

## Speech Anxiety among EFL Arab College Students

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### Abstract

EFL classes in Saudi Arabia are known to be teacher-dominant. However, at college level in speaking classes, students are expected to be fluent, produce accurate sentences, and contribute a lot to class discussions. Thus, students will become very anxious because they are not used to express themselves in such classes. The purpose of the study is to explore the factors that make Saudi female college students anxious the most. Using a fourteen-item questionnaire, 22 freshmen students reported that peer comparison, being called on, low grades, being overwhelmed by many English rules, students' perception of their speaking ability, failing to understand the teacher, impromptu speech, fear of failure, being the focus of attention are the main sources of anxiety. Hence, teachers of speaking courses are advised to alleviate anxiety through using supportive messages, correcting errors implicitly, dividing class into small groups for presentations, paraphrasing difficult expressions and asking students to prepare presentations before time.

**Key words:** anxiety, EFL, FLCAS, Saudi, speaking

### Introduction

Much attention has been given to the affective domain in the process of learning in recent years. Some consider its factors as the most influencing on learners' performance. For example, Murray (1986) states that both domains, cognitive and affective, are equally essential for learning a second language. Research focusing on the affective component addresses the issue of *anxiety* as a central one to language learning. Moreover, MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) mentioned that intelligence and aptitude were the only factors considered in successful language learning till Brown (1973) suggested anxiety as another important determiner of success.

Muhareb (1997) argues that though anxiety is used frequently in different contexts, it is still an ambiguous term for many. Hence, some define the concept of anxiety to reach an understanding of its nature and symptoms. According to Kelly (1980), anxiety is "a subjective experience of apprehension or tension, imposed by the expectation of danger or distress or the need for a special effort" (p. 3). Moreover, Sellers (2000) defines anxiety as "feelings of uneasiness, frustration, self-doubt, insecurity, or apprehension and is intricately intertwined with self-esteem issues and natural ego-preserving fears" (p. 33). Such definitions shed some light on the symptoms to give a better picture of the phenomenon.

Young (1992) reports that speaking courses are the most anxiety-inducing comparing them to those of reading, writing, and listening. Thus, many researchers such as Gardner, Lalonde and Moorcroft (1985), Horwitz (1986) Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986), Cohen and Norst (1989), MacIntyre and Gardner (1991, 1993, 1994), Young (1991,1992), Phillips (1992), Kim (1998) and Gardner, Day and MacIntyre (1992) published countless papers on anxiety in which they attribute much significance to anxiety in foreign language classrooms, particularly on speaking in the foreign language.

Though the importance of anxiety in facilitating or debilitating language learning, only few examined its triggering factors among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Arab college students in speaking classes. According to Magnan (1986) and Ewald (2007), most of the conducted research on speech anxiety focused on beginning levels of language classes with low to intermediate speaking abilities. Further, Kitano (2001), Machida (2001), and Rezazadeh and Tavakoli (2009) found that female students tend to be more anxious while learning another language than male students. In addition, the researcher chose the Saudi context because English is still viewed as a foreign language in the Kingdom (Aljafen, 2013) and one reason behind Saudi students' low performance in English classes is their high-anxiety level (Alrabai, 2014). In addition, the Saudi culture promotes the role of instructors and encourages the creation of teacher-fronted classrooms in secondary and elementary schools. Hence, most Saudi college students become reluctant to answer questions in speaking classes. They become even more apprehensive once they are asked to participate in class discussions (Alrabai, 2014). Thus, the present study aims at investigating the factors that make EFL Arab college students anxious the most.

## Previous Studies

### Anxiety Types

Researchers were interested in outlining anxiety types to identify the type related to language learning. For instance, MacIntyre and Gardner (1991a, 1994a) argue that earlier studies attempting to conceptualize language anxiety mirrored the psychological research on anxiety by examining the phenomenon from three different perspectives: trait anxiety, state anxiety, and situation-specific anxiety. Trait anxiety refers to a stable predisposition to become nervous, worried, tense, and apprehensive in various types of environments and situations. State anxiety, on the other hand, is the momentary experience of anxiousness as a reaction to a current situation, and situation-specific anxiety is the experience of anxiousness in a particular type of situation, such as any test-taking situation (referred to as test anxiety). The negative effects of anxiety, such as diminished cognitive performance, are generally associated with state anxiety.

Moreover, Ando (1999), MacIntyre and Gardner (1991b) highlight that the interpretations of trait anxiety would be meaningless without taking into account other anxiety-provoking factors. For example, while two people may be assessed as having the same level of trait anxiety, one may be more apprehensive in social situations, whereas the other would be prone to nervousness during tests. Yet, others such as Spielberger and Vagg (1995) view state and situation-specific anxieties as representatives of the same phenomenon, but they adopt only one term in their studies.

