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From EFL Classroom into the Mainstream: A Socio-Cultural Investigation of Speaking Anxiety among Female EFL Learners

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Abstract

This study was conducted with the aim of examining the rate of foreign language anxiety in male and female language learners. FLCAS (*Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale*) was administered to two groups of male and female learners. The mean scores of FLCAS indicated a significant difference with females having considerably higher levels of anxiety than males. From 38 female learners, 22 were recognized as experiencing anxiety, 14 of whom were invited to attend interviews as high-anxious learners. In addition to the learners, six language instructors were interviewed. From among the responses, socio-cultural reasons were deduced as being responsible for the noticeable level of females' anxiety. With regard to the findings, this study invites language teachers to be more sensitive and considerate about their female learners' social status, their senses of identity, and their self-perceptions, and take account of all these when judging their language performance, particularly as to the speaking activities and communicative tasks.

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1. Introduction

Anxiety remarkably hinders speaking skill and the ease or difficulty with which it is learned. Research has indicated that anxiety decreases when experience and proficiency increase (e.g., Gardner, Smythe & Brunet, 1977). On the contrary, some other studies have concluded that upper-level students experience higher anxiety (Kitano, 2001). We may then conclude that, as a general and irrefutable fact, and irrespective of exceptional situations, the higher the learners' language proficiency, the lower their level of anxiety. This, however, does not reject the influence and functioning of anxiety above proficiency on the evidence of many highly proficient learners who refrain from speaking.

Learning a language itself is "a profoundly unsettling psychological proposition" because it directly threatens an individual's self-concept and world-view (Guiora, 1983, cited in Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986, p. 28). Anxiety is claimed to be one of the strongest predictors of foreign language success (MacIntyre, 1999). It has been shown to be more related to speaking than to any other skill (Horwitz et al., 1986). One of the reasons for this may be the nature of speaking which involves the spontaneous manifestation of knowledge. The other reason emanates from the inadequate speaking opportunities in schools and universities and generally in EFL contexts like that of our country where listening to the teacher is the most frequent classroom experience. That is why speaking a foreign language as a scarcely happening experience is almost always associated with anxiety.

Speaking is a skill which is problematic for most language learners; and there are many cases that even highly advanced EFL learners (who are quite competent in all other skills), are unable to express themselves freely through foreign language. This situation, in particular, applies to female language learners,

who are often reported by language instructors as being reticent and inactive in language classes.

The communicative nature of speaking which demands the existence of a second party generates anxiety in learners and discourages them to take part in interactions, which results in advanced language learners being reluctant to speak, and this is a serious educational catastrophe. Horwitz and Young (1991, p. 14) assert, "We have been truly surprised at the number of students who experience anxiety and distress in their language classes". Likewise, Campbell and Ortiz (1991, p. 159) expressed that language anxiety is "alarming" among university students, who experience high debilitating levels of anxiety. They further held that as many as one half of all language students experience a startling level of anxiety.

Research on foreign language anxiety has implications for the teaching as well as the learning of foreign languages. Moreover, the investigation of anxiety-producing factors can expand the insight into this issue and consequently help language teachers make the classroom environment a psychologically safer place. Administering a number of anxiety-probing questionnaires, this study aimed at investigating language anxiety from the perspective of male and female language learners to examine whether gender could predict language anxiety in the educational context of Iran with respect to the cultural context of the country.

Based on the aims of the study the following research questions were formulated:

- Q1: Do male and female language learners experience the same amount of language anxiety?
- Q2: What are the common sources of foreign language speaking anxiety among female language learners?
- Q3: How do socio-cultural interventions exert influence on female learners' foreign language speaking anxiety?

Q4: Which strategies can be used to successfully cope with female learners' foreign language speaking anxiety?

