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FROM EFL CLASSROOM INTO THE MAINSTREAM: A SOCIO-CULTURAL INVESTIGATION OF SPEAKING ANXIETY AMONG FEMALE EFL LEARNERS

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts in English Language Teaching

By

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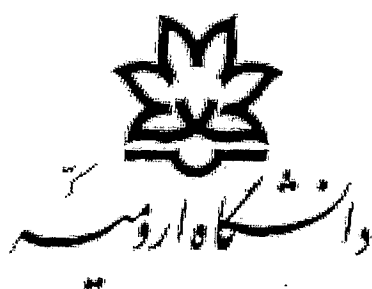
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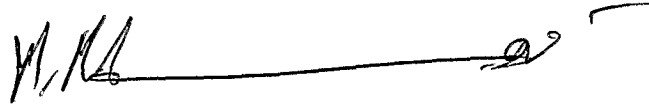
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Hereby we are submitting a thesis written by **Forouhar Mohamadi** entitled "FROM EFL CLASSROOM INTO THE MAINSTREAM: A SOCIO-CULTURAL INVESTIGATION OF SPEAKING ANXIETY AMONG FEMALE EFL LEARNERS". We have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content, and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT).

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Dedicated to

I dedicate this thesis to,

my dad;

to whom I wish I could donate the spirit of my

life,

with our all extinguished shared memories and

recollections;

my father,

who is everything to me,

and whose love is irreplaceable with anyone else's

love.

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ABSTRACT

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

This research study with the aim of examining the rate of foreign language anxiety in male and female language learners administered FLCAS (*Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale*) to two groups of male and female learners, quite equal in number (N=38, each group), age and language proficiency. According to the results of FLCAS for males and females, the rate of foreign language anxiety proved to be significantly higher in female learners as compared to their male counterparts. The mean score in FLCAS for male's anxiety was calculated as 80.97, and it was 92.28 for females. From the total 38 female learners, 22 were recognized as experiencing anxiety in language class, 14 of whom, as high-anxious learners, were invited to attend the qualitative phase of the study, proceeding with interview sessions with the subjects. Along with that, six language instructors-four females and two males-were interviewed. The interview questions revolved over the common sources of foreign language anxiety for learners focusing on anxiety during speaking and communication, and some final exclusive questions to arrive at an answer for the magnitude of the females' anxiety over that of the males. 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 about their language performance, particularly as to speaking activities and communicative tasks.

Keywords: foreign language anxiety, communication apprehension (CA), self-perception, gender.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CA	Communication Apprehension
CCA	Classroom Communication Apprehension
CLT	Communicative Language Teaching
CM	Cognitive Modification
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
FL	Foreign Language
FLCAS	Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale
ICA	Intercultural Communication Apprehension
L1	First Language
L2	Second Language
LAD	Language Acquisition Device
NNs	Non-native Speakers
SDT	Systematic Desensitization Therapy
SLA	Second Language Acquisition
ST	Skills Training
TL	Target Language
TMT	Terror Management Theory
TOEFL	Test of English as a Foreign Language
URT	Uncertainty Reduction Theory
WTC	Willingness to Communicate

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

In order to take risks, you need a learning environment in which you do not feel threatened or intimidated. In order to speak, you need to feel you will be heard and that what you are saying is worth hearing. In order to continue your language learning, you need to feel motivated. In order to succeed, you need an atmosphere in which anxiety levels are low and comfort levels are high. (Leki, 1999, p. 80)

I had a professor (Ghaemi, F, Ph.D) during BA studies who used to tell us a memorable sentence in a joking manner but conceptually serious and high and promising: “you need to be rude in the language class”. This is actually a true statement, a way to success, as the ultimate goal of every language learning is speaking in the target language and you do not seem to know a language unless you speak it well. In fact, one may be quite competent in reading, writing and listening but lacking in speaking skill and still unable to communicate efficiently via foreign language. This is, in particular, noticeable for those teachers who entirely attribute the learners’ unwillingness for speaking to their linguistic deficiencies. Many a time we have confronted less proficient learners who are far better speakers than more proficient learners. We do not, however, deny the role of linguistic proficiency as an indispensable facilitating variable in speaking ability. Some research studies have indicated that anxiety decreases when experience and proficiency increases (Gardner, Smythe & Brunet, 1977). On the contrary, some other studies have concluded that upper-level students experience higher anxiety (Ewald, 2007; Kitano, 2001). These contradictory results may arise from the age of the learners, so that upper-level learners usually consist of adults, and children, regarding the process of learning in the course of time, are normally of low language proficiency, classified as beginners, and it would be plausible to attribute this discrepancy in results to the learners’ age. In this sense, adult language learners feel more anxious and less at ease because self-consciousness and the fear of negative evaluation is more prevailing among adults when compared with children and less aged students. Another reason may reside in upper classes’ more frequent demand in taking speaking roles on the part of the learners, and consequently

adult learners show more anxiety. We may then truly conclude that, on the whole and as a general and irrefutable fact, and irrespective of exceptional situations, the higher the learners' language proficiency, the lower anxiety exists within them. 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.

