

Gender contribution in anxiety in speaking EFL among Iranian learners

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ABSTRACT: There is no doubt that second language learning is a complex process which involves several factors, and that this process is highly influenced due to plasticity of the brain. Foreign language anxiety is widely used to describe the feeling of tension, which is specifically associated with foreign language learning contexts, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing. It interferes with the production of a foreign language, which is speaking in foreign language. Gender, is among the factors that influence language learning process. Both males and females are equipped with some tendencies that would help them to acquire some aspects of language much faster and easier. The present study is an attempt to investigate the ideas for and against gender as a influential factor in facilitating the process of second language learning. To achieve this aim 80 learners who learn English in language learning institutions in Ilam province were investigated. The instrument used in this study to measure student's foreign language speaking anxiety is the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz (1986), and the results of speaking grades which are qualitative data from the interview with learners is used as another kind of questionnaire to measure learners speaking. The results show that male respondents demonstrated higher levels of language anxiety compared to Female students.

Key words: Gender, language anxiety, speaking English.

INTRODUCTION

Foreign language learning anxiety has been the subject of many studies that indicates anxiety affects many language learners. Some researchers argued that foreign language anxiety might contribute to the feelings of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry (Arnold & Brown, 1999; Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993; Oxford, 1999), while other scholars believed some anxiety may actually enhance foreign language performance (Chastain, 1975; Scott, 1986; Steinberg, 1982) or found no relationship between anxiety and language proficiency performance (Young, 1990).

According to Ellis (1994) the goal of SLA as is the description and explanation of the learner's linguistic or communicative competence. And the learners' differences are significant topics in second language acquisition in achieving success in language learning. Learners are different in second or foreign language learning in terms of cognitive factors such as language aptitude and learning style, and affective factors, such as motivation and anxiety.

Gender is fundamental categorization distinguished in all human societies. It emerges in human life as a source of determining individual as well as social identity. Each student learns differently and has his or her own set of strengths and weaknesses. Some studies show that while both boys and girls have improved their performances, girls achieved higher marks than boys in EFL learning. Many experts suggest that there are learning differences between and within the genders. Tendency of females to using strategies is more than males, and proficient students use more strategies than less proficient ones, certain cultures promoting the use of particular strategies more than others (Grainger, 1997; Kaylani, 1996; Oxford, 1989, 1996).

Females and males learn the appropriate behaviors and attitudes from the family and overall culture they grow up with, and so non-physical gender differences are a product of socialization (Eagly, 1987; Eagly and Karau, 2002). Gender is an important factor that plays a specific role and influences second language acquisition.

Males and females have somewhat different patterns of lateralization, with males being more left-hemisphere dominant than females (Banich, 1997, p. 306-312). The theorists of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) believe that female learners show possible superiority in their second language learning process (Burstall, 1975; Boyle, 1987; Ehrlich, 2001).

Anxiety is an important factor, which affect learning SL and particularly SL learners speaking skill. Different learners both male and females have different levels of anxiety, and it may delay their second language speaking. There are different periods to overcome the problem of delaying the English speaking. The importance of the present study is to find the relationship between gender differences in anxiety and speaking in Iranian EFL learners and to present strategies for decrease the effect of anxiety on speaking and advance speaking skill. Oxford (1990) stated that “learning strategies are specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations” (p.8).

Language teachers would like to find the sources of language anxiety so that classes may be organized in a manner which minimizes student anxiety. Gender is one of the factors that influence the anxiety in learning second language and specially speaking second language.

Research Question

Is there any gender difference in foreign language anxiety?

Literature Review

Gender is one of the most affective factors used in SLA research to distinguish among learners. A great number of studies have been tried to researching gender differences in several areas of second language acquisition. The results of these studies are different, some highlight the superiority of males over females, some others emphasizes that girls are better language learners than boys and still according to some gender is irrelevant in second or foreign language acquisition.

A research by Suleiman (1993) on the students of Arabic ethnicities studying EFL at Arizona State University, shows motivational differences related to gender. Sung& Padilla (1998) examined 144 elementary and 451 secondary school students’ motivation towards learning Chinese, or Korean as L2. Research findings confirmed significantly higher motivation for females than their male counterparts.

The results of the study by Abu-Rabia (1997) who conducted a research in the Canadian context to identify the gender differences of Arab students in the motivational constructs and attitudes towards ESL learning revealed that both male and female participants showed stronger extrinsic motivation to learn English as a second language in the Canadian context.

