# "Foreign Language Anxiety Influencing Speaking Skills. A picture of Moroccan EFL Universities Students"

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## *Abstract*

The purpose of this study was to find out the impact of foreign language anxiety on speaking abilities of Moroccan university students. It pinpointed the sources of foreign language anxiety and suggested strategies that can be implemented to reduce this widely spread phenomenon. To do this, a mixed methods was adopted through two instruments. The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale questionnaire for quantitative data was given to 80 participants of EFL university students, and teachers' interviews for qualitative data that were conducted with 8 experienced EFL teachers. The results obtained showed that FLA has a negative impact on speaking abilities of Moroccan university students. Furthermore, teachers admitted that students who suffer from anxiety tend to have low speaking skills. Therefore, it was recommended that students should build a strong personality, confidence and enhance their language skills, and teachers should to be supportive and creative to help students overcome foreign language anxiety.

Key words: Speaking abilities - FLCAS - Sources - Manifestations - Strategies

## 1. Introduction

One of the main affective factors that has attracted the attention of researchers is foreign language anxiety as it is considered as an obstacle of learning languages in general and speaking in particular. A plethora of studies concluded that the main problem of speaking anxiety is the negative impact that it has on language performance as well as on the attitude toward the target language (Horwitz et al., 1986; Liu, 1989; Phillips, 1992; Ely, 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991a; Campbell, 1991; Aida, 1994). In fact, Daly (1991, as cited in von Worde, 2003) states that "fear of giving a speech in public exceeded such phobias as fear of snakes, elevators, and heights" (p.3). Therefore, although students are always interested in communicating orally in foreign languages and develop their communicative competence, foreign language anxiety is thought to be a hindrance for language learners to achieve decent speaking abilities (Phillips, 1992).

Against these backdrops, this study aimed at investigating the impact that anxiety has on speaking abilities of Moroccan university students. Young (2007) asserts that speaking in any language is essentially affected by anxiety. Thus, it is important to tackle the issues related to anxiety and its impact on speaking. In addition, this study attempted to pinpoint the sources of foreign language anxiety. Last but not least, it aimed at suggesting some strategies to help students overcome anxiety and thus, obtain successful academic achievements.

The significance of this study was threefold. First, it is characterised by the focus on the impact of anxiety on speaking only. Second, it is characterised by investigating subjects from various Moroccan universities Finally, this study would hopefully contribute to the field of language teaching in Morocco by suggesting strategies that can be used by students and teachers to overcome a widely spread phenomenon.

## 2. Literature Review

In literature, several definitions of foreign language anxiety have been identified. MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) define anxiety as "the feeling of tension … associated with second language contexts, including speaking, listening" (p. 284). Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) define foreign language anxiety as "a distinct complex construct of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of language learning process" (p. 128). To illustrate, language anxiety generates problems for language learners as it may hinder the process of language acquisition, retention and production of the language (Macintyre & Gardner, 1991).

MacIntyre and Gardner (1991a) conducted an investigation about anxiety and language learning of a sample of thirty-nine students learning French which concerns the dominant topic of the students' essays commenting on negative and positive experiences in the classroom. The authors concluded that 87% of the students who write about classroom anxiety experience remember situations in which speaking is the provocative task to anxiety. The same study supports the fact that students with high levels of anxiety perform more poorly than those who have a low level of anxiety.

Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) outlined three components of foreign language anxiety pertaining to academic and social situations. These are communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative apprehension.

In communication apprehension, students experience a level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated comm unication with another person or persons (McCroskey, 1984 cited in Barraclough et al., 1988). In other words, it is the fear of confronting others and communicating with them. The second component of anxiety is test anxiety, which refers to the type of anxiety originated from the fear of failure in a test (Brown, 1994). The last component is fear of negative evaluation, which has been defined by Watson and Friend (1969) as the "apprehension of others' evaluations, distress over their negative evaluations, avoidance of evaluative situations, and the expectations that others would evaluate oneself negatively" (p.448).

Other well-known kinds of anxiety phenomenon are trait anxiety, state anxiety and situation specific anxiety (Horwitz & Young, 1991). On the one hand, Scovel (1978) defines it as "a more permanent predisposition to be anxious" (p. 479). In other words, a person who suffers from trait anxiety is likely to be anxious in a variety of situations. On the other hand, state anxiety refers to situations when students experience anxiety in a specific moment of time and comes as a reaction to a particular anxiety-provoking stimulus such as public speaking or oral exams (Spielberger, 1983). As for situation specific anxiety, it is the type of anxiety that has attracted more attention in the field of language learning and teaching. Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1991) describe situation specific anxiety as a psychological state that includes perception, beliefs, feelings and behaviours related to classroom language

learning. This kind of anxiety is confined to classroom settings and it can affect the process of language learning and prevents EFL learners from speaking and interacting orally in class.