In order to be able to speak fluently, say, to succeed in the process of language learning, one must speak it. There is no other way out! For this purpose, one must run the risk, meet the hazard and disregard anxiety-provoking stimuli. Speaking is the most threatening component of foreign language learning; it is associated with feelings of uneasiness, frustration, self-doubt, and apprehension. This is because it involves public display of abilities. Nonetheless, the learners' tendency to undertake risky actions is an important characteristic of successful foreign language learning.

Anxiety remarkably hinders speaking and learning speaking. Sometimes the risk students have to take during the experience of learning to speak a language is to cope with inappropriate feedbacks on the part of the teachers which may prevent a student from speaking forever. Thus, teachers should be, somewhat, psychologists as well. From the perspective of a language learner, I have witnessed situations in which students kept silent till the end of a course upon an improper attitude of the teacher towards their errors. 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 et al., 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, Horwitz & Cope, 1986). One of the reasons for this may be the nature of speaking which is the spontaneous manifestation of knowledge. The other reason emanates from the inadequate speaking opportunities in schools and universities or generally EFL contexts such as that of our country where listening to the teacher is the most frequent classroom experience. That is why speaking the foreign language as a scarcely happening experience is almost always associated with anxiety.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The intended objective of learning a second or foreign language may be something other than speaking and it may suffice for some language learners to solely develop, say, their writing skills, on the basis of their specific occupational goals. The public wisdom, however, expects individuals to speak the language well enough to be fairly reckoned a successful language learner. Moreover, current approaches to language learning emphasize the importance of oral interaction between students, which is likely the most important source of anxiety for language learners (Ellis, 1994; Frantzen & Magnan, 2005; Koch & Terrell, 1991; Matsuda & Gobel, 2004; Young, 1991). Speaking seems to be a skill which is problematic for most language learners and there are many cases that even highly advanced EFL learners, 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. Why is that? How does speaking differ from other skills that it gives rise to such inadequacies among the majority of language learners? As far as other skills are concerned, one can practice them personally at home; whereas, practicing speaking skill without a responsive interlocutor is nonsense and something absurd. Speaking is built upon mutual interactive exchanges.

This communicative nature of speaking which demands the existence of a second party generates anxiety in learners and encourages them to take as less speaking roles as possible. The result is advanced language learners who are unable to speak and this is really an educational catastrophe. Further, in a foreign language context, like that of our country, the development of speaking skill, due to the rarity of speaking opportunities, if any at all, outside the classroom may be even more challenging. Then, how shall we proceed in order not to let such a thing happen? 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. As Cubuku (2008) puts, this anxiety occurs in varying degrees and is characterized by emotional feelings of worry, fear, and apprehension. Teachers, however, do not always

identify anxious students, and often attribute their unwillingness to participate in speaking tasks to factors such as lack of motivation, or low performance.

Another reason that language learners are reluctant to get engaged in speaking possibly emanates from their mispronunciation of English words. Some students may prefer to keep silent in class discussions either because they do not know the correct pronunciation of some words or because their idealistic aspirations urges them to remain silent until they can attain a native-like pronunciation. For certain, we need to know the sources of this anxiety in order to decide how to eliminate or mitigate it and thereby, set the learners at ease enough to get started with speaking experience. Throughout this thesis, along with reporting the common causes of anxiety, we aim to exclusively investigate culturally-grounded sources of anxiety in female learners. One may view language anxiety simply as a manifestation of other general types of anxiety such as test anxiety or public-speaking anxiety. Public-speaking anxiety has long been an accepted psychological phenomenon. Daly (1991) noted that the fear of speaking in public exceeded even such phobias as fear of snakes and heights. Therefore, any investigation regarding speaking in the foreign language class should take into consideration how much anxiety is generated by the fear of speaking in general, and how much by the fear of speaking in the foreign language (Young, 1990). Foreign language anxiety is a complex psychological construct, and is difficult to be precisely defined, which is perhaps due to the intricate hierarchy of intervening variables as noted by Trylong (1987). Horwitz and Young (1991) viewed language anxiety as a particular form of anxiety because there is something unique in the language learning processes which makes some persons nervous or anxious. On the other hand, Young (1992) suggested that situation-specific studies, which ask respondents about various aspects of their particular anxiety, will offer more to understanding the phenomenon.

