ORIGINAL RESEARCH REVIEW

Mitigating Anxiety and Enhancing Oral Performance in the Algerian EFL Classroom

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Speaking a foreign language in an academic setting is one of the most challenging tasks among Algerian EFL learners who lack fluency in the target language. The purpose of this paper is twofold: First, it tries to discover the principal reasons behind the learners' feeling of anxiety when performing orally in class. Second, it attempts to maintain a supportive relationship between students and teachers in order to improve the learners' oral performance and mitigate anxiety. Through the use of two questionnaires administered to teachers and second year graduate students from the department of English and studying at Belhadj Bouchaib University, data were gathered and analyzed via a mixed- method approach embracing both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The findings revealed that anxiety is omnipresent among the learners who are supposed to perform orally in class, and it is only via better teachers' sociability that the students may avoid anxiety and improve their oral performance.

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Introduction

The process of foreign language learning (FL) has been a topic of hot debate for many years since learning a foreign language requires efforts, strategies and techniques to be followed from both teachers and learners. Learning a foreign language in academic settings is considered a challenge for many, especially those English foreign language (EFL) learners who are not fluent enough in the target language, and who may face various obstacles in FL learning since they are unable to express themselves freely the way they do with their mother tongue. One of these obstacles is manifested through anxiety, a phenomenon that occurs because of miscellaneous reasons that affect learners' oral performance negatively, and can only be reduced through a better teacher's sociability. In order to tackle this issue, the following research questions are put forward:

1- Which factors trigger off the phenomenon of anxiety among EFL learners in oral classroom settings?

2- How does a better teachers' sociability contribute in decreasing anxiety and improving oral commitment inside the classroom?

The significance of the current study lies in scrutinizing the reasons that stand behind EFL students' anxiety in oral classroom settings; it also attempts to maintain a supportive relationship between teachers and students for the sake of improving oral performance and mitigate anxiety inside the classroom. However, this study has its limitations in that it deals with a small sample, and thus the results cannot be overgeneralised.

Foreign language anxiety

Anxiety refers to a set of negative emotions including the feeling of unease, worry and nervousness experienced by an individual. Spielberger et al. (1983) considers anxiety as the subjective feelings of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system. Carlson et al. (1987, 694) defines anxiety disorders in general as: "A psychological disorder is characterized by tension, overactivity of the autonomic nervous system, expectation of an impending disaster, and continuous vigilance for danger." Anxiety, then, is considered as a serious obstacle to a better functioning of the learner's oral capacities.

FL anxiety, however, is different from a general feeling of anxiety, and therefore, keeps learners from reaching their goals. According to MacIntyre and Gardner (1994, 284), FL anxiety is "the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language context, including speaking, listening and learning". This means that FL anxiety can occur if students are exposed to several negative experiences in a FL context; they feel anxious and afraid when they present something orally in front of an audience. They often feel that they are representing themselves badly or showing only a small part of their real personality and intelligence.

The impact of anxiety on students' oral performance

The effect of anxiety on EFL students' oral performance has been and still is the major concern of many researchers (MacIntyre 1994; Spielberger et al. 1983) who used various instruments to test the degree of anxiety and had in return different

results concerning this issue. Moreover, "anxiety has potential negative effects at different levels; one of these levels is the learner's academic performance level; for example, bad oral subject grades" (Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope 1986). Anxiety, then, is considered as a serious flaw that leads to a better functioning of the learner's oral capacities.

Anxious students, in oral expression settings, often avoid or escape any situation that triggers off anxiety. These learners perceive situations causing anxiety as threatening; their psychological body changes whenever they feel anxious and this is what is known as 'nervous system activation' which is a core aspect of anxiety. Following Krinis (2007, 1) words, anxiety can have physical, emotional and behavioural manifestations which may differ from one individual to another. Sweat, quick heart beat, worry, lack of concentration, forgetfulness, short answer responses, and avoidance behaviours, such as, missing class, refusing to speak or remaining silent, and coming to class unprepared are FL anxiety manifestations that have been listed by Krinis (2007, 1)

The impact of teacher's sociability on students' foreign language learning process

It is generally acknowledged that good communication between teachers and students in EFL classrooms leads to good results since effective cooperation between teachers and learners provides a suitable atmosphere for learning and students will undoubtedly feel comfortable, a fact which raises their motivation towards learning. Hargreaves (1994, 835) says in this respect; "Good teachers are not just well oiled machines. They are emotional, passionate beings who connect with their work and classes with pleasure, creativity, challenge and joy". From this quote, it may be deduced that teachers' enthusiasm, feeling of energetic interest, and their constant support provided to their students, leads to an effective teaching and consequently, a positive relationship will be established. As a result of this relationship, students will be provided with an appropriate, positive, and supporting environment for learning.