In addition to the conceptual foundation that has been tackled above, a significant amount of research has been done in order to find out the sources that make students feel anxious when they speak a foreign language. These sources are mainly associated with learners themselves, instructors, environment and classroom procedures.

Low self-esteem is a significant source of learner anxiety which refers to a set of individual's thoughts, beliefs, and perceptions that EFL learners attribute to themselves. It has been reported that learners' degree of self-esteem is strongly related to language anxiety (Young, 1992). Hence, learners with low self-esteem are always concerned about what other people think. Krashen (1980, p.15 as cited in Young, 1991, p. 427) indicates that

"the more I think about self-esteem, the more impressed I am about its impact. This is what causes anxiety in a lot of people. People with low self-esteem worry about what their peers think; they are concerned with pleasing others. And that I think has to do a great degree with anxiety".

Another main source of anxiety generates from the beliefs that learners hold about learning a language (Zhang & Zhong, 2012). Some of these beliefs may generate anxiety students' frustrations and tension in the classroom (Horwitz et al, 1986). The following is an example of these beliefs: "I just know I have some kinds of disability: I can't learn a foreign language no matter how hard I try" (Horwitz et al, 1986, p. 183). From this quote, one can understand that this student thinks that it is mandatory to speak the language fluently. These beliefs make students reluctant to speak the language in class and hence, they may impede the process of language learning. Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) have been developed by Horwitz (1988) to assess students' beliefs about language learning. . The results obtained from this study show that some learners are concerned about the accuracy and quality of language use as well as how their speaking accent and pronunciation sound.

Not only learners' beliefs about language learning that contribute to language anxiety, but also instructors' beliefs about language teaching. The instructors who believe their role is to correct students' mistakes and who believe that the teacher should be doing most of the talking and teaching may be contributing to learner anxiety (Young, 1991).

There is a huge difference between high proficiency and low proficiency learners in terms of anxiety level. The former is less likely to be anxious than the latter (Young, 1991). Thus, low proficiency learners' self-esteem may be hurt as they have more problems using foreign language communicatively. Recent studies have been done by Sparks and Ganschow (2007) showed that foreign language anxiety is strongly correlated to the low language skills of the learners. According to Sparks and Ganschow (2007), "students with the highest level of anxiety about foreign language learning may also have the lowest levels of the native language skills" (p.27).

Anxiety associated with classroom procedure is mainly generated from having to speak the language in front of the teacher and peers (Young, 1991). The latter referred to a study conducted by Koch and Terrel (1991) in which they found that more than half of the participants in their natural approach classes admitted that giving a presentation, oral activities and group discussion are the most anxiety provoking classroom activities.

A number of ways were suggested by researchers and educators to diminish and alleviate anxiety. They are mainly grouped in two categories: Students strategies and instructors' strategies. In order to overcome anxiety, it is indispensable for the learners to recognise their feelings of anxiety when they speak the target language and to be fully aware that going through this experience is normal. Foss and Reitzel (1988) suggested that discussing the phenomenon of language anxiety with students makes them feel that they are not alone and this discussion itself "encourages learners to relax" (p. 5).

Besides learners' strategies to cope with anxiety, instructors' role is also significant. The instructors are required to create and maintain a safe and supportive environment for successful learning and teaching ( Hortwitz, 2002; Hortwitz, 1986; Hortwitz & Cope, 1986; Young, 1991). Creating a comfortable and safe learning environment facilitates language learning and makes students focus more on the process of learning rather than being anxious with the presence of the teachers and peers. Hence, creating a relaxed environment is of great importance in reducing anxiety.

Another strategy to reduce anxiety and create a safe atmosphere is the use of humor in class. According to (Mogavero, 1979, as cited in Schacht & Stewart, 1990) humor can have an "inherent tension-reducing function" (p.54). It helps students overcome anxiety and maintain a positive attitude toward the target language. However, a healthy dose of humor should be relevant to the topic being studied and should not be used to make someone the laughing stock of the class. Therefore, both instructors and students should be involved in using a variety of techniques and strategies in order to overcome and diminish foreign language anxiety in classrooms.