1.3 Significance of the Study

All of us have experienced the feeling of anxiety more or less at one time or another in different situations, mainly while speaking in a foreign language or even in our native language; situations such as taking a test, delivering a lecture, speaking with foreigners or people with whom we are in formal terms and so forth. Speaking is associated with stress and

anxiety. Thus language learners evade it for fear that their deficiencies might be revealed to public. Aiming to prevent this disclosure of inabilities, they postpone speaking in the hope of some day, in higher levels, to be able to talk fluently. They are wrongly in the fancy that if they elevate to higher levels, they can automatically talk. They are ignorant of the fact that they might be through with the final levels in the course of language learning and competent in other skills, but still unable to talk satisfactorily, whereas language learners in lower levels might be able to express themselves freely by their limited competence. These imperfections, however, are inevitable and kind of natural in the attempt towards learning speaking skill. Such jittery learners do not take account of the many mistakes a child commits in the way to learn and speak their first language.

Although first language acquisition and second language learning are quite two different situations, the learners' viewpoint in an error-free speech, waiting for the great leap to come about, turns out to be a failure for language learners, just hampering them to avail from speaking practice opportunities. Perfection cannot be attained overnight. It is worth noting as well that teachers mostly have the students read, write, or listen, but as to speaking skill, they normally ask for volunteers to take the floor because it would be out of the patience and timing of the class to wait for less proficient learners to handle the flow of talk. Besides, underperforming in speaking is very obvious and the learner's inadequacy in producing prompt responses is revealed rapidly. The above-mentioned points partially account for the students' fear of speaking and their evident anxiety when required to communicate. Since language anxiety is a subjective experience, its origins can be as many as the individuals, but whatever its origins are, language anxiety must be treated and controlled for as it poses potential problems for language learners "because it can interfere with the acquisition, retention and production of the new language". (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991a, p. 86)

According to Ohata (2005, p.139) language anxiety cannot be defined in a linear manner. It is a complex psychological phenomenon influenced by many factors. Hence, it seems reasonable to deal with this issue from a variety of perspectives or approaches (Young, 1992). This study has adopted a socio-cultural approach to the investigation of this feeling in female language learners. Such research is vital because we firstly need to understand why a

language learner feels anxious in order to control such anxiety and alleviate its effects (Horwitz, 1996; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991 a, b; Onwuegbuzie, Bailey, & Daley, 2000; Scovel, 1991). In addition, foreign language educators have found that anxiety plays a role in success or failure in the foreign language classroom (Ganschow, et al., 1994). A lot of researchers indicate that high level of anxiety can interfere with foreign language learning (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991c; Madsen, et al., 1991). Anxiety, if not properly treated, can turn into a personality trait over time; thus, bringing about pervasive effects on language learning and performance. Crookall and Oxford (1991) reported that serious language anxiety may lead to other related problems as with self-esteem, self-confidence, and risk-taking ability, and ultimately hampering proficiency in the second language. Teachers, also, need to beware of the role language anxiety plays in overall strategy use and the use of certain types of strategies in the language classroom (MacIntyre & Noels, 1996). Krashen (1985) held in his affective filter hypothesis that high anxiety will prevent input that learners receive in the classroom from reaching the language acquisition device.

Research on foreign language anxiety will thus have 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 psychologically a safer place. Administering anxiety-probing questionnaires, this study aims to investigate language anxiety from the perspective of male and female language learners to arrive at a conclusion over the probability of a link between language anxiety and gender and to examine whether gender is a major variable in predicting language anxiety in the educational context of Iran with respect to the cultural context of the country. In this sense, from among the variety of approaches taken to investigate the issue of foreign language anxiety, this study adopts a socio-cultural approach to the issue. By the means of semi-structured interviews, the rest of the study, particularly, will deal with female learners so as to get a handle on the sources of foreign language anxiety within them. The rationale behind cultural investigation lies in the inordinate number of female learners who, in spite of being linguistically competent, show unwillingness to initiate or attend speaking and evade it as far as possible, along with the frequent report of language teachers on the passivity and reticence of their female students.

1.4 Research Questions and Hypotheses

There are four research questions to be answered throughout this study:

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?

On the basis of the first question, the following hypothesis is posed:

H1: There exists no significant difference between the rates of foreign language classroom anxiety female and male language learners experience.

1.5 Definition of Key Terms

Anxiety: "subjective, consciously perceived feelings of apprehension and tension accompanied by or associated with activation or arousal of the autonomic nervous system." . . . Spielberger(1966, pp. 3-20).

Foreign Language Anxiety: "the feeling of tension apprehension specifically associated with second language contexts, including speaking, listening and learning" (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994, p. 284). In plain English, it is the fear or nervousness that occurs when a learner is expected to perform in the second or foreign language.