Learning is a social and interpersonal process where teachers and learners communicate with each other and construct their own relationship. This latter can affect the learning process either negatively or positively. Marisa and Ryberg, (2004, 3) state the following:

Together, teachers and students develop and evolve a social structure that establishes social norms, permissible behaviours, interpersonal relationships, etc. In this context of social interaction, participants foster the learning process through social exchanges (such as give and receive feedback, guidance, encouragement, etc).

In FL learning process, the kind of relationship evolving between students and teachers is fundamental as it is considered as the starting point towards success, i.e., teachers having a supportive and caring relationship with students can give them the opportunity to be motivated towards the learning process, and they will also feel protected and comfortable. This feeling of security will engender a safe and supportive environment suitable for acquiring a second/ foreign language. Hargreaves (1994, 835) says in this respect:

Good teaching is charged with positive emotions. It is not just a matter of knowing one's subject, being efficient, having correct competencies, or learning all the right techniques. Good teachers are not just well oiled machines. They are emotional, passionate beings who connect with their students and fill their work and classes with pleasure, creativity, challenge and joy.

The impact of motivation and self-confidence on learners' commitment

On the one hand, motivated and self-confident learners are those who do not feel anxious during the course. They seem to be relaxed and free from any kind of negative emotions that may prevent them from showing interest towards learning, being behaviourally, emotionally and cognitively engaged with the teacher, or showing a good oral performance. On the other hand, students who do not feel confident and motivated, tend to face anxiety which stands as an obstacle in the way of their academic success. Brophy (2004, 4) defines students' motivation as "the degree to which students invest attention and effort". Following this quote, motivation refers to the feeling of interest that makes students want to learn. It is about the desire that students have towards learning and how much students are eager to know more about the learning tasks.

What differentiates motivation from self confidence is that the latter refers to self- efficacy; it is one's own confidence that enables him/ her to achieve intended goals. Just like motivation, self- confidence is believed to be related to students' engagement. It is defined by Bandura (1986, 391) as "people's judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required attaining designated types of performance". Self-confidence helps students in different ways to be engaged with the teacher; this means that confident students are believed to show a kind of comfort and relax in the FL setting. The role of self-confidence in the students' behavioural engagement, especially when supposed to perform orally in class, is that anxious learners with low self-esteem are less likely to deploy efforts in FL learning and they may even forswear. This, clearly, stresses how important it is for EFL learners to have confidence in their own competencies, since it is going to facilitate their engagement by overcoming the different negative emotions related to anxiety.

Method

This section is completely devoted to the methods used to gather data, the presentation of the sample population that has participated in this study, in addition to the presentation, discussion and interpretation of the main findings.

1. Participants

The participants of this study consisted of 40 second year LMD students of English whose age ranged between 20 and 25 and 3 teachers of oral expression who had an experience of teaching ranging from 7 to 15 years. They were chosen on purpose from the department of English, Ain-Temouchent University, the place of the author's work. The students usually face anxiety inside the classroom since they are unable to freely express their thoughts, ideas and feelings in front of an audience. Moreover, as teachers' sociability plays a vital role in helping students to at least mitigate this obstacle, it was of paramount importance to gather data from teachers

being in charge of the oral expression subject to identify the impact of teachers' social interaction on the learners' oral proficiency.

2. Research tools and data collection procedures

The present study used two different questionnaires as a research tool. The first questionnaire was administered for the students who took part in the study in order to get their opinions about the impact of anxiety on their oral performance. The second questionnaire was administered to the teachers of oral expression. It includes questions that test the kind of relationship between teachers and their students in the classroom setting and how this relationship can help in, positively, affecting the students' oral performance. The questionnaires were distributed to both participants at class time and after asking permission from the teachers. It took 15 minutes to complete them both. Based on a mixed-method approach, the data were analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively. This method of analysis was used to better understand the issue.

3. Data Presentation and Analysis

This section is completely devoted to the presentation and the analysis of the findings obtained from the students' and teachers' questionnaires.

3.1 Presentation and Analysis of the Students' Questionnaire Findings

The purpose behind administering this questionnaire was to check the students' oral skill abilities, i.e., how can anxiety prevent them from performing orally in class and in what ways the teaching of the oral expression subject affects the learning process. Some of the questions are as under.

1) How would you describe your level of oral fluency in English?