## 3. Research Questions

Four main questions are addressed in this study:

1. What effect does foreign language anxiety have on speaking of EFL university students?
2. What makes students (sources) experience foreign language anxiety?
3. How can foreign language anxiety be reduced?

## 4. Method
### 4.1 Research design

In this study, the data gathered were collected through the use of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale questionnaire and teachers' interview. The former was given to different students from different Moroccan universities to measure the impact of FLA on speaking abilities. The latter was used to obtain qualitative data with the aim of giving a description of how students experience anxiety, its sources and how to deal with it.

### 4.2 Participants

The 80 participants of this study were chosen randomly from different Moroccan Faculties of Letter and Human Sciences (students of English studies) who served for the process of data collection. In addition, 8 teachers from different schools were interviewed.

### 4.3 Research Tool

With the purpose of answering the questions posed earlier, the researcher chose to use questionnaires as a research tool to gather data and interview for qualitative data which gave the researcher an insightful idea about participants' ideas, perceptions and thoughts.

#### *4.3.1 Questionnaire.*

Since Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) measures classroom anxiety generated from foreign language learning, the questionnaire in this study is used in order to measure the impact, the causes of FLA of Moroccan university students. The modified version of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale of Horwitz et al. (1986) was translated into Arabic to make sure every single item is fully understood by the participants. FLCAS consists of 33, each of which offers the five point Likert-type responses, ranging from (1) strongly agree to (5) strongly disagree. The theoretical score ranges from 33 to 165. The higher the total score was, the more anxious the student.

#### *4.3.2 Interview.*

In order to know and understand more the impact and the sources of foreign language anxiety as well as the strategies to overcome anxiety and to investigate more the responses from the questionnaire, teachers' interview was conducted. There were 8 randomly chosen teachers for a face to face interview including 6 male and 2 female participants.

### 4.4. Data Collection Procedure
The quantitative data of this study was collected during the months of July, August and September, 2020. The researcher managed to have 80 questionnaires completed and turned back successfully. The qualitative data was gathered after the quantitative data had been collected. The teachers were invited to a face-to-face interview in English. The duration of each interview was between 10 to 15 minutes.

### 4.5. Data Analysis

The quantitative data obtained from the questionnaire was analysed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) computer program. The statistical analysis was performed to extract number, percentages, means and standard deviations. Then, a t-test and Anova-test were used to see whether there were any differences in English speaking anxiety between students due to their speaking skills and the years they spent studying English.

The qualitative data analysis was conducted with the data obtained from the face to face interview conducted with the EFL Moroccan teachers. Teachers were provided with the questions a couple of days before the interview to give us relevant and well-formed answers. The copy of the questions contains questions such as the effects, the causes of foreign language anxiety and the strategies to cope with this phenomenon.

## 5. Results and Discussions

In the process of analysing FLCAS questionnaire, the researcher used descriptive statistics via SPSS program to compute minimum, maximum, mean and standard deviation. This study revealed that the mean of anxiety scores for 80 participants was 94,81 and the standard deviation was 18.16 in which the scores ranged from 59 and 131. Compared with the previously mentioned studies, the mean score of our participants in this study is slightly higher than the results of Horwitz (1986), Horwitz and Cope's (1986) (M=94.5, SD 21,41) and lower than Aida's (1994) (M=96.7, SD 22,10).

**Table 1**: A summary of FLCAS scores.

| Descriptive Statistics | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | N | Minimum | Maximum | M | **S. D** |
| **The present study** | **80** | **59** | **131** | **94,81** | **18.16** |

It was stated earlier that there are three main categories of language anxiety. These are communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety. From table 2 below, we concluded that the mean score of the aforementioned categories is: communication apprehension was 2.90 (SD: 1.32), fear of negative evaluation was 2.99 (SD: 1.33) and test anxiety was 3.32 (SD: 1.20). Therefore, the results indicate that communication apprehension is the most provoking of anxiety level among Moroccan university students.

**Table 2**: Categories of anxiety based on FLCAS questionnaire.

| Rank | Types | Mean | Standard deviation |
|---|---|---|---|
| **1** | Communication apprehension | 2.90 | 1.32 |
| **2** | Fear of negative evaluation | 2.99 | 1.33 |
| **3** | Test anxiety | 3.32 | 1.20 |

### 5.1 Analysis of anxiety according to some personal factors.

*5.1.1 Gender*. In order to investigate a possible relationship between FLCAS and gender, a t-test was conducted using the SPSS program. The results in table 3 indicate that there is no significant difference in anxiety level in terms of gender.