As indicated by von Worde (1998), "to capture the essence of foreign language anxiety (FLA), many researchers have adopted the situation-specific approach as an alternative to using either state or trait anxiety measures" (p.15). However, Horwitz and Young (1991) consider FLA as composed of different types of anxiety including that of communication, fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety and hence another type of anxiety is developed which is unique to EFL classes.

In terms of its effects, anxiety can be facilitative or debilitating. According to Ando (1999), the former is associated with positive performance, whereas the latter is induced by

negative results and may lead to poor performance. When teachers find their students anxious, they should decide whether their anxiety is truly disadvantageous. Some such as Brown (2000) views anxiety as a grading continuum in which too much and too little anxiety may hinder the process of language learning. Such a finding is supported by Backman's (1976) study, in which the two least linguistically competent subjects scored the highest and the lowest on the anxiety scale. According to Bailey (1983), only facilitative anxiety can result in achievement in second language learning. In this study, hence, anxiety will be examined from the debilitating aspect

### **Speech Anxiety**

Speech anxiety is a common phenomenon. McCroskey (1977), for example, found that 20% of students enrolled in university classes face problems with speech anxiety. He also states that 1 out of every 4 or 5 high school and university students suffer from speech anxiety to the extent that their performance in classrooms will be badly affected. Further, Behnke, Sawyer and King (1987) claimed that students at the beginning of speaking courses are worried that the anxiety which they feel during speaking will be easily noticed by their audience. Others such as MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) argued that anxiety is a feeling closely linked to early experiences and that it can grow until students' performance is negatively affected. Young (1991) added that FLA that EFL students experience in speaking classes manifests itself through a number of symptoms including distortion of sound, intonation, rhythm, etc, forgetting newly learnt phrases, increased heartbeats and accelerated pulse rate.

### **Research on Language Anxiety in the Saudi EFL Context**

Though the significance of FLA in the EFL classrooms, only a limited number of studies were conducted in the Saudi setting and a few focused on speech anxiety. For example, Abu-Ghararah (1999) worked with secondary and university students and used the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) to examine the effect of FLA on student achievement. The researcher reported a negative relationship between the two. Using questionnaires, group and individual interviews and class observations, Al-Saraj (2013) conducted a study with ten female college students. According to participants' responses, the teacher, the teacher-learner interaction, the teaching method, fear of negative evaluation,

competitiveness, and the communication style are the most common anxiety-provoking factors. In another study, Alrabai (2014) used the FLCAS to evaluate learners' anxiety. Results indicated that the participants suffered from high to moderate levels of anxiety and that communication is the main cause of anxiety. Utilizing various anxiety-management strategies, Alrabai (2014a) used students' scores before and after the treatment as an indicator of their apprehension level, he found that teachers' anxiety-reducing practices helped lower students' anxiety level. Such studies

### **Anxiety-provoking Factors Suggested by Prior Studies**

Several educators identify different factors that may induce speech anxiety in foreign language classroom. For example, Ayres (1986) found that speech anxiety is caused by students' perception of their own abilities in regard to speaking. Thus, Allen (1997) suggested that if students know that they are proficient at one aspect of language, then anxiety is unbelievably reduced. Moreover, Neer (1982) argued that speaking in front of a class of a large number is an anxiety-provoking situation. He also noted that grade anxiety appears to contribute to speech anxiety as well as immediate oral feedback. He added that peer comparisons trigger speech anxiety since anxious students do not like to be compared to an excellent speaker. Even more, Neer claims that being the centre of attention contributes to speech anxiety as apprehensive speakers prefer to deliver their first speech in front of a small group. They also do not like to speak about themselves. In addition, they prefer to present their first speech while being seated with their colleagues in a circle, and that the class and the teacher should not ask questions while they are delivering their presentations. Further, Neer states that situation-induced apprehension triggers anxiety because anxious students do not like an impromptu speech but they prefer to speak for a short period of time and in front of smaller classes. Cohen (1983) suggests other factors such as the fear of certain audiences (older or more powerful listeners or strangers) or of the subject matter being presented (talking on material quite new to the speaker or on something controversial to the audience). In another study, Pite (1996) mentions similar findings. He argues that in speaking classes students become anxious because of continuous oral testing and negative evaluation.

MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) highlight that higher levels of anxiety seem to be

closely linked to negative early experiences in speaking courses. Also, Vogely (1998) found that 10% of students fear failure. Such a feeling is induced by negative experiences or from the belief that they lack the skills potential for successful language learning. Similarly, other educators such as Greenhouse (1989), claim that ambiguity in classrooms may induce anxiety for some students. Further, Horwitz (1986) argues that if students are not linguistically competent, they continuously suffer from anxiety provoked by ambiguity and uncertainty. Competitiveness is another cause that may enhance the development of anxiety (Horwitz et al. 1986; Young, 1991; Bailey, 1983). Also, Ando (1999) states that fear of "being called on, fear of being inferior to peers, impromptu speaking anxiety, and grade anxiety" (p.1) are the most anxiety-inducing factors. These anxiety-provoking factors may contribute to what Krashen describes as an "affective filter" which affects input as well as output of foreign and second language learners.

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

Subjects of the present study are 22 EFL female students who are native speakers of Arabic. All the subjects are majoring in English-Arabic translation at the COLT, King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Their ages range from 17 to 20. They are level-one students and they volunteered to respond to the questionnaire on 9.12.2007. They are taking writing (4 hours), reading (4 hours), listening (3 hours), vocabulary (3 hours), besides speaking (4 hours). In semesters 1 through 4, students are required to take courses in speaking, reading, writing, grammar, and listening. In semesters 6 to 10, students are taking translation courses in relation to politics, literature, medicine, commerce, education, mass media, etc. Besides written translations, students are required to do oral translations such as bilateral translation 1 (2 hours) and consecutive translation 1 (2 hours) on the sixth level. As advanced above, students are required to do written and oral translations and hence anxiety in speaking and oral translation classes is predictable.

### **Data Collection**

The questionnaire (See Appendix 1) administered to the students is based on the FLCAS developed by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986). As mentioned by von Worde (1998), the FLCAS is a 33-item scale. The decision taken on its items ranges from strongly agree to

strongly disagree. It was developed to investigate the specific factors of FLA, mainly those related to communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Horwitz et al. (1986) noted that the 33 items in the FLCAS related to the three main sources of FLA: communication apprehension (items 1, 4, 9, 14, 15, 18, 24, 27, 29, 30, and 32), test anxiety (items 3, 5, 6, 8, 10, 11, 12, 16, 17, 20, 21, 22, 25, 26, and 28), and fear of negative evaluation (items 2, 7, 13, 19, 23, 31, and 33). According to von Worde (1998), this scale has been used in many studies of anxiety by Aida (1994), Ganschow and Sparks (1996), MacIntyre and Gardner (1989), Price (1988), and Young (1986) and found to be a highly reliable and valid tool of measurement. Further, such a tool of measurement is chosen because it measures FLA regarding the four major skills (reading, writing, listening) and mainly speaking. Items in the questionnaire such as those related to speaking are chosen. Those are items 1, 2, 9, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 29, and 31. Others are not particularly related to speaking but to foreign language in general. Those include 3, 4, 7, 8, 10, 13, 15, 18, 19, 20, 30, and 33. Hence, these are modified to test only speaking anxiety. Some items are not related to speaking and thus they are discarded such as items 5, 6, 11, 12, 14, 16, 17, 21, 22, 28, and 23. Members of the following pairs such as (16, 9), (15, 4), (18, 1), (20, 3), and (25, 23, 7) are addressing the same issues, so that they are not repeated.

The FLCAS is modified by the researcher to capture all the potential sources of anxiety in speaking classrooms. As a result, the modified version of the FLCAS is a 14-item questionnaire. The purpose of the present study, as has been manifested, is to find out which factors make students anxious the most. For each item, the students have to tell whether they agree or disagree. Using agree\disagree questionnaires serve many advantages. For example, they are quick to do and do not allow for ambivalent answers.

Items which represent factors (suggested by prior studies) are included in the questionnaire such as fear of being inferior to peers, immediate oral feedback, being laughed at, impromptu speaking anxiety, having a fluent speaker and an excellent presenter in class, ambiguity due to not understanding the teacher, large classes, being on the spot, students' perception of their language abilities, the feeling that there are lots of English rules to be known to speak the language, being called on, failure, a class with many fluent students, and grade anxiety or negative evaluation. This research tool also includes questions in which

students should supply information as age, year in college and length of time spent in studying English. The modified version of the FLCAS is written in Arabic since the participants are beginners and to ensure that all the subjects have understood the items in the questionnaire.

**Questionnaire reliability.** To assess the internal consistency of the questionnaire, correlation between questionnaire items (intended to measure the same characteristic) was calculated using the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient. Table 1 shows the correlation coefficients between each subscale item and the total of items belonging to the same subscale.