Song Haiyan (1998) studied prototype of gender and its reflection in speech communication competence between the two genders. Results show that, obvious differences such as, females are inclined to passiveness, circumbendibus and not imposing their own will upon others, etc, exist between male and female in terms of language use.

According to Hou Songshan(1998) who analyzed and studied influences of task and gender on foreign communication strategies, he pointed out that when male and females finished a task, sometimes obvious discrepancy existed and sometimes didn't.

Larsen-Freeman (2000) believed that, in the process of first language acquisition, at least at the early stage, female excel male. Hu Zhuanglin (1989: 199) suggest that, it was general believe that male and female are born with different linguistic advantages, such as, female learn to speak earlier, faster and better than male, etc.

Boyle (1987) determined that, boys are superior to girls in the comprehension of heard vocabulary. Similarly, Scarcella and Zimmerman (1998) found that men performed significantly better than women in a test of academic vocabulary recognition, understanding, and use. In Lin and Wu (2003), Lynn et al. (2005), and Edelenbos and Vinjé (2000), males also outperformed females in vocabulary knowledge in the foreign language (henceforth FL). But, in Nyikos’ (1990, cited in Sunderland, 2000, p. 206) study women performed better than men in a memorization test of German vocabulary. Nevertheless, Jiménez and according to Terrazas (2005-2008) there is no significant gender differences in performance in a receptive vocabulary test.

METHOD

Participants

Considering the main focus of this research is the observation of gender differences in speaking anxiety experienced by EFL learners in the English language teaching classes, A total number of 80 male and female learners were participated in this study (39 male and 41 female). They were all EFL learners from private ILam English teaching institutes. Their ages ranged from 14 to 35 years old.

Table1. Age Distribution of the Participants

category	Mean	median	Range	mode	High limit	Low limit
Participants age	16/18	14	23	14	35	14

Age mean of the participants of this study is 16/18, high age limit is 35(year old), and low age limit is 14(year old) while range of participants age is 23(year old). The population selected for this experimental study was EFL children and adult learners at Ilam language institutions. The age of learners who participated in this study were selected randomly with different ages.

Table 2 . Gender Distribution of the Participants

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Male	39	39
Female	41	41
Total	80	80

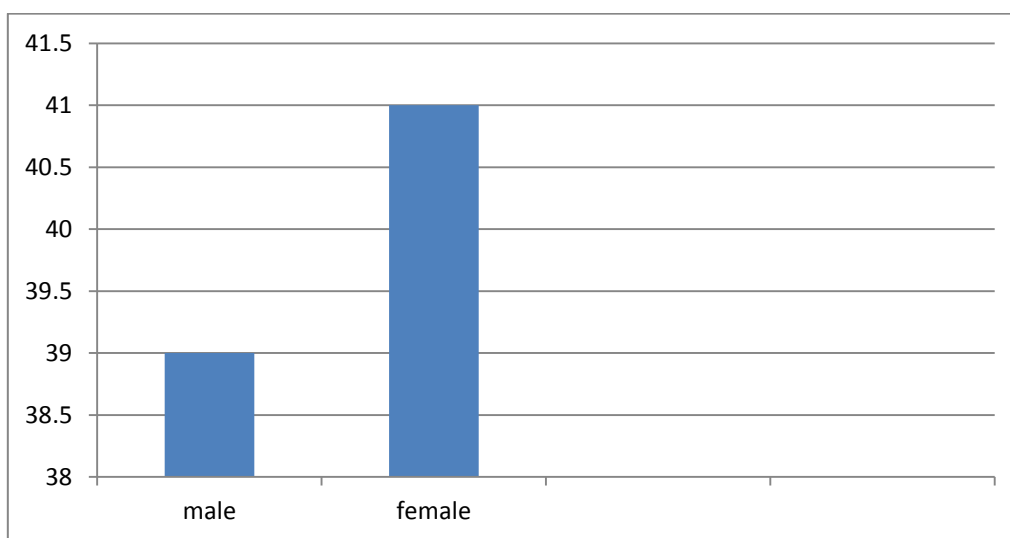


Figure 1. Gender Distributions of the Participants

According to the table 3.2 and figure 3.1, participants of this study are combination of both genders, 39 male and 41 female participated in this study. In this study selection of the participants is randomly.

Instruments

In this study, three instruments were used with the purpose of collecting quantitative and qualitative data. The first instrument was an English final achievement exam which was administered at the end of the semester by the institutions to gather students English speaking grades, these grades are qualitative numbers which are collected by interview with students. The next instrument was ForeignLanguageClassroomAnxietyScale(FLCAS), developed by Horwitz (1986). The Persian version of the FLCAS was translated and used among participants. The other instrument is a background questionnaire Test, to provide some information such as age, gender about participants.