**Table 3**: t-test of foreign language anxiety for gender.

| Variables | Number | Mean | Standard deviation | T | Sig |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Male** | 41 | 2.94 | 1.21 | | |
| | | | | 0.86 | 0.45 |
| **Female** | 39 | 2.79 | 1.29 | | |

*5.1.2 Time spent in studying English.* In the questionnaire, the participants were requested to mention how many years they had studied English. The results show that 45% spent 4 years, 10% 5 years, 10% 6 years, 10% 7 years and 25% have spent more than 7 years studying English. Therefore, the longer the period of studying English, the lower anxiety level is. One way ANOVA test was used to distinguish differences in FLACS among Moroccan university students. The results showed that foreign language anxiety may be reduced by increasing learning time.

**Table 4**: ANOVA test for the time spent in studying English.

| | Sum of squares | Df | Mean square | F | Sig |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Between groups** | 437.422 | 4 | 109.276 | | |
| **Within groups** | 3778.94 | 75 | 50.26 | 2.14 | 0.19 |
| **Total** | 4216.36 | 79 | 159.53 | | |

*5.1.3 Self-perceived English proficiency.* Based on the results obtained regarding students' evaluation on their English speaking skills, the researcher concluded that students with low anxiety believed that their English is good, whereas participants with high anxiety admitted that their English proficiency level is average. One-way Anova test of self-perceived English proficiency showed that participants with high perceived proficiency have more abilities and skills to cope with anxiety than those with low self-perceived proficiency as the latter can easily be anxious due to the lack of linguistic and communication skills.

**Table 5**: ANOVA test of foreign language anxiety level for English proficiency.

| | Sum of squares | Df | Mean square | F | Sig |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Between groups** | 824.68 | 3 | 266.483 | | |
| **Within** | 3391.7 | 76 | 44.493 | | |

| | | | | 6.14 | 0.069 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **groups** | | | | | |
| **Total** | 4216.38 | 79 | 310.978 | | |

## 5.2 Foreign language anxiety influencing speaking of Moroccan university students.

The first research question's objective was to scrutinize "the impact that foreign language anxiety has on speaking abilities of Moroccan university students" The following table presents the results obtained from the statistical analysis of the FLCAS questionnaire.

**Table 6**: Percentage of Five Point Likert-Scale answers used through FLCAS questionnaire.

| FLCAS | |
|---|---|
| **Strongly agree** | **26. 50%** |
| **Agree** | **30.18%** |
| **No comment** | **7.50%** |
| **Disagree** | **24.62%** |
| **Strongly disagree** | **11.20%** |

We can conclude from table 6 that there is a negative impact of anxiety on the speaking abilities of Moroccan participants as the number of participants who answered by "strongly agree" and "agree" of FLCAS questionnaire made of negatively worded statements showing that the levels of anxiety among Moroccan university students is significant. Moreover, teachers who were interviewed claimed that anxiety affects negatively the ability of their students to speak English

## 5.3 Sources of anxiety according to FLCAS and teachers' interview.

The purpose of research question two was to find out the sources of FLA among Moroccan students. Therefore, according to the responses of the questionnaire and teachers' interviews, some causes of foreign language anxiety have been identified. These are low self-esteem, learners' beliefs about language learning, instructors' beliefs about language teaching, language proficiency and classroom procedures. The results showed that more than half of participants agreed with the statements of FLCAS that are related to lack of self-esteem such as "I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my English language class", "I keep thinking that the other students are better at languages than I am", "I always feel that the other students speak the English language better than I do" to name just a few. Moreover, according to teachers' interview, most teachers admitted that self-esteem is an important source of anxiety. They added that students who do not have good English proficiency, but are confident tend to speak more than those who have little confidence.

Learners' and instructors beliefs about language learning and teaching were also spotted as causes of anxiety. To illustrate, , (38,8%) of students think about things other than English during English classes as in item (6) "During language class, I find myself thinking about things that have nothing to do with the course", and (82,5%) of participants do not express their readiness to attend English classes "I often feel like not going to my English class". In addition, a teacher during the interview said that "students who do not appreciate being in an English class suffer from anxiety". This kind of anxiety is generated from the wrong beliefs and negative attitude that students and teachers have toward English language learning. In addition, some teachers confessed that at the beginning of their careers, they had had some wrong language teaching beliefs that might contribute to students' anxiety. For instance, a male teacher said that "I believed that I should be authoritative and force students to speak in whole class activities". Another teacher told us that "in speaking activities that focused on fluency, I would correct any single mistake in class which was wrong of course.