Table 1

*Correlation Coefficients Between Each Scale Item and the Total of the Items Related to the Same Subscale*

Statements	Pearson's Correlation Coefficient Values (r)
Being inferior to peers	0.643**
Being called on	0.577**
Grade anxiety	0.583*
Lots of English rules to be known	0.672**
Students' perception of their abilities	0.712**
Ambiguity	0.742**
Impromptu speaking anxiety	0.693**
Failure	0.693**
Being on the spot	0.873**
Having many fluent students in class	0.693**
Immediate oral feedback	0.828**



Being laughed at	0.594**
Having a good presenter in class	0.577**
Large classes	0.627**

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*Note.* Pearson's *r* is significant at  $p < 0.01$  and  $p < 0.05$ .

Pearson's *r* varies from -1 to +1, with 0 indicating no relationship. If Pearson's correlation coefficient value is +1, it indicates a perfect positive linear relationship, but if it is -1, so there is a perfect negative linear relationship between two variables (Dowdy & Wearden, 1983). As shown above, Pearson's *r* ranges from 0.49 to 0.87 indicating a moderate to high degree of correlation between each scale item and the total of items in the scale.

Another measure of reliability known as Cronbach's alpha was used for the same questionnaire to examine how closely related a set of items are as a group. Alpha scores can be less than or equal to 1, but higher scores of alpha (those of 0.70 or higher) are desirable. In general, Cronbach's alpha for the whole questionnaire was computed to be 0.912 and this result indicates that the questionnaire is highly reliable.

### **Data Analysis**

The present study is an attempt to shed some light on the most anxiety-arousing factors among EFL Arab college students. Results showed that anxiety-arousing factors are the following arranged from the most provoking to the least provoking: (a) fear of being inferior to peers (95%), (b) being called on (86%), (c) grade anxiety (77%), (d) the feeling that there are lots of English rules to be known to speak the language (77%), (e) students' perception of their language abilities (72%), (f) ambiguity due to not understanding the teacher (72%), (g) impromptu speaking anxiety (68%), (h) failure (63%), (i) being on the spot (95%), (j) having many fluent students in class (50%), (k) immediate oral feedback (50%), (l) being laughed at (45%), (m) having a fluent speaker and an excellent presenter in class (40%), and (n) large classes (36%). Table 2 below is illustrative.

Table 2

*The Most Anxiety-arousing Factors*

Factors	Percentage	Number of Students
Being inferior to peers	95%	21
Being called on	86%	19
Grade anxiety	77%	17
Lots of English rules to be known	77%	17
Students' perception of their abilities	72%	16
Ambiguity	72%	16
Impromptu speaking anxiety	68%	15
Failure	63%	14
Being on the spot	59%	13
Having many fluent students in class	50%	11
Immediate oral feedback	50%	11
Being laughed at	45%	10
Having a good presenter in class	40%	9
Large classes	36%	8

**Discussion**

The aforementioned factors have been emphasized by prior studies. For example, being inferior to peers is an anxiety-provoking factor suggested by Neer (1982) and Ando (1999) who argue that peer comparisons do contribute to speech anxiety since anxious students do not like to be compared to other excellent speakers in class. Confirmed by Horwitz et al. (1986), Young (1991), Bailey (1983) and Hamouda (2013) competitiveness can aggravate anxiety as it grows out of negative comparisons with peers and perceived low

self-esteem. In addition, the factor of grade anxiety has been investigated by many researchers such as Ando (1999) and Pite (1996) who argue that students become anxious because of frequent oral testing and negative evaluation. Another factor tested by previous studies is students' perception of their language abilities. For example, Ayres (1986) found that speech anxiety is closely linked to how students perceive their own abilities in regard to speaking. Sultan (2012) reported that students with low perceived competence experienced more feelings of anxiety compared to those with high confidence in their abilities. In a study by Chen and Chang (2004), most anxious students have a history of learning difficulties, low grades, failing to understand the instructor and poor development skills. Further, impromptu speech as a trigger of anxiety is also investigated by Ando (1999) and Neer (1982) who state that situational difficulty contributes to anxiety because anxious students do not like to deliver unprepared presentations but they prefer to speak for just 5 minutes and before only a few number of students. Neer (1982) also examines the factor of being on the spot as he claims that the centre of attention contributes to speech anxiety because apprehensive speakers prefer to deliver their first speech in front of a small group. They do not like to talk about themselves and they prefer to present their first speech seated with their colleagues in a circle, and that the class and the teacher do not ask questions while they are delivering their presentations. Additionally, Jang (2003) mentions that students are afraid that other students will laugh at them when the teacher corrects their mistakes. For the factor of having large classes, Neer (1982) argues that speaking in front of a large class is a very threatening experience. He explains that "situational difficulty contributes to anxiety since the apprehensive student prefers to speak for just 5 minutes and before only half the class" (p.10).