According to Horwitz, Horwitz& Cope (1986), there are three components of language anxiety – communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. The eight items for communication apprehension were 1, 9, 14, 18, 24, 27, 29 and 32, the items related to test anxiety were 2, 8, 10, 19 and 21, and the items related to fear of negative evaluation were 3, 7, 13, 15, 20, 23, 25, 31 and 33. The final 11 items were placed in a group which could be described as anxiety of second language classes (Na, 2007). We cannot pay more attention to above mentioned kinds of anxiety, it can be more researched in future studies. According to Horwitz (1986),“This self-report measure assesses the degree of anxiety, as evidenced by negative performance expectancies and social comparisons, psychophysiological symptoms, and avoidance behaviors” (p. 559).

Background Information

The background questionnaire aimed to gather the respondents’ demographic information about participants of this study such as name, gender, age, education level. In the present study gender is one of the effective variables.

Performance in English

All the participants’ scores in the course final exam taken in the last week of the term were collected as their performance in English. Performance means actual use of English language speaking, particularly in social situations.

MATERIALS

The books used for teaching the EFL in the institute where data were collected are Interchange series written by Richards, Hull and Proctor (2005). These books are used to teach all four skills of English language in English teaching institutions and learners are engaging in language learning completely, but because of limitations of this study, the researcher just investigate gender differences in speaking anxiety among participants.

Data Analysis

After the researcher distributed the translated Farsi version of the FLCAS questionnaires to the participants and they answered the questions. The questionnaires and the final English speaking grades of the students were collected for data analysis using the SPSS software version 16. The descriptive data consisting of the mean, the standard deviations and the standard error of means was found to gain the test anxiety level. To find any significant differences between the anxiety levels of the EFL learners at language institutes, and to find any relationships between the speaking scores and the test anxiety level, a Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient and significant levels were computed, and then the results were compared with participant's gender.

RESULTS

As the present study aimed at investigating the gender differences of the participants regarding foreign Language anxiety toward speaking English, the researcher has analyzed the data through SPSS (version 16). Foreign Language anxiety has been used as dependant variables and gender has been used as independent variable.

According to the findings of the research there is a significant relationship between these two categories (gender, stress) the mean of level of anxiety among male of this study is 83.000 and the mean of stress of female participants of this study is 80.1148, as results shows male participants experience more level of anxiety than female participants, but this difference is not so high and it may be changed in another researches.

Table4. Relationship between Stress and Gender

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
male	39	83.0000	13.80885	2.21118
Female	41	80.1148	15.17794	1.94334

DISCUSSION

The findings of the present research are likely to support other studies, by asserting that foreign language anxiety is a common debilitating feeling which affects students in a variety of ways, particularly during speaking activities.

Research has shown that the effects of anxiety can adversely affect a person's ability to acquire a second language, particularly speaking skill. Woodrow (2006) found that anxiety can adversely affect oral communication for students speaking English, while Maclyre and Gardner (1989) concluded that anxiety leads to deficits in learning and performance.

After gathering and analyzing the data, the results of the study showed some noteworthy insights suggesting that the gender in EFL classrooms can produce notable FL anxiety among Iranian language learners which might eventually lead to some learning failures. Male learners in this study feel more worried although they prepare well more than Females. Male respondents demonstrated higher levels of language anxiety compared to Female students. The level of anxiety decreases at high speaking grades and the students who have higher scores are less anxious than the ones who have lower marks. The FLCAS shows boys had significantly higher overall levels of anxiety when looking at cumulative responses in EFL. It seems necessary to state that the difference between anxiety among males and females in this study is not so high and it can change in other researches.

Almost all participants of the research acknowledged that people feel anxious and nervous while speaking English in front of others and this feeling is among both male and female participants. Some EFL learners even expressed that they feel 'stupid' when they cannot speak English well. Every factor or situation that creates possibilities or enhances the chances to speak in front of others is likely to cause language anxiety for EFL learners.

Iranian learners' cause for anxiety and coping strategies are not exactly similar. It is possible to find differences in causes of anxiety and coping strategies from one person to other within a cultural group. It is

important that language instructors recognize that anxiety is a major cause of students' lack of success in FL communication and learners who develop such a feeling should not panic and feel discouraged. Instead, they should consider it as a process that they need to go through to overcome their feelings of unease and discomfort in their attempt to learn a foreign language, and they think of ways of how to alleviate their FL anxiety problem so that it will not affect their learning negatively.

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