Language proficiency and classroom procedure have been also identified as sources of anxiety. For instance, some interviewees believed that one of the main causes of speaking anxiety is lack of vocabulary. They claimed that their students are afraid of speaking because they don't have enough vocabulary and expressions and when learners master an important number of lexical items of the target language, they are likely to speak English in an efficient way and without any hesitation". Moreover, speaking is the most anxiety stimulating and since speaking includes pronunciation, and English is a language that contains words with silent letters and sounds that are pronounced differently in different situations, it is obvious that lack of the mastery of pronunciation of some words may generate speaking anxiety. As a result, (63%) of students agreed that they feel anxious when they have to speak English without preparation in item (9): "I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in language class". This reflected that they are afraid of mispronouncing some English words that they have never practiced or pronounced. In item (13): "It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my language class" (46,3%) of students feel anxious and embarrassed as they know that they might pronounce words incorrectly.

Although some speaking activities such as giving presentations, public speaking activities, group work and pair work are very useful for students to acquire the target language, they can sometimes be the most anxiety provoking classroom activities. It has been accepted that students are likely to experience speaking anxiety if they are called on in an unexpected way by the teacher to speak in class. To support this concept, (51,3%) of students would agree with item (3) "I tremble when I know that I'm going to be called on in English class", (63%) of participants agreed with item (9):  "I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in English class" .During the interview with teachers, a teacher told us that "I

notice that students feel anxious whenever I ask them to say something in an unexpected way as they feel that they need some preparation of ideas as well as how to say it before".

### 5.4 Strategies to reduce with foreign language anxiety.

Teachers who have been interviewed have suggested a number of effective strategies that a teacher may apply to alleviate and diminish anxiety in EFL classes.

To begin with, teachers suggested creating a friendly and safe environment that helps to reduce anxiety of students because appreciating and taking care of feelings of students promote their willingness to participate in the speaking activities in classes. Teachers said that "we should create a very friendly and supportive- learning environment in the classroom, make a nice and motivating class, love students and make them love learning and speaking freely through fun, respect, humor and activities that are compatible with their cultures, interests and capacities".

In addition to the class atmosphere, teachers suggested that using the appropriate methods and approaches in teaching play a significant role in helping students overcome speaking anxiety. It has been accepted that there are some approaches that help students build their confidence and be able to learn the target language in an efficient way. These are suggestopedia and communicative approach, to name but a few. Therefore, one of the interviewees claimed that "it is very important to adopt a communicative approach so that students get more chances to practice their speaking skills". Another teacher said that "teachers can use pair or group work and use language games and encourage learners not to be afraid of making mistakes.

The relationship between students and teacher should be friendly. A teacher recommended that "when teachers build a positive relationship with their students, the classroom becomes a relaxing and safe environment. Therefore, students become more confident and willing to take risks and participate in the class without thinking about teachers' negative feedback". In the same vein, another teacher told us that "what is common in our schools is that the teachers give instant negative feedback when students are speaking, which negatively affects the performance of students. Therefore, it makes the students unwilling to speak freely and participate in the class.

Students' strategies to overcome anxiety are also of great importance. According to some teachers, not only teachers should find solutions to reduce anxiety of their students, but also students themselves should take part in this process. For instance, a teacher summarized some important strategies that should be used by students to overcome foreign language anxiety. She said that "when speaking, students should pay more attention to the message they want to convey rather than the form, relaxation during speaking tasks, positive thinking as it makes performance good, ignoring the fear of communication, having more practice and risk taking".

## 6. Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

This study was aimed to investigate the impact of foreign language anxiety on the speaking abilities of Moroccan university students. The results obtained revealed that anxiety has a negative impact on the speaking abilities of EFL Moroccan students.  Therefore, the pedagogical implications would be most useful for EFL teachers who are possibly aware of speaking anxiety that their students undergo. In addition, teachers and instructors have to adapt their teaching methods and approaches to help students with high levels of anxiety. In

this case, the most useful key is to create a good and safe learning environment such as the one that exists in successful and professional language centers and schools where students feel free to make mistakes and take risks. Also, letting the students know about phenomena that they may experience in class such as speaking anxiety would be a key to overcome it.

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