Table (1): Students' description of their oral fluency level

Alternatives	Excellent	Very good	Good	Average	Poor
Responses %	2.5	10	10	60	17.5

When asked about their level of fluency in English, especially when performing orally, most respondents with a rate of 60% claimed that their level is average, 10% reported to have either a very good or good level while only 2.5% said that they excel in performing orally and 17.5% affirmed to have a poor oral fluency in English.

2) Do you feel sure of yourself when speaking English in class?

Table (2): Students' insurance when performing orally in class

Alternatives	Yes	No	A Little
Responses %	60	10	30

Based on the elaboration of the results shown in table 2, the majority respondents rating 60% claimed to feel linguistically insecure when performing orally in class, 30% said 'a little' while only 10% denied their insurance with regard to oral performance inside the classroom context.

3) How often are you invited to perform orally in front of your classmates?

Table (3): Students' frequency invitation to perform orally in class

Alternatives	Very often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Responses%	12.5	12.5	37.5	35	2.5

Evidence from the results and the percentages from the above table clearly show that the respondents are rarely or sometimes invited to perform orally in front of their peers. The same rate 12.5% is attributed to those who argued 'often' or 'very often' and a minority respondents 2.5% claimed to 'never' have the opportunity to be invited to perform orally in class.

4) How do you feel when talking in English in front of your teacher and classmates?

Table (4): Students' feelings when performing in front of teachers/ peers

Alternatives	Very anxious	Anxious	Confident	Neutral
Responses%	10	25	3	2

Here again, most of the respondents stressed on their feeling of anxiety when performing orally in front of their peers and teachers. The percentages included in table 4 clearly show that 10% feel very anxious, 25% feel anxious while only 3% revealed to be confident and 2% remained neutral in their responses.

5) Is this anxiety related to

Table (5): Reasons behind the students' anxiety feeling

Statements	Frequency %
1. Face to face communication	50
2. Classroom management and climate as anxiety provoking situations	5
3. Teachers' method of teaching	15
4. The relationship between learners and their teacher/ peers	10
5. Official tests and marking as leading-anxiety issues	20

The reasons related to feeling of anxiety are numerous. In fact, 50% tied it up with face to face communication; 5% considered classroom management and climate as anxiety provoking situations; 15% related this feeling to the method adopted by the teacher; 10% connected it with the type of relationship between learners and their teacher while 20% associated anxiety with official tests and marking and viewed them as leading-anxiety issues.

6) How does the teacher's way of presenting the lessons affect your oral proficiency?

Table (6): The impact of teachers' way of teaching on oral proficiency

Alternatives	Positively	Negatively	Neutral
Responses %	45	50	5

Here, the respondents seemed to show a kind of equality and equilibrium as far as their the choice of alternatives for this particular question is concerned as nearly the same rates are attributed to those who argued that the teacher's way of presenting the lessons affect them either positively or negatively, and a small portion rating 5% remained neutral.

3.2 Presentation and Analysis of the Teachers' Questionnaire Findings

The second questionnaire of this study was administered to the oral expression teachers from the department of English in order to have some background information about what happens inside oral classrooms. It includes the following open-ended questions.

Q1: What kind of relationship is established between your students and you?

For the sake of obtaining information about the kind of relationship the teachers and learners have with one other, teachers provided nearly similar replies as they described such relationship as good, fair and sociable. Yet, one teacher revealed that his relationship with his students may vary from time to time and might be intimate, friendly, unfriendly, or even neutral but still human. Following these results, it seems that teachers do their best to keep the relationship with their students stable and suitable.

Q2: Are you sociable with your students?

When this question was posed, all the teachers affirmed their sociability towards the learners. Some of their claims were as follows:

We need to show sociability from time to time to attract the learners' interest and increase confidence.

We are responsible of these learners, so we must treat them well and pay attention to their needs and feelings.

Sociability facilitates and helps improve interaction with the students, especially those who are shy and anxious.

Q3: What strategies do you usually employ to aid your students avoid anxiety while performing orally in class?

Here, the teachers talked about various strategies that may be used to help the learners not to feel anxious or at least reduce this feeling; albeit, these strategies may vary from one teacher to another they shared common opinions such as avoiding correcting the students' mistakes harshly and directly in front of their peers, inviting them to interact even if they make some mistakes and lack vocabulary in the target language, and, most importantly, making them feel at ease and self-confident.

Q4: In what ways does 'sociability' aid in mitigating students' anxiety?

Some of the teachers' replies are as under:

Through teachers' sociability, the students will show interest in the subject matter.

They will feel less anxious and try to participate in whatever topic of discussion or debate.

They will show better oral proficiency years later.