2. Theoretical Framework

Of the movement of the research focus in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) away from teachers to learners, and from cognitive aspects to the consideration of affective properties, has been a turning point in the history of language studies. In the past, issues mainly related to language pedagogy, language learning, and the like were central to the research projects whose main concern was language itself. Language classes were mainly linguistically-oriented and there was no room for the concept of affect. It was only in the late twentieth century, in the 1970s, that affective variables such as personality traits and motivation emerged in the field of second language acquisition studies and the significant part played by such variables in learning a second or foreign language was drawn into attention (Shams, 2006). As Arnold holds, "a broad understanding of affect in language learning can lead to more effective language learning" (1991, p. 21). Second language researchers came to understand that the learners' affective variables needed to be considered (Samimy, 1994). Krashen (1982) describes the relationship between affective variables and L2 learning in his Affective Filter Hypothesis. He claims that learners with high affective filters will poorly receive any language input. Moreover, since the emergence of Communicative Language Teaching, SL/FL instruction mainly aims at developing learners' communicative competence rather than merely linguistic competence. This demands language learners to be able to speak in the target language spontaneously which is a great stone for most learners to carry and is almost always associated with stress and anxiety. In this regard, the investigation of the learners' anxiety as a great hindrance to speaking and easeful communication has come to be recognized as an important area of study in second language acquisition.

2. 1. Components of Foreign Language Anxiety

According to Horwitz et al. (1986), three performance anxieties are categorized as: communication apprehension (CA), test anxiety, and the fear of negative evaluation. The description of these components will provide an insight for grasping the sources language anxiety emanates from.

2. 1. 1. Communication Apprehension (CA)

There is a famous saying about public speaking being humans' second major fear. This overstatement deliberately points to the strong association of speaking with anxiety. Horwitz et al. (1986, p. 128) define communication apprehension as "a type of shyness characterized by fear or anxiety about communicating with people".

2. 1. 2. Test Anxiety

In order to grasp at an appropriate conceptualization of foreign language anxiety, a definition of test anxiety seems pertinent. Test anxiety, as defined by Horwitz et al. (1986, p. 127), "refers to a type of performance anxiety stemming from a fear of failure". Basically, in every situation that performance of any kind is assessed, anxiety turns up as an unwanted by-product and meddler. "Oral testing may be the worst of all because of its potentiality to stir both test and oral communication anxiety" (Horwitz et al., 1986, p. 127).

2. 1. 3. Fear of Negative Evaluation

Fear of negative evaluation is an extended form of test anxiety because it is not limited to test-taking situations; rather, it may occur in any social, evaluative situation, such as interviewing for a job or speaking in foreign language class (Horwitz et al., 1986). It is even so broad that "it pertains not only to the teacher's evaluation of the students, but also to the perceived reaction of other students and listeners as well" (Shams, 2006, p. 10).

2. 2. Potential Sources of Anxiety

Many variables have been found to be related to foreign language learning anxiety. Each language learner brings to the classroom a series of idiosyncratic characteristics which are situation-specific, context-sensitive, and divergent. As a result, the causes of anxiety can be as many as the individuals. In one general classification, these variables may be divided into two main categories: psycholinguistic and socio-cultural aspects. Another possible classification, subdivided into situational variables and learner variables, could be suggested. Situational variables include, for example, course level, course organization, course activities, instructor behavior and attitudes, and social interaction among learners. Learner variables include ability (both perceived and actual), age, attitudes, beliefs, culture, gender, learning styles, and personality variables among others. These independent variables interact in complex ways that possibly create anxiety-provoking situations for many students.

Bailey (1983), through the analysis of the diaries of 11 learners, found that competitiveness can also lead to anxiety. Besides, she found that tests and learners' relationship with their teachers also contributed to learners' anxiety. These three aspects that Bailey identified were supported in subsequent studies, especially in Young's study. According to Young (1991), there are six potential causes of language anxiety, including: personal and interpersonal anxieties, learner beliefs about language learning, instructor beliefs about language teaching, instructor-learner interactions, classroom procedures and language testing. Young (1994) further illuminated that these sources of language anxiety are interrelated.

2. 2. 1. Gender

The interactants' gender can be another variable contributing to anxiety during communication. Gobel and Matsuda (2003) reported no significant effect of gender on

anxiety as a whole. There exist conflicting results concerning gender-related anxiety. Mejias, Applbaum, and Trotter (1991) found higher anxiety among Hispanic males than females. In her study on state anxiety, Spielberger (1983, p. 19) found that "females are more emotionally stable than males in their reactions to highly stressful and relaxing circumstances". Similarly, in Kitano's study (2001) over Japanese college students, male students, having perceived their spoken Japanese as being less competent compared to others, were found to be more anxious; such a relationship, however, was not observed among female students. Conversely, according to the findings of Machida (2001, cited in Gobel and Matsuda, 2003. p. 23), who investigated Japanese students' language anxiety in terms of gender, female learners were reported to be more anxious than male counterparts.