There are important pedagogical implications that can be drawn from the present study. For example, Near (1981) tests several instructional methods which he believes may reduce or provoke anxiety. He argues that the first speech must be as non-stressful as possible. Thus, delivering one's speech in front of a small group, volunteering to speak or being among the last speakers in class may reduce anxiety. In offering oral feedback, Neer (1982) reports that students do not like to hear oral comments on their presentations in class. However, teachers' feedback is as important as the speech itself. Without any feedback, students will not understand how well their presentation was received by the audience. Instructors need to

explain to students the importance of feedback between one speech and another and how it will improve their speaking ability. Similarly, Tolhuizen (2006) highlights other advantages of immediate oral feedback such as accuracy and elaboration. He further states that oral critiques in class helps students practice their critical thinking skills and they become ready to evaluate others and eventually themselves. However, oral critiques can be introduced in class without the effect of lowering students' self-confidence. For example, along with oral critiques, teachers can include supportive messages that convey a sense of worth, acceptance, equality and willingness to work with the student (Tolhuizen, 2006). Moreover, correction should be done in a conversational manner where instructors rephrase what a student has said incorrectly and such corrections should be done in a non-threatening manner (Haskin, Smith & Racine, 2003) or implicitly (Jang, 2003).

## **Conclusion**

The Arab culture is similar to other Asian cultures (Kubota, 1999) that value the teacher and discourage individualism and self-expression. Hence, Arab learners tend to be more anxious than other EFL students. Based on this, the present study is an attempt to shed some light on the most anxiety-arousing factors experienced by EFL Arab college students. Using a questionnaire based on Horwitz's, results showed that anxiety-arousing factors are the following arranged from the most provoking to the least provoking: (a) fear of being inferior to peers, (b) being called on, (c) grade anxiety, (d) the feeling that there are lots of English rules to be known to speak the language, (e) students' perception of their language abilities, (f) ambiguity due to not understanding the teacher, (g) impromptu speaking anxiety, (h) failure, (i) being on the spot, (j) having many fluent students in class, (k) immediate oral feedback, (l) being laughed at, (m) having a fluent speaker and an excellent presenter in class, and (n) large classes.

Pedagogically, it is the responsibility of teachers to understand the problem of anxiety, mainly its causes, and the possible strategies used to alleviate it (Mandeville, 1993). It is advisable, for example, that teachers use anxiety-management strategies such as the use of supportive messages, paraphrasing what has been said to avoid ambiguity, suggesting topics for presentations in advance, and implicit error correction. As for explicit error correction, it can be effective only if a teacher explains to her students the benefits of

explicit error correction. In this way, explicit error correction is not meant to lower students' anxiety.

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## Appendix 1

### Speech Anxiety Questionnaire

العمر: \_\_\_\_\_  
المستوى: \_\_\_\_\_  
عدد سنوات دراستك للغة الإنجليزية: \_\_\_\_\_

لا أوافق	أوافق	أشعر بالقلق عندما ...
		1. لا أحصل على درجة جيدة مقارنة بأقراني في الفصل.
		2. تصحح الأستاذة أخطائي.
		3. يسخرن زميلاتي من طريقة تحدثي للإنجليزية.
		4. لا أكون حضرت ما أريد التحدث عنه.
		5. يحتوي الصف على الكثير من الطالبات القادرات على التحدث بالإنجليزية بطلاقة.
		6. يتفوق غيري في عرض موضوعه.
		7. لا أفهم ما تتكلم عنه الأستاذة.
		8. يكون الصف مكتظ بالطالبات.
		9. أقف لعرض موضوعي.
		10. أتوقف كثيرا أثناء تحدثي لإيجاد الكلمات المناسبة واختيار الزمن المناسب للجمل ونطق الكلمات بشكل صحيح.

		11. أشعر أن القواعد التي تُلزمني لأتحدث اللغة الإنجليزية بطلاقة كثيرة جدا.
		12. تسألني الأستاذة أسئلة لم أكن مستعدة للإجابة عنها.
		13. أفكر فيما سينتج عن رسوبي في مادة الحديث.
		14. لا أحقق درجة جيدة في مادة الحديث.

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