

Original Research

Dealing with foreign language speaking anxiety: What every language teacher should know

by Chahrazad Mouhoubi-Messadh and Kamel Khaldi

Chahrazad Mouhoubi-Messadh University of Algiers 2, Algeria chahrazad.mouhoubi@gmail.com

Kamel Khaldi University of Algiers 2, Algeria kamel.khaldi@univ-alg2.dz

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The issue of language learning anxiety has received considerable attention in the last decades due to interest in learner psychology. Foreign language anxiety has been investigated as situation-specific anxiety related to the language classroom. Lately, researchers focused on language anxiety from a skills perspective, mainly the productive ones, speaking and writing, exploring the debilitating effects of anxiety on language learners. This paper reports on a study on speaking anxiety that included a sample of sixteen EFL undergraduates who took part in focus group interviews. They were conducted to collect qualitative data that would shed light on speaking anxiety from students' perspectives. Based on existing language anxiety research, a theoretical overview of some of the personal and procedural factors that are thought to contribute to foreign language speaking anxiety is provided. The findings revealed a significant impact of the teachers' role (s) in alleviating much of the anxiety experienced by the subjects in EFL speaking. An essential aim of this paper was to suggest some possible pedagogical measures that would help learners, as well as teachers, overcome major difficulties caused by foreign language speaking anxiety in an EFL university setting with reference to the teaching and learning of the speaking skill in the EFL Algerian university context. Ways to deal with and minimise foreign language speaking anxiety could be more effective if they intersect with students' concerns.

KEYWORDS: speaking anxiety, focus group, reducing anxiety, EFL, foreign language, language teacher



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1. INTRODUCTION

With regards to research into foreign language anxiety, there is ample evidence that it has negative effects on language learning. Foreign language anxiety matters because it 'represents an emotionally and physically uncomfortable experience for too many language learners' (Horwitz et al., 2010, p. 109). In the language classroom, individual communication attempts will be evaluated according to uncertain or even unknown lin-

guistic and socio-cultural standards. For this, Horwitz et al. (1986) suggest that second language communication entails risk-taking and is necessarily problematic. In their theory of language anxiety, the authors hypothesise that 'since speaking in the target language seems to be the most threatening aspect of foreign language learning, the emphasis on the development of communicative competence poses particularly great difficulties for the anxious student' (Horwitz et al., 1986, p. 132).

2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

In this study, the method used was qualitative descriptive research. To explore learners' perceptions of speaking anxiety in EFL learning, focus group interviews were designed to answer the following research questions: what factors do EFL Algerian university students associate with foreign language speaking anxiety, and how could anxiety be reduced in EFL speaking classrooms?

Data were collected from a sample of sixteen (4 males and 12 females) EFL Algerian students at the English Department, University of Algiers 2. Two focus group interviews were conducted by dividing the subjects into Focus Group (FG) 1 (N=8) of low-ability students and Focus Group (FG) 2 (N=8) of high-ability students. Every focus group comprised two females and six males of different proficiency levels. Those participants represented samples of first-year undergraduates (FG1) and third-year undergraduates (FG2) respectively. The division of the population into low-ability and high-ability students was based on overall course grades. Our choice of focus group interviews stems from the fact that participants could provide more descriptions and insights about speaking anxiety in a form of a group. Moreover, researchers have drawn attention to the inclusion of focus groups in research studies since they are *'less threatening to many participants as the environment is helpful for the group participants to discuss perceptions, ideas, opinions and thoughts'* (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009, p. 2).

In constructing the questions of the focus group guide, we have taken into consideration existing research on language anxiety (Yan & Horwitz, 2008), learners' attitudes in speaking classroom and general descriptions of anxiety in speaking given by the students prior to the study. To reduce the chances of falsified responses and comments, each participant was assured that he or she would remain anonymous. The subjects welcomed the opportunity to talk about their classroom experiences in their speaking classes, and the researcher acted as a moderator. In discussing emergent themes and categories, we shall provide verbatim statements made by focus group members. The data from focus group interviews were analysed using the thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The data from the students' comments were recorded in their original form as they were conducted in English, allowing some idiosyncratic language to creep in. We used thematic analysis as it was more suitable in exploring psychological variables like speaking anxiety.

3. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

3.1. Rationale

The tendency on the part of some people to avoid and fear communicating orally is one of the most studied topics. Daly (1991) pointed out that reasoning from the analogy of first language anxiety might offer insights that will aid educators in coping with language anxiety. We assume that there might be some logical ties to foreign language anxiety related to speaking especially if we consider the following description:

'In the typical classroom, students might avoid talking because they are unprepared, uninterested, unwilling to disclose, alienated from the class, lacking confidence in their competence, or because they fear communicating' (Daly, 1991, p. 6).