Generally speaking, females are thought to be more adept in language learning than males. Female students usually score higher in English exams than their male counterparts. As a result, females are more confident in their abilities to learn a new language well and will be more ready to approach threatening situations in English classrooms (Dörnyei, 2001). However, concerning anxiety and achievement, in some research studies, female students showed higher levels of anxiety than males in academic settings (Elkhafafi, 2005; Pappamiheil, 2001). As with language learning, female students were reported to be more apprehensive (Worde, 2003). Investigating English writing anxiety in Taiwanese learners, Cheng (2002) found that females were significantly more anxious than males. However, in another research study conducted by Aida (1994), no relationship was detected between language anxiety in learning Japanese and gender, although mean FLCAS scores were slightly lower for females. Batumlu and Erden (2007), likewise, reported no significant difference between females' and males' anxiety levels.

Elkhafaifi (2005) found that females and males displayed different levels of anxiety depending upon the task, such that female students exhibited significantly higher levels of general Arabic language anxiety levels than males, but in Arabic listening anxiety, males showed more anxiety than females. However, in a study carried out in Chinese high schools, males were found to be more anxious in English classes than females (Zhao Na, 2007). MacIntyre, Baker, Clément, & Donovan (2002) investigated the effects of language, gender, and grade on Willingness To Communicate (WTC) (which refers to the idea that learners who are willing to communicate in L2 look for opportunities to communicate and actually do communicate more in the L2), anxiety and other variables among 7th to 9th graders. They found that “whereas boys’ overall WTC and anxiety levels remain constant across the three grade levels, girls show an increase in WTC and decrease in anxiety from grade 8 to grade 9” (p. 557).

3. Methodology

3. 1. Participants

A total of 76 language learners participated in this research study. Two segregated classes of female and male learners (N = 38, each) from Iran Language Institute (ILI, Tehran’s branch) along with their teachers constituted the research participants. The two classes were of the same proficiency level according to language institute classification, which was also confirmed via TOEFL. The average age of female learners was 21, and it was 20 for the males. They were mostly high school and partially university students from a variety of majors.

3. 2. Instruments

For gathering the required quantitative and qualitative data, the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) was administered to the subjects followed by semi-structured interviews. FLCAS is a 5-point Likert scale devised by Horwitz et al. (1986)

and is aimed at probing students’ experiences of anxiety related to the learning of a foreign language in the classroom context. It comprises items with respect to speaking anxiety, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. The anxiety score of each subject is found out by summing up the item weights of all 33 items. The theoretical score range of this scale was from 33 to 165. The higher the total anxiety scores, the more anxious the students were. For each item, the respondents were required to answer on a scale ranging from strongly agree (5 points), agree (4 points), undecided (3 points), disagree (2 points), to strongly disagree (1 point). However, items 2, 5, 8, 11, 14, 18, 22, 28, and 32 were to be scored in a reversed format.

As revealed by the pilot study, the items were proved to be understandable for the subjects and, therefore, the English version of FLCAS was submitted to them. In order to increase the validity of the results, semi-structured interviews were carried out to support and complement the data based on which the findings were reported. Interviews, both with teachers and the students, were conducted in Persian. Prior to these, a TOEFL test of language proficiency was administered to the subjects so as to examine the comparability of the two sample groups.

3. 3. Procedure

Data collection was organized in two phases. In the first phase, the quantitative data were gathered using the FLCAS which was administered. Female subjects exhibiting a high level of anxiety in FLCAS were asked to participate in the following interviews. The objective of this second phase was to gather qualitative data concerning the possible sources of foreign language anxiety in female learners and find the source of a significantly higher degree of language anxiety among females than that in males.

SPSS was used for the analysis of the quantitative data obtained from TOEFL and FLCAS. For the analysis of the responses

given to FLCAS, a value of 1 was given to the response 'strongly disagree' and a value of 5 to 'strongly agree'. In the case of negatively worded items (items 2, 5, 8, 11, 14, 18, 22, 28, and 32), the values were reversed. The obtained values of the 33 items were then added together to present an individual's anxiety score. The scores of the FLCAS were then interpreted as follows: The cut-off score in this study was 86, so that the participants scoring lower than 86 were perceived as low-anxious and those scoring above 86 were considered to be high-anxious. The two series of scores obtained from TOEFL and FLCAS were analyzed using independent *t*-test to reveal any statistical significance in the discrepancy between the two sets of scores.

