performance. Nervousness sometimes will help in enhancing the vitality and enthusiasm brought to the situation.

The next strategy is to share your feelings with others. It is helpful knowing that you are not suffering those feelings alone. Even professionals such as artists or experienced speakers may feel some sort of anxiety when they have to speak in public. Thus, having a slight feeling of anxiety is normal as it is experienced by many of us.

Students must bear in their mind that nobody is aware of their fright except if there are outward signs of nervousness. However, nervousness can be controlled. Students must focus on getting their message across to the audience and not be afraid to make mistakes. Mistakes are the best way of learning so that we are less likely to keep making them. Many native English speakers do not speak a second language, so the fact that the students are able to converse in a second language at all says a lot.

Teachers should realize that language learning, and particularly oral production, is a potentially stressful situation for some students, and that the "tension and discomfort related to language learning call for the attention of the language teaching profession" (Horwitz, 2001: 122). The recommendations we make are congruent with previous studies suggesting that teachers should not consider withdrawn students as lazy, lacking in motivation, or having "poor attitude" (Gregersen, 2003 :30), when in fact they suffer from anxiety. Instead, they should identify anxious learners and make interventions to help them overcome foreign language anxiety (Aida, 1994). Because foreign language speaking anxiety in the English classroom may stem from fear of making mistakes and the consequent fear of negative evaluation, and students' perception of low ability in relation to their peers, we suggest that teachers may want to consider the following interventions. At first, teachers can incorporate project work, because it can provide anxious and non-anxious students alike with abundant opportunities to use language in a non-threatening context. We argue that the first step in reducing anxiety is to actually have students participate in speaking tasks. Because students

are more eager to participate in oral activities in small groups (Young, 1990), project work can be very helpful. Second, the creation of a friendly classroom atmosphere is important.

Universities should adopt innovative approaches to minimize apprehension and maximize student achievement. Lecturers must encourage the students to express themselves in English and help them reduce their anxiety by giving them support. Lecturers might also use quick relaxation techniques such as that suggested by Psychologist Anthony Grasha to tense the body for a count of 10 and then breathe deeply in and out to a count of four for a period of three to five minutes. This is especially effective after a tension-producing event.

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