We may assume, therefore, that many learners who fear participation resort, most of the time, to silence as an avoidance strategy. For this reason, there is an assumption that too much anxiety presents a major hindrance in second language learning (Oxford, 1999). In an oral classroom, for instance, the amount of language production can be influenced by the ways learners perceive themselves, their willingness to communicate and take risks, and by the classroom atmosphere itself.

Researchers like Sevinc and Dewaele (2018) consider that communicative anxiety can occur in a range of cases, typically starting in foreign language classrooms but with the potential to extend to other situations and contexts. In an EFL setting, most opportunities to perform orally in the target language are given in the language classroom (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992). In discussing major sources of anxiety, Price (1991) identified speaking the target language in front of peers as the greatest source of anxiety. Likewise, Scarcella and Oxford (1992) referred to speaking as the major skill that triggers anxiety, described as performance anxiety, stemming from speaking in front of the class.

Assuming that language anxiety may affect learners' speaking skill development, we attempt to investigate this aspect as a central issue in this paper. It is hoped that by examining foreign language speaking anxiety and how it interacts with contributing variables, this study could provide some theoretical insights and pedagogical suggestions to reduce EFL speaking anxiety in language classes. There have been attempts to design some measures to reduce anxiety in language learning situations. Though effective, they would require time and energy on the part of teachers and learners to be applied in classrooms (Jin et al., 2021). As such, our direction of thought is within this framework, that ways to

cope with anxiety in EFL speaking could be more effective if they derive from learners' voices. Teachers are not that receptive to those psychological procedures and measures that could be much demanding and need special training. That might diverge educators from their essential role(s) as teachers into psychologists or therapists. As posited by Horwitz et al. (2010), providing help to reduce or overcome foreign language anxiety should be an important concern for all language teachers.

People who suffer from communication apprehension are more reluctant to converse or interact with others and tend to avoid communication. Keeping silent, responding only when necessary, being passive, and avoiding class entirely are typical behaviour patterns of communication apprehension that can be observed in the language classroom (Oxford, 1999).

In examining possible routes to apprehension, Daly (1991) stated that individuals become apprehensive when they receive random and unpredictable patterns of rewards and punishments for engaging in the same verbal activity. The unpredictability of others' responses to a person's communication attempts leads him or her to become apprehensive about communicating. Those views are interesting in the light of research into language anxiety. Apprehensive students who perceive communicating in a foreign language as threatening tend to avoid communicative opportunities. Aida (1994) hypothesises that *'communicatively apprehensive people are more reluctant to get involved in conversations with others and to seek social interactions'* (Aida, 1994, p. 156).

Out of all the language skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing, speaking stands as a major anxiety-inducing skill (Tsui, 1995). This might be because of the classroom situation itself or because some individuals are not receptive to the idea of communicating with others (Allwright & Bailey, 1991). Moreover, lacking the necessary linguistic tools of the target language, for instance in oral production activities, can generate speaking anxiety (Thaler, 2021).

In many research studies, it has been found that speaking in front of the class provides the greatest emotional challenge to second language learners (Horwitz et al., 1986; Price, 1991). The emotional challenge required when students are asked to speak is described as an inhibition which *'occurs when learners must publicly produce new responses which are not yet well-learned, and such demands for public performance could be premature and may lead to anxiety on the part*

of the learner' (Bailey, 1983, p. 67). Individuals who typically have trouble speaking in groups are likely to experience greater difficulties in speaking where they have little control of the communicative situation, and their performance is constantly monitored (Horwitz et al., 1986). In the language class, students are required to communicate via a medium in which only a limited facility is possessed. Consequently, the potential for frustrated communication is always present in the language class (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). As Horwitz et al. (1986) put it, *'the special communication apprehension permeating foreign language learning derives from the personal knowledge that one will almost certainly have difficulty understanding others and making oneself understood'* (Horwitz et al., 1986, p. 127).

In other words, students' awareness that, at the level of speaking and listening, full comprehension of the foreign language messages is so demanding can generate apprehension. Horwitz et al. (1986) argue that this knowledge might help explain why some talkative people are silent in a foreign language class. The converse seems to be true. Ordinarily self-conscious and inhibited speakers may find that communicating in a foreign language makes them feel as if someone else is speaking. Therefore, those speakers are likely to feel less anxious in the language class.

3.2. Personal and procedural factors that might influence EFL speaking anxiety

According to Horwitz et al. (2010), teachers can help in minimising students' anxiety levels by relying on the *'individual characteristics associated with anxiety and on the instructional factors that contribute to increased anxiety'* (Horwitz et al., 2010, p. 108). In line with this view, we attempt to review the role played by some of the variables that could augment negative affect and foreign language speaking anxiety for EFL learners.