Interview data was analyzed and interpreted following the data analysis techniques and procedures of the grounded theory which is a qualitative research method that uses a systematic set of procedures to arrive at an inductively grounded theory. The analysis of the data derived from interviews was carried out on the basis of Young's (1994)

classification of the sources of language anxiety.

4. Results

4.1. Quantitative Findings

The average ages of females and males were 21 and 20, respectively. Both groups were advanced language learners, studying at the same level in a single language institute (ILI), thus following the same classroom procedures, and studying the same teaching materials with an approximately similar score range on TOEFL.

4.1.1. TOEFL Results

The mean score in TOEFL was calculated to be 550.79 for males and 553.92 for females (see Table 1). A *t*-test was then run to find out any possible differences between the groups (see Table 2). The *t*-value and the level of significance being -.59 and .31, respectively, the results showed that there existed no significant difference between the TOEFL scores for the two sample groups. In other words, the two groups were homogeneous.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for TOEFL Scores

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Gender	Male	38	5.50	28.67	4.65
	Female	38	5.53	25.65	2.94

Table 2

Independent t-test Results for TOEFL Scores

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means		Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
	F	Sig.	t	df			
Gender	1.00	.31	-.59	112	.55	-3.13	5.30

4. 1. 2. The Results of FLCAS

In the quantitative phase of the study, on the basis of FLCAS, two sets of scores were obtained for males and females. The mean score in FLCAS for males' anxiety was

calculated as 81.31 and it was 92.28 for females (see Table 3). As it was expected, the degree of anxiety among female learners was significantly higher than that of males. Table 4 shows that this difference was significant at 0.01.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics for Anxiety Scores

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Gender	Male	38	81.31	15.57	2.52
	Female	38	92.28	21.13	2.42

Table 4

Independent t-test Results for Anxiety Scores

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means		Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
	F	Sig.	t	df			
Gender	6.62	.01	-2.83	112	.00	-10.97	3.86

The only difference between the two samples of this study was that of their instructors and their genders. During interviews with female subjects they were asked about their instructor and her manners and attitudes, and what she was like in the class. All of them tended to declare their satisfaction of their teacher, describing her as a kind and patient instructor and considerate when correcting errors. Therefore, their teacher could not be the stimulation for female learners' anxiety. Considering that all the other situational factors were analogous and controlled for, the only remaining running factor would be gender.

4. 1. 3. The Analysis of FLCAS

The minimum score for females' anxiety was 52 and the maximum score for this group ran to 131. Males' scores ranged between 53 up to 117.

As to the highly anxious participants, 36.84 % of females were experiencing high levels of anxiety in their English class, while this number for male learners was only 7.89 %. In other words, most female learners fell into the high-anxious category while most male learners fell into the moderate-anxious language learners' classification (see Table 5).

Table 5

Anxiety Levels for Males and Females

Anxiety Levels	Females %	Males %
Low-anxious	34.21	44.73
Moderate-anxious	28.94	47.36
High-anxious	36.84	7.89

4. 2. Qualitative Findings

This section will proceed on the basis of Young's (1994) categorization of the sources of foreign language anxiety. The participants in this study assigned a paramount importance to the instructor as the most influential contributing factor in the creation or reduction of the feeling of anxiety within learners. They also pointed to some other factors among which some common and repeated themes can be inferred: self-confidence, teacher's scoring and evaluation, fear of making errors, accent, preparedness and prior practice, being questioned in front of the class, the quality of error correction, very formal and disciplinary language institute environment, limited vocabulary knowledge, language proficiency, concern about making oneself understood, and fear of negative evaluation.

