بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

Shiraz University
Faculty of Literature and Humanities

M.A. Thesis in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL)

VARIABLES PREDICTING ENGLISH ORAL PROFICIENCY AMONG IRANIAN EFL STUDENTS

By

MARZIEH SOUZANDEHFAR

Supervised by

A.M. Riazi, Ph.D.

January 2009

دانشکده ادبیات و علوم انسانی

پایان‌نامه کارشناسی ارشد در رشته آموزش زبان انگلیسی

عوامل پیشگویی کنندهٔ مهارت گفتاری زبان آموزان ایرانی در زبان انگلیسی به عنوان یک زبان خارجی

توسط

مرضیه سوزنده فر

استاد راهنما:

دکتر عبدالمهدی ریاضی

۱۳۸۸/۳/۳۱

بهمن ماه ۱۳۸۷

In the Name Of God

Declaration

The undersigned, Marzieh Souzandehfar (850295), the student of Teaching English as a Foreign Language at Shiraz University College of Literature and Humanities, hereby declare that this thesis is the result of my own research, and wherever, in this thesis, other peoples' sources have been used, I have given their exact address and specifications in the reference section. I also assert that my research and its topic are not the repetition of other peoples' works, and I commit myself not to publish or let others have access to the achievements of the thesis without the prior permission of the university. In conformity with the regulations of mental and intellectual ownership, Shiraz University reserves all the rights of the present work.

Name: Marzieh Souzandehfar

Signature and date: *M. Souzandehfar*

18.5.2009

IN THE NAME OF GOD

VARIABLES PREDICTING ENGLISH ORAL PROFICIENCY AMONG IRANIAN EFL STUDENTS

BY

MARZIEH SOUZANDEHFAR

THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES IN PARTIAL
FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER
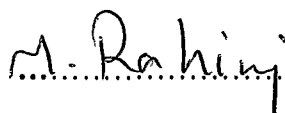OF ARTS (M.A.)

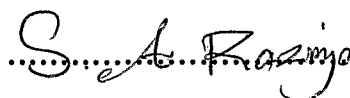IN

TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

SHIRAZ UNIVERSITY

SHIRAZ, IRAN

**EVALUATED AND APPROVED BY THE THESIS COMMITTEE AS:
EXCELLENT**

.... A. M. RIAZI, Ph.D., ASSOCIATE PROF. OF
SECOND LANGUAGE EDUCATION
(CHAIRMAN)

.... M. RAHIMI, Ph.D., ASSISTANT PROF. OF
TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN
LANGUAGE

.... S. A. RAZMJOO, Ph.D., ASSISTANT PROF. OF
TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN
LANGUAGE

JANUARY 2009

DEDICATED TO MY DEAR FAMILY MEMBERS AND IN PARTICULAR MY BELOVED SISTER

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I should express my deepest gratitude to Dr. Riazi, my supervisor, for his continued encouragement, support and understanding. In fact, without his valuable guidance, comments and insight, this work would not have been completed.

I would also like to thank Dr. Rahimi and Dr. Razmjoo, my advisors, for their helpful comments and suggestions on the manuscript of this thesis. I deeply appreciate their valuable contributions to the completion of the thesis.

I would like to express my appreciation to my dear family members, my father and my mother, for their love and devotion, and my two brothers for their great help and support.

And last, but not least, I must express my heartfelt thanks to my dear sister and my only sister, without whose moral support and emotional support, pursuing my studies to this level was definitely impossible.

ABSTRACT

VARIABLES PREDICTING ENGLISH ORAL PROFICIENCY AMONG IRANIAN EFL STUDENTS

BY

MARZIEH SOUZANDEHFAR

This study intended to investigate the predictive power of the four variables of L1 speaking ability, L2 proficiency, speaking strategies and extroversion/introversion personality styles in relation to L2 speaking ability. To this end, 47 freshman students (13 male and 34 female learners) majoring in English Literature at Shiraz University were interviewed in the language laboratory using IELTS type questions in order to examine their L2 speaking ability. To test their L1 speaking ability, the translation of two parallel IELTS tests were employed. The participants' L2 proficiency was tested using a truncated version of a standardized English proficiency test. Khodadadi's (2000) speaking strategy questionnaire was used to examine the participants' use of speaking strategies. Based on Eysenck's (1973) Extraversion Questionnaire, Students' personality styles (extroversion/introversion) were determined. Using Multiple Regression, it was revealed that the four independent variables, i.e. L1 speaking ability, L2 proficiency, speaking strategies and extroversion/introversion personality attributes, jointly predicted 42% of the variance in L2 speaking ability. The result of ANOVA also showed that the Regression was significant (Sig. = .000). Finally, the Coefficients table revealed that L1 speaking ability, L2 proficiency, and Personality style were individually able to predict L2 speaking ability significantly. Speaking strategy did not have such a result.

