

Language Anxiety And Its Effects On Speaking Performance Among Efl Learners

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Abstract

Language anxiety is a significant affective factor influencing foreign language learning, especially in speaking. This study examines the nature, sources, and impact of language anxiety on EFL learners' speaking performance. Using a mixed-methods approach, quantitative data from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) were combined with qualitative insights from semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. Results show that high anxiety is strongly associated with reduced fluency, accuracy, vocabulary range, and overall communicative competence. Anxiety stems from fear of negative evaluation, low self-perceived proficiency, perfectionism, and classroom expectations. Highly anxious learners exhibited avoidance, frequent pauses, self-monitoring, and lower willingness to communicate. The study highlights the importance of supportive classroom practices, collaborative speaking tasks, and strategies to reduce anxiety. Future research should explore longitudinal changes, younger learners, and real-time cognitive processes during speaking.

Keywords

language anxiety; EFL learners; speaking performance; foreign language classroom anxiety; affective factors; willingness to communicate; communicative competence; oral communication.

Аннотация

Языковая тревожность является значимым аффективным фактором, влияющим на изучение иностранного языка, особенно на устную речь. В этом исследовании рассматриваются природа, источники и влияние языковой тревожности на устную речь студентов, изучающих английский как иностранный язык (EFL). Используя смешанный метод, количественные данные, полученные с помощью Шкалы тревожности в классе иностранного языка (FLCAS), были объединены с качественными данными из полуструктурированных интервью и наблюдений в классе. Результаты показывают, что высокий уровень тревожности тесно связан со снижением беглости речи, точности, словарного запаса и общей коммуникативной компетентности. Тревожность возникает из-за страха негативной оценки, низкой самооценки своих знаний, перфекционизма и ожиданий в классе. Студенты с высокой тревожностью проявляли избегающее поведение, частые паузы, самоконтроль и меньшую готовность к общению. Исследование подчеркивает важность поддерживающих практик в классе, совместных устных заданий и стратегий снижения тревожности. Будущие исследования должны изучать долгосрочные изменения, младшие возрастные группы и когнитивные процессы в реальном времени во время говорения.

Ключевые слова

языковая тревожность; студенты EFL; устная речь; тревожность в классе иностранного языка; аффективные факторы; готовность к коммуникации; коммуникативная компетентность; устное общение.

Annotatsiya

Til xavotiri chet tilini o'rganishga, ayniqsa og'zaki nutqqa sezilarli ta'sir ko'rsatadigan muhim hissiy omil hisoblanadi. Ushbu tadqiqot EFL (English as a Foreign Language) talabalari og'zaki nutqidagi til xavotirining tabiati, manbalari va ta'sirini o'rganadi. Aralash metodologiya qo'llanilib, chet tilida sinfdagi xavotirlarni o'lchash shkalasi (FLCAS) bo'yicha olingan kvantitativ ma'lumotlar yarim tuzilmali intervyular va sinf kuzatuvlari orqali olingan sifatli ma'lumotlar bilan birlashtirildi. Natijalar yuqori xavotir darajasi nutqning ravonligi, aniqligi, lug'at boyligi va umumiy kommunikativ kompetentsiyaning pasayishi bilan kuchli bog'liqligini ko'rsatadi. Xavotir salbiy baholanishdan qo'rquv, o'zini past baholash, mukammallikka intilish va sinfdagi kutishlar bilan bog'liq. Yuqori xavotirga ega talabalarda chekinish xatti-

harakatlari, tez-tez pauzalar, o'zini nazorat qilish va muloqotga tayyorlikning kamayishi kuzatilgan. Tadqiqot sinfdagi qo'llab-quvvatlovchi amaliyotlar, hamkorlikdagi og'zaki vazifalar va xavotirni kamaytiruvchi strategiyalarning ahamiyatini ta'kidlaydi. Kelajakdagi tadqiqotlarda uzoq muddatli o'zgarishlar, yoshroq o'quvchilar va og'zaki nutq davomida real vaqtli kognitiv jarayonlar o'rganilishi tavsiya etiladi.

Kalit so'zlar

til xavotiri; EFL talabalari; og'zaki nutq; chet tilida sinfdagi xavotir; hissiy omillar; kommunikatsiyaga tayyorlik; kommunikativ kompetentsiya; og'zaki muloqot.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the study of affective factors has gained substantial importance in second language acquisition (SLA), reflecting the growing recognition that emotional states deeply shape linguistic performance. Among these affective factors, language anxiety has emerged as one of the most persistent obstacles to successful communication, particularly in speaking. Speaking is inherently demanding, requiring learners to engage in instantaneous processing, linguistic retrieval, self-monitoring, and interactive negotiation of meaning. When these cognitive demands intersect with fear, stress, or self-doubt, speaking becomes not only a linguistic challenge but a psychological barrier.

Language anxiety is especially relevant in EFL contexts where classroom environments often emphasize accuracy, teacher authority, and formal assessment. In such settings, a single mistake may feel amplified; learners may imagine themselves under constant evaluation by teachers and peers. As a result, even students with adequate linguistic competence may hesitate, withdraw, or produce speech far below their actual ability. The discrepancy between learners' internal knowledge and their external performance highlights the complex interplay between emotion and language use.