4. 2. 1. Language Learning Environment and Classroom Procedures

This study was conducted in Iran Language Institute (ILI), where very strict disciplines and deliberately-defined procedures and measurements are imposed both on the learners and instructors, which is quite distinctive among language institutes. This, by itself, imposes a great deal of anxiety on the learners studying in this institute. Supporting the previous studies, almost all the subjects regarded oral activities to be highly anxiety-inducing for them and they felt more secure sitting at their desk. Thus, the study confirmed the previous research by Koch and Terrell (1991), Young (1990, cited in Young, 1991), Price (1991), and Wu and Chan (2004) who found that the majority of their subjects considered oral presentation as the most anxiety-provoking activity in the class.

4. 2. 2. Learner's Beliefs about Language Learning

Some language learners are so perfectionist in their estimation of their abilities as a successful language learner. In the belief

system of such learners, there is no room for mistakes.

Fear of Making Mistakes

Compared to the responses of males in FLCAS (item 31), it was interesting to find that female learners were more concerned about committing mistakes and accordingly being negatively evaluated. Seemingly, male learners cared less about others' appraisal of their performance. This outstanding difference between males and females in displaying anxious behaviors needs to be pondered on so as to find the psychological roots it stems from.

Preparedness

Having prior practice on the subject was taken by all the interviewees as a determining factor in reducing their anxiety. There is no mention of this factor in literature, however. Probably, it had not been found to be a key factor or maybe quite conversely, being taken as granted by the respective subjects. Apart from the interview data, based on FLCAS (item 33), 50% of male subjects and 68.42 % of female subjects in this study reported ill-preparedness to be anxiety-provoking, and during interviews female subjects repeatedly posed it as influencing their anxiety.

Linguistic Difficulties

Low confident learners usually underestimate their linguistic knowledge. Many of the subjects of this study expressed difficulty with finding vocabulary items (rather than grammar) and their correct usage, which seemed justified since they were advanced learners. The responses supported MacIntyre and Gardner's research (1991) which found a significant negative correlation between language anxiety and the ability to recall vocabulary items. Numerous subjects reported that they had difficulty speaking English because they either did not have enough vocabulary at their disposal or they could not

retrieve the required words promptly. As far as pronunciation is concerned, contrary to the previous research, most of the subjects of this study agreed that it was not a big problem indeed because they thought others did not talk very well either.

4. 2. 3. The Instructor's Beliefs about Language Teaching

According to the interviews, the majority of the subjects contended that the instructor was the greatest influencing factor in the students' anxiety. In this regard, contrary to the public belief, teaching is not the only responsibility of the teachers, especially in language classes which are of great potentiality in involving and uncovering the inner personality traits of the individuals. In this sense, a language teacher should be a psychologist, a counselor, and a friend as well. The findings of this research converge with the past studies, as with the role of language instructor (Brandl, 1987; Horwitz et al., 1986; Piniel, 2000; Price, 1991; Young, 1990; Young, 1991, cited in Onwuegbuzie et al., 1999). The teachers' attitudes towards teaching and learning, their reaction to the learners' errors and their manner of error correction have been reported to be significantly influential in creating a stressful or a secure classroom environment.

4. 2. 4. Language Testing: Fear of Failure and Teacher's Scoring

Testing is stressful for the students in that the obtained grades are representative of the overall knowledge of the learners. In this sense, final exams are even more anxiety-producing because they determine advancing of the learner into a higher level or the necessity of repeating the same course which consequently brings about the critical feedback of the students' parents as well. Oral testing may be the worst of all because of its potentiality to stir both test and oral communication anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986, p. 127).

4. 2. 5. Instructor-Learner Interactions

Learners' relationship with their teachers also remarkably influences their anxiety. Consistent with Bailey (1983), Young (1991), and Savignon (1972, cited in Samimy, 1994), one teacher believed that giving the feeling of security and comfort to the students in the classroom and establishing rapport with them is the golden rule. All the learners also declared that bad-tempered or short-tempered or serious teachers placed a whopping amount of stress on them.

4. 2. 6. Personal and Interpersonal Anxieties: Fear of Negative Evaluation

Students are constantly worried about the evaluation of the teacher and their peers on their performance. This happens because such students are not confident about their abilities. They feel self-conscious when answering questions or delivering a lecture in front of the class and detect the way other students are looking at them. This supports the previous research that learners feel more anxious in evaluative situations, particularly in foreign language classrooms where their performance is under constant monitoring by both the teacher and the peers (Daly, 1991, cited in Onwuegbuzie et al., 1999).