I

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CONTENTS   **PAGE**

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

1.0. Introduction

In the first part of this chapter the current position of speaking English in the EFL context of Iran is discussed. In the next section, Levelt's (1989) model of speech production is presented. In section three the theoretical framework of the study will be stated. Section four presents the conceptual framework of the study. The objectives of the study are presented in section five. Moreover, section six is devoted to the significance of the study.

1.1. The Position of Speaking English in Iran

It is perhaps no exaggeration to say that being able to speak English in the EFL context of Iran is the most desirable and prestigious manifestation of one's command of this language and at the same time most challenging task given the fact that Iran is an EFL context.

While learners of English are so much interested in developing their speaking proficiency, this is not usually the case for other skills such as reading, writing, or listening. In fact, those learners who are able to speak this international language, which has now become the lingua franca of the business, technological and academic worlds, are considered to be in a state of distinctiveness and superiority over their peers.

Throughout our country today, we can see so many English language institutes in which students of different ages and from different levels of L1 academic proficiency enroll with the hope that they can speak this language fluently. Furthermore, in a developing country like Iran, where tendency for

1

foreign investment increases day after day and consequently, employers look for good English speakers, it is important for students to learn to speak English well and for teachers to know how to teach speaking well.

On the other hand, as Murphy (1991) states, "oral communication is a complex and multifaceted language process" (p. 51). In fact, "speaking in a second language involves the development of a particular type of communication skill which, in turn, differs from reading and writing skills" (Bygate, 2001 p. 14). Skehan (1998) suggests that "speakers' fluency, accuracy and complexity of speech demand capacity, and that there is likely to be a trade-off between these aspects of the skill" (cited in Bygate, 2001 p. 17). This complexity especially increases when the education is in an EFL context like Iran, where there is no direct contact with native speakers of this language. All this needs even greater effort on the part of both teachers and students.

Unfortunately, the present condition of development in English speaking skill is disappointing in the educational system of our country. Despite studying English language for six years in schools, students still rush to language institutes in order to improve their skills in this language. But the worse news is that even when the students graduate from these institutes they can hardly understand, write or speak English fluently. The only things in which they can probably make progress are grammar, vocabulary, and reading to some extent.

The more disappointing condition can be observed in our universities throughout the country. In these universities students pass major courses in their fields without passing enough courses in general English. That is, although at the end of the four years of BA or BS degree, students might show a good command of technical courses, this is not the case when it comes to their general proficiency including the four skills of reading, writing, listening and particularly speaking which is a productive and spontaneous skill. Students might also continue their studies in higher

degrees successfully or even become university professors, while they are still in low levels of general proficiency, especially with regard to their productive skills (speaking and writing).

This annoying condition of English speaking in schools, language institutes and especially our universities, makes one think about the roots of the problem.

One reason for this troublesome condition could be the inadequacy of the educational programs executed in such institutes. For example, as Riazi (2002) states, productive skills like speaking and writing do not receive enough attention.

> The curriculum of the undergraduate program of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) and English Literature – currently being practiced in Iranian colleges and universities – includes fourteen credits on writing. This is approximately one tenth of the whole credits required for the fulfillment of the BA program in TEFL. (p. 3)

This defectiveness could exist in case of educational programs related to speaking skill as well. One should remember that the situation is even worse in other fields of study in which students take only six credit English courses.

However, the bigger problem lies somewhere else and that is, the real paucity of research on this skill, particularly in our country as an EFL context. Generally speaking, compared to literacy skills, oral skills like listening and speaking are not paid enough attention to. This can be easily discovered by having a look at the titles of articles in different volumes of any journal in TEFL. Sometimes it happens that out of a TEFL journal which has been published for over 30 years, one can hardly extract even 5 articles on speaking. The worse situation is in our own country. Again,

compared to the literacy skills of reading and writing, a much smaller number of studies have been devoted to speaking. Also, skimming over the lists of MA theses and doctoral dissertations in a department of foreign languages, one can find only a few studies on this skill. In fact, research on L2 speaking is still in its infancy not only in Iran but also in other countries.