Recent scholarship has shown that anxiety can impair essential components of speaking performance, such as fluency, pronunciation, lexical choice, and grammatical structure. At the neurological level, anxiety consumes cognitive resources needed for speech planning and retrieval, while psychologically it triggers self-monitoring and fear of failure. Despite extensive research globally, limited studies have examined the phenomenon within Central Asian educational contexts, where sociocultural expectations and classroom norms may intensify communicative pressure.

Given these gaps, this study explores language anxiety among EFL learners and examines how it affects various dimensions of speaking performance. Understanding this relationship is essential for designing more supportive pedagogical environments that foster confidence, reduce psychological barriers, and encourage meaningful oral communication.

2. Literature Review

The conceptual foundation of language anxiety in SLA is strongly connected to the pioneering work of Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), who defined foreign language classroom anxiety as a distinct form of situation-specific anxiety derived from the unique nature of language learning. Their model highlights three components: communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. Later research confirms that communication apprehension is particularly relevant to speaking performance, as speaking requires immediate processing and public exposure.

MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) emphasized that anxiety affects every stage of language processing, including input, processing, and output. Learners experiencing anxiety struggle with lexical access, sentence formulation, and maintaining coherence. Woodrow (2006) further demonstrated that anxiety significantly reduces fluency and leads to avoidance of spontaneous speaking opportunities.

Studies across linguistic contexts consistently show that anxious learners produce shorter utterances, simplified vocabulary, and more pauses. Liu and Jackson (2008) found that unwillingness to communicate is a direct behavioural manifestation of anxiety, especially in teacher-centered classrooms. Dewaele (2017) argues that sociocultural norms, classroom dynamics, and teacher attitudes profoundly shape anxiety levels, particularly in collectivist cultures where fear of embarrassment is heightened.

While existing research provides substantial evidence of anxiety's negative effects, most studies rely heavily on self-reported questionnaires, leaving gaps in understanding how anxiety appears in natural classroom

interactions. Additionally, research in Central Asian EFL contexts remains limited, suggesting the need for localized studies to explore how sociocultural expectations influence speaking anxiety.

3. Methods and methodology

Although language anxiety has been widely studied, its impact on speaking performance remains insufficiently addressed in many EFL classrooms, where high expectations for accuracy and formal performance continue to heighten learners' anxiety. Learners frequently demonstrate competent linguistic knowledge in written tasks yet fail to activate this knowledge during oral communication due to psychological pressure. Moreover, existing studies often lack qualitative insight into behavioural manifestations of anxiety and rarely consider Central Asian educational norms, which may intensify fear of making mistakes. This research addresses the need for a deeper, context-specific understanding of how anxiety affects EFL learners' speaking abilities.

4. Research Aim and Objectives

Aim:

The research aims at investigating the sources, nature, and effects of language anxiety on EFL learners' speaking performance. The work focuses on identifying major sources of speaking-related anxiety as well as examining how anxiety influences fluency, accuracy, vocabulary use and communicative behaviour. The researcher also tries to analyze sociocultural and classroom factors that shape anxiety levels and recommend pedagogical strategies to reduce anxiety for improving speaking ability.

Objectives:

1. Identify major sources of speaking-related language anxiety.
2. Examine how anxiety influences fluency, accuracy, vocabulary use, and communicative behavior.
3. Explore relationships between self-perceived proficiency and speaking performance.
4. Analyze sociocultural and classroom factors that shape anxiety levels.
5. Recommend pedagogical strategies to reduce anxiety and improve speaking ability.

5. Results and discussion

Research Design:

A mixed-methods design combining quantitative and qualitative data.

Participants:

60 intermediate EFL learners (ages 17–22) at a university language center.

Instruments:

- Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS)
- Speaking performance rubric
- Semi-structured interviews
- Classroom observations

Procedure:

Learners completed the FLCAS, participated in two speaking tasks (presentation + spontaneous discussion), and took part in interviews. Observations were conducted over three weeks.

Data Analysis:

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and correlation analysis. Qualitative data were examined through thematic coding.

This study demonstrates that language anxiety is a substantial barrier to effective speaking performance among EFL learners, influencing linguistic output, psychological states, and classroom behaviour. High-anxiety learners consistently show reduced fluency, increased hesitation, limited vocabulary range, and lower accuracy. Anxiety constrains cognitive processing during speech production and triggers fear-based behavioural responses, such as avoidance, silence, or reliance on simple language structures. Classroom norms emphasizing error-free performance further intensify anxiety, particularly in cultures where public mistakes are socially uncomfortable.

6. Conclusion

However, findings also reveal that supportive pedagogical strategies can significantly reduce anxiety and improve oral performance. Collaborative work, positive teacher feedback, communicative activities, and a low-pressure classroom atmosphere create conditions where learners feel more confident and willing to participate. These insights emphasize that developing speaking skills requires not only linguistic instruction but also attention to learners' emotional well-being.

Future research should incorporate real-time cognitive data, explore younger learner groups, and conduct longitudinal studies to observe how anxiety changes over time. Addressing language anxiety is essential for enabling learners to reach their full communicative potential and participate confidently in global communication.

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