They will speak the language confidently and feel at ease whenever supposed to perform orally in front of an audience.

The teacher will also benefit from this strategy since it allows him/her to gain in return the learners' involvement in class by establishing a stable and relaxing atmosphere.

4. Discussion of the Findings

Based on the students' responses, it might be deduced that their oral competence is quite average or weak and a considerable amount of anxiety exists inside oral

classrooms. This is due to several reasons such as the students' lack of security and confidence, the teachers' lack of attention especially when it comes to inviting and allowing them to perform orally in class, face to face communication, classroom management and climate are among the most common anxiety provoking situations, the teachers' method of teaching that needs to be revised, the relationship between learners and their teacher needs to be more sociable and attractive, in addition to testing and marking considered to be as leading-anxiety issues. However, throughout the teachers' claims and replies, one can notice the opposite of what has been reported by the students as most, if not all of them, affirmed that it is only through teachers' sociability that the learners can mitigate their anxiety feeling and improve their oral competencies in class. Indeed, all the teachers insisted on helping their students to get rid from anxiety by developing different strategies that may aid in creating a good and stable learning atmosphere inside EFL oral classrooms.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Speaking a foreign language in an academic setting is one of the most challenging tasks among English foreign language learners who lack fluency in the target language. The purpose of this study is twofold: First, it tries to discover the principal reasons behind the learners' feeling of anxiety when performing orally in class. Second, it attempts to maintain a supportive relationship between students and teachers in order to improve the learners' oral performance and mitigate anxiety. Through the use of two questionnaires administered to teachers and second year students from the department of English studying at Belhadj Bouchaib University, data were gathered and analyzed via a mixed- method approach embracing both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The findings revealed that anxiety really exists among the learners who are supposed to perform orally in class and it is only through better teachers' sociability, that the students may avoid anxiety and improve their oral performance.

The present study has scrutinized the negative effect of the anxiety phenomenon on the students' oral performance and tried to list the main reasons behind its existence. Performing in front of an audience, fear of negative evaluation, the teacher's method of presenting the lessons and oral tests were among the principal causes behind this negative feeling. These, can only be reduced through a better teacher's sociability. Indeed, the more sociable the teacher is, the less anxious the learner will be, and the less sociable the teacher is, the more anxious the learner will be. That is why, establishing a peaceful, relaxed and more or less friendly atmosphere inside the four walls can yield a fruitful and successful learning/teaching process. As such, teachers are the pillars and the principal agents who can help anxious learners overcome their anxiety and enhance their oral performance. This may happen by taking into consideration the provoking anxiety aspects mentioned in this study. Teachers need to reconsider their sociability, an important aspect for creating a supportive relationship in such a sensitive educational milieu. It is also important to mention that this study has its limitations since the findings obtained cannot be over-generalized and applied to all EFL oral classrooms scattered throughout the Algerian universities, and thus, the door remains open for further research related to such a remaining issue.

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کاهش اضطراب و افزایش عملکرد شفاهی دانشجویان در کلاس‌های درس آموزش زبان انگلیسی به عنوان زبان خارجی در الجزایر

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صحبت‌کردن به یک زبان خارجی در یک محیط دانشگاهی یکی از چالش برانگیزترین کارها در بین زبان‌آموزان الجزایری است که به زبان مقصد تسلط ندارند. هدف این مقاله دو چیز است: اول اینکه سعی می‌کند دلایل اصلی احساس اضطراب فراگیران هنگام بیان شفاهی در کلاس را کشف کند. دوم، تلاش برای حفظ رابطه حمایتی بین دانشجویان و معلمان به منظور بهبود عملکرد شفاهی فراگیران و کاهش اضطراب آنهاست. با استفاده از دو پرسشنامه که برای معلمان و دانشجویان سال دوم تحصیلات تکمیلی گروه زبان انگلیسی که در دانشگاه بلحاج بوشعیب مشغول به تحصیل بودند، اجرا شد، داده‌ها با رویکرد ترکیبی با رویکردهای کمی و کیفی جمع‌آوری و تجزیه و تحلیل شدند. یافته‌ها نشان داد که اضطراب در بین فراگیرانی که قرار است در کلاس به صورت شفاهی اجرا کنند وجود دارد و تنها از طریق اجتماعی‌پذیری بهتر معلمان است که دانشجویان ممکن است از اضطراب اجتناب کنند و عملکرد شفاهی خود را بهبود بخشند.

واژه‌های کلیدی: اضطراب، کلاس درس زبان انگلیسی، زبان‌آموزان، معلمان، عملکرد شفاهی.

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