Why is research so important in the development of speaking skill? The answer is obvious. As it was mentioned before, speaking is a complex task in which so many variables such as cognitive, affective, personality and contextual factors are involved. As a result, recognition, investigation and control of these factors seem to be vital in the development and improvement of this challenging and at the same time desirable skill. This can be done through different studies the results of which can be applied to our classrooms in schools, institutes and universities. In this way, we are able to make improvement in educational programs and development in our students' general English proficiency including speaking which is considered as the most favorable skill in the EFL context of Iran.

1.2. Levelt's Model of Speech Production

According to Bygate (2001), "to understand what is involved in developing oral L2 skills, it is useful to consider the nature and conditions of speech" (p. 16). As a result, in this part, one of the most current approaches of speech production, i.e. Levelt's (1989) model, which is a psycholinguistic information-processing model will be introduced. This model is able to give us a path to follow in order to better understand learners' performance in L2 production.

According to Levelt's (1989) model, speech production involves four major processes, namely, conceptualization, formulation, articulation and self-monitoring. The conceptualization is responsible for planning the message content. This step is itself divided into macroplanning and microplanning. During the macroplanning process the speaker elaborates

4

the communicative goals and retrieves the information needed to express such goals. During the microplanning process the speaker selects "the information whose expression may realize the communicative goals" (Levelt, 1989, p. 5). The next component of Levelt's model of speech production is the formulator. This component is responsible for grammatical and phonological encoding. In other words, the formulator gathers syntactic, morphological, and phonological information about the lexical items – which are stored in the mental lexicon – in order to form the utterances that will be produced. The third component, the articulator, is responsible for the phonetic and articulatory plans for the utterance. That is to say that, "the execution of the phonic plan by the musculature of the respiratory, the laryngeal, and the supralaryngeal systems" (Levelt, 1989 p. 12) is activated in order for the speaker to actually produce the utterance. Finally, self-monitoring is concerned with those language users who are able to identify and self-correct mistakes.

1.3. Theoretical Framework

In 1989, Sparks, Ganschow and Pohlman, for the first time, proposed the Linguistic Deficit Hypothesis (LCDH) in a learning disabilities (LD) journal, and later on, in 1991, Sparks and Gaschow introduced this hypothesis into the foreign language (FL) literature.

> The LCDH was initially proposed as a plausible explanation for the FL learning problems of a particular FL at-risk population, students with LD (Sparks, Ganschow & Pohlman, 1989). Since its appearance in the literature, however, the authors have encountered large numbers of students who are not diagnosed as LD but who exhibit FL learning difficulties. Like Pimsleur's "underachievers," these students may achieve average and above average grades in their other subjects, yet struggling in a FL course (Sundland & McIntyre, 1964). The term

"linguistic coding," initially adopted by Vellutino and Scanlon to describe the language-based deficits of students with reading disabilities (Vellutino & Scanlon, 1986), was selected by the authors of the LCDH to refer to the deficiencies of the students with LD in one or more of the linguistic codes (phonological, syntactic, and semantic) of their native language system. These students are said to display either subtle or overt difficulties with the oral and written aspects of language.... Basically, the theory suggests that students who do poorly in FL courses may have language problems in their native language that interfere with their ability to learn a FL. Its authors posit the possibility of a causal connection between native and FL learning, and indict phonology, or phonological coding, as the most plausible area of difficulty. (cited in Sparks & Gonschow, 1993, p. 58)

In fact, "the major premise underlying the LCDH is that the primary causal factors in successful or unsuccessful FL learning are linguistic; students who have difficulties learning an FL are likely to have overt or subtle difficulties in their NL" (Ganschow & Sparks, 2001, p. 93). Ganschow and Sparks (2001) justified their claim about the students' language-based problems in learning a FL by reasoning that "because FL learning is the learning of 'language', the primary locus of FL learning problems would be in the students' language learning skills" (p. 89).

1.4. Conceptual Framework

While Sparks and Ganschow believe that FL learning difficulties are language based, some other researchers like Gardner and his colleagues (e.g., Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Gardner & Smythe,1975; Gardner, 1985; Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993) , Horwitz and her colleagues (e.g., Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986; Horwitz & Young, 1991; Young, 1999;