4. 2. 7. Socio-Cultural Factors

Apart from the classroom context and macro-factors working in this small scale, broader social and cultural context that individuals are part of, can be the underlying origins of the learners' anxiety which might be operating above the mentioned sources and further giving shape to them. Therefore, commenting on the individuals' behaviors regardless of their culture and social status would be an incomplete and defect outlook. According to some language instructors, social factors are more important causes of language anxiety functioning in advance to linguistic factors, and only if these influences have been proved to be positive, then the individuals'

inadequacies can be attributed to linguistic and classroom-bound factors. Regarding the investigation of socio-cultural factors in relation to language anxiety, this research differs with other studies in that it does not compare the subjects' culture and social status with that of the target culture or community. Such a comparison in an FL context, where no direct connection exists with the members of the target community and culture, is vain, desperate, and yet impossible by nature.

Self-Perception

Highly-anxious learners are usually of low self-esteem, low perceived self-worth, thinking negatively about themselves, and bearing erroneous beliefs based on their self-degradation (Tobias, 1986, cited in MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). Such negative self-perception that was frequently expressed by the learners of this study, as also mentioned by Horwitz (1988), derives from their low confidence in themselves.

Based on the learners' responses regarding their self-evaluation of their general levels of linguistic proficiency and self-confidence, most of them estimated it as low or intermediate and many of the subjects directly attributed their stress and anxiety to their low self-confidence. This way, one can generally conclude that anxious students are usually of low self-confidence.

Gender, Culture, and Society

FLCAS results revealed that while the two groups of females and males were homogeneous with respect to age, language proficiency, level of study, classroom procedures, course books, and the learning environments, the female group showed significantly higher levels of anxiety.

In response to whether they participated in discussions and gave vent to their ideas freely out of the class and even in their mother tongue, they mostly replied that they usually

did not or they did very little. One of them described herself as being a reticent person who spoke only if need be. As to the role of the culture running through society, she said *there are some problems with our culture of course, for example when you are sitting in a taxi; it is not very acceptable that you get involved in ongoing discussion as a woman.*

One of the experienced teachers assessed the reason behind the difference *between males' and females' anxiety in the language classroom as being very obvious and remarkable.* When asked what this difference emanated from, she said, "it has nothing to do with gender indeed, rather; it's a matter of our culture.

All the instructors agreed that the difference between their male and female students was drastically obvious. *Girls are so calm and fearful to talk, it's because they are ruled by their parents and afterwards, astonishingly by their husbands. But if you yell at boys hundreds of times, they still act after their own hearts as if they were the supreme power, your words do not carry weight indeed* another instructor declared.

As a matter of fact, girls are always expected to act according to the wills and expectations of some other people. In the cultural context of this study, there are so many widely held beliefs and expectations regarding women's behaviors, duties, do's and don'ts, p's and q's, and moral codes. As far as social and cultural issues are concerned, it might be notable for the readers to know that the female subjects present in this study belong to the female community of the capital city of the country, whose situation is, by comparison, better than the rest of the country by far in terms of having easier access to communication facilities and a more relaxed male-female relationship. For certain, the issue would be more striking in other far-off smaller cities throughout the country, resulting in more serious public speaking fear and

communication apprehension and less assertiveness.

4. 2. 8. Strategies to Cope with Language Anxiety

Language anxiety, as an unsettling psychological construct, has been found to markedly influence speaking a foreign language. A variety of strategies have been posited to cope with this multifaceted phenomenon. Since the subjects in this study reckoned the instructor as being the main cause of their anxiety and the most influential factor capable to compensate for all the other factors such as low self-confidence or low language proficiency, the first frequently posed suggestion for alleviating language anxiety was that of the kind and friendly behavior of the teacher and their role in creating a friendly and less formal classroom atmosphere, where students can make mistakes without fear of being negatively evaluated. Lively, spirited, and enthusiastic teachers are always motivating students to take part in classroom tasks more actively, while teachers showing apathy about teaching and their students markedly demotivate the students.

Most of the learners disapproved of teachers' engagement in giving grades when they were talking. The subjects shared the idea that teacher's patience and consideration when they were speaking in the classroom were very relaxing for them and they all agreed on the elimination of scoring.

The following are suggested as some fruitful classroom strategies to reduce anxiety:

Scoring

Teachers are recommended to regard classroom as a setting for learning and avoid frequent scoring and noting down all the minor performance problems of the students as they are speaking, because it would break their

concentration and make them so anxious that they will lose track of their speech.

Accent

Teachers should put a reasonable emphasis on accent and phonological factors. Unconscionable insisting on such matters and reproaching students for having bad accents prohibits some weak and sensitive students from speaking and aggravates their anxiety.

Communicative and Interactive Classrooms

Classrooms where the students interact with one another and with the teacher impose lower levels of anxiety on learners and decrease their communicative fears. Teachers should create opportunities for interaction as much as possible.

Group Work

Group work is recommended to be implemented by teachers due to the following benefits: students have increased motivation (Lee, 2002); they do not feel that they are constantly assessed; in group work the focus is on communication, rather than on accuracy; and students are less concerned with formal errors and the consequences of "imagined failure" (MacIntyre, Noels, and Clement, 1997, p. 269). An additional advantage of project work is that students have an active role and responsibilities in the implementation of project work, which can augment their confidence and diminish the perceptions of low ability in the target language.

Supportive Classroom Atmosphere

Creating a learning community that provides the environment for "optimal motivation" (Alderman, 2004), and a "collaborative atmosphere" (Gregersen, 2003, p. 30) can help reduce fear of errors. Many scholars have found it of eminence to create a supportive learning classroom community (Brophy, 2004; Dornyei, 2001).

Teacher-Students Interactions

Errors should be considered a natural part of learning a foreign language and students should be encouraged to ask for help without embarrassment (Dornyei, 2001). Less formal and friendlier classroom environment has an ample relieving effect on learners.

Indirect Correction

Direct correction in speaking activities can undermine students' confidence because it discourages learners who are anxious about "sounding silly" making mistakes when experiencing a new language (Lightbown & Spada, 1999). Students should be encouraged to continue speaking activity despite making errors; prompts and questions can be provided in order to foster the development of repair strategies. In relation to error correction, also, contemptuous and harsh attitudes must be definitely avoided.

Preserving Students' Image

Behavior that can threaten students' social image should be avoided. For example, students' test scores should be kept private and not announced to the whole classroom. This is to the purpose of reducing preoccupation with fear of negative evaluation, which can lead to withdrawal from activities that "could increase their language skills" (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002, p. 563). It is also a good idea that teachers should emphatically advise all the students not to laugh at each other at any rate.

Teacher's Behavior

Verbal (use of humor, use of students' first names) and nonverbal (eye contact, positive gestures) types of behavior is recommended since they can reduce anxiety and impact positively on motivation to learn (Christopher, 1990; Frymier, 1993). Lively, friendly, and outgoing teachers decrease stress and anxiety within learners to a great extent.

Positive Reinforcement

Sometimes teachers seem to be oblivious of the fact that a simple praise matters highly to some students, motivating them to attend classroom activities more actively and zealously. Also, non-verbal praise (e.g. a positive nod), as mentioned by one of the teachers interviewed, really works.

Linguistic Concerns

Due to frequent concerns of students in relation to their limited vocabulary items and linguistic knowledge and the role it plays in the learners' inclination to initiate speaking, students need to be informed that they do not need to await for perfection and have to speak the foreign language using the very limited knowledge. They will make progress little by little.

Cultural System

In trying to take a strategic approach to learners' speaking anxiety, language teachers should not be negligent of the pernicious culture-based influences that, operating above classroom-based situational factors, underlie female students' anxious reactions and manifestations. In this regard, teachers need to show a special dedication in heightening female learners' confidence, and provide them with positive feedbacks, and have them initiate communication and give full vent to their ideas without fear of being negatively evaluated, thus conveying to them the sense that what they say is respected and valued. As Leki (1999, p. 80) also has put "In order to speak, you need to feel you will be heard and that what you are saying is worth hearing".

5. Discussion

The preliminary results of this study clearly point to the magnitude of the female learners' anxiety over the male ones. The reasons behind this noticeable difference have been found to stem from the specific and anomalous cultural circumstances and social status of

female individuals that, by itself, puts a great burden of anxiety on the shoulder of the female community. This potential anxiety emerges and is intensified mostly in speaking and communicative situations in the language classrooms when coupled with the demand to be constantly evaluated. Another noteworthy point found in this study is that the fear of failure in the course was the biggest concern of both males and females in foreign language classrooms since almost all the subjects perceived speaking in front of the class as the most anxiety-inducing classroom activity. As far as speaking anxiety is concerned, females again exhibited more anxiety than males. What distinguishes speaking is the public nature of the skill that poses a threat to individuals' self-concept, self-identity, and ego which they have developed in their first language (Horwitz et al., 1986). In the opinions of all the interviewees, the teacher, regarding the personality and manner of behavior, holds the greatest stand in creation or alleviation of anxiety within learners. Also relevant to teachers were their scoring and manner of error correction, which were mentioned as important stimuli for the production of anxiety.

Concerning females' speaking anxiety, language teachers should be of the cultural awareness that their female learners (adopting their L1 patterns of behavior and modes of thought), might have been accustomed to keeping aloof from communicative situations (for the fear of losing their positive sexual-identity as calm and obedient decent girls). According to Jones (2004), such a fear has roots in the individuals' mother tongue.

All in all, in treatment of language anxiety, careful attitude of the language teachers is demanding in order to understand and to effectively diagnose this phenomenon in learners. This research, laying emphasis on female learners' anxiety, asks for the double understanding and care of the language teachers for their female students when

considering the big challenge they have to make in breaking or coping with the firmly established restricting mentalities in their way towards being successful language speakers.

Yet, despite the fact that the long-standing and steady impact of culture cannot be shaken easily, the researchers still hold out hope and believe in teachers' capability in having it made due to the aforesaid grave influence and contribution they can exert on the learners' minds and affections. Although it might be a big request from some male teachers, few in number though, who themselves are the forerunners and establishers and maintainers of this tradition, teachers should bear it in mind that their responsibility resembles that of a physician in the necessity of ethical considerations. This work invites all its readers into a thorough introspection and a probable needful revision as to one's ideas, interests, rights, wants, attitudes, and standpoint as an individual in order to best fulfill the potentials of one's 'self' without hurting others.

Owing to the fact that in the present study, as in line with previous studies in the literature, the teacher's role was particularly highlighted as a key factor in inducing students' foreign language anxiety, teachers need to be considerate about the anxious behaviors of their students and through establishing rapport with each and every language learner and adopting suitable error correction approaches, set the learners at ease and motivate them to attend classroom discussions and talks actively. Besides, the realization of the students' sources of FL anxiety is prerequisite to its treatment by language teachers. Teachers should adopt a psychological approach to the assessment of their students' behavior and performance. They should establish personal relationship with every learner so as to know them and thereby, gain the ability to gauge the sources of anxiety in learners. This is imperative for finding the suitable strategies to help learners overcome their anxieties.

Because foreign language speaking anxiety in English classrooms 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, teachers are invited to consider the following points. First, they had better incorporate project work into their classes, because it can provide anxious and non-anxious students alike with ample opportunities to use language in a non-threatening context. The first step to be taken in reducing anxiety is to have students participate in speaking tasks. Since 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 drastically relieving. This study showed that a supportive classroom atmosphere, in which language errors are considered as natural in the process of language acquisition, without overcorrection which can "draw students' attention away from communication and toward a focus on form and accuracy" (Gregersen, 2003, p. 31), can be very effectual in helping anxious students overcome their perception of low ability and fear of negative evaluation.

Moreover, teachers had better openly and verbally set the students at ease and frequently impress in their minds that there is no room for worrying about the errors, because learning and speaking a foreign language is accomplished only in virtue of committing errors. Teachers, further, are strongly advised to prevent from negative evaluation of the students either in or out of the classroom because the teacher's words and evaluation carry a great weight to the students and can exercise remarkable long-term effects on the spirit and morale of the students.

Owing to the fact that culture is not a subject easily and rapidly lending itself to change and modification, female learners are not expected to develop a new personality overnight. At least, people can care about transmitting the

previous harmful patterns of mind and behavior to the new generation and the female kids whose minds are already blank, ready to absorb current stereotypes and cultural prescriptions, and whose personalities are in the process of development, and just be hopeful about the grown up girls to find their way out of this predicament. At best, language teachers may need to personally ponder on the issue of how female learners' unwillingness to take part in speaking situations can be related to culture.

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