3.2.1. Speaking anxiety and limited self-expression

When communicating in a second language, learners may face difficulties in expressing themselves due to limited ability. In other words, communication in the second language becomes problematic because of the *'immature command'* of the second language relative to the first (Horwitz et al., 1986). With their limited communicative competence, learners may have difficulties in relating to others and presenting themselves adequately (Littlewood, 1984). Even attempts to speak spontaneously may result in misunderstandings on the

part of language learners. They may feel threatened when the ability and desire to participate in discussion are present, but the process of verbalising is inhibited (Gkonou, 2011).

In language learning, students can feel pressure and frustration when the material is out of their grasp. As Horwitz et al. (1986) put it, *'adult language learners' self-perceptions of genuineness presenting themselves to others may be threatened by the limited range of meaning and affect that can be deliberately communicated'* (Horwitz et al., 1986, p. 128).

The situation is different when communicating in a native language as it is not difficult to understand others or to make oneself understood. For this reason, assumptions about ability to perform and self-expression are challenged when learners are required to perform in a second or foreign language. Some students might even experience pressure when asked to perform. In the same vein, Tsui (1995) suggests that *'the pressure to give the right answer is exacerbated by the fact that not only do students have to know the right answer but they also need to express it in the target language'* (Tsui, 1995, p. 84).

3.2.2. Speaking anxiety, reduced self-esteem and reduced self-confidence

Learners with high self-esteem are less likely to feel threatened when communicating in another language even in unfamiliar situations. Those learners are ready to risk making mistakes or projecting a reduced image of themselves (Littlewood, 1984). In Price's (1991) study, unsuccessful language learners often have lower self-esteem than successful language learners.

Horwitz et al. (1986) noted that foreign language learning can cause a threat to learners' self-esteem by depriving learners of their normal means of communication, their freedom to make errors, and their ability to behave fully as normal people. Individuals with a sure sense of self-worth could manage more effectively the threats caused by the language learning environment than those with low self-esteem. Among highly anxious language students, those with high self-esteem might handle their anxiety better than those with low self-esteem, resulting in better performance (Oxford, 1999).

As self-confidence is closely intertwined with self-esteem, researchers suggest that students who lack confidence in themselves both in ability level and ability to communicate suffer from communication apprehension (Tsui, 1995). Low self-confidence may cause reticence or withdrawal from classroom interaction. For this rea-

son, teachers should not expect instant fluency and creativity, instead, they should build up students' confidence bit by bit, giving them restricted tasks first before more spontaneous ones (Harmer, 2001).

3.2.3. Anxiety and speaking in front of the class

Many researchers relate language anxiety to some classroom procedures. Speaking in front of the class or giving oral presentations are regarded as the most anxiety-producing activities (Yan & Horwitz, 2008; Malyuga et al., 2016). In Horwitz et al.'s (1986) study, many subjects felt anxious about being called on to respond orally in their language classes. Similar results were found by Price (1991). Speaking the target language in front of peers was identified by all of Price's (1991) subjects as the greatest source of anxiety. Interviewees spoke of their fears of being laughed at by other students, of making a fool of themselves in public, and of being ridiculed by their peers.

3.2.4. Anxiety and learners' help-seeking behaviour

This is another aspect that has been shown to contribute to stress in the classroom. Students who are not comfortable in seeking help from their instructors or teaching assistants may experience a high level of anxiety in the classroom. Accordingly, their failure to seek help may in turn result in lower levels of achievement. As Aida (1994) puts it, *'some students may need assistance from the instructor, but do not ask for help because they might view help-seeking as a manifestation of weakness, immaturity, or even incompetence'* (Aida, 1994, p. 164). Such types of students might feel lost in the classroom when they do not ask for help from their teachers because they consider it as a weakness. Moreover, they can be very anxious about the teacher discovering their problems.

3.2.5. Teachers' intolerance of silence

Research suggests that teachers who are intolerant of silence put a great deal of pressure on students to perform in language classes. Tsui (1995) regarded teachers' intolerance of silence as a contributing factor to anxiety. In her action research project, many teachers reported that they were afraid of silence and that they felt very uneasy or impatient when they failed to get responses from their students. One of the reasons is that teachers are afraid that a longer wait time will slow down the pace and lead to boredom and disruption in the classroom.

3.2.6. Anxiety and peer-to-peer interactions

In language classrooms, students are required to perform orally in front of the whole class. In communicative tasks, for instance, students will constantly assess how significant others will react to them. The possibility that learners’ performance can be evaluated negatively on the part of fellow learners is always present. Allwright and Bailey (1991) suggested that for a learner to be open to the experience of becoming a speaker of another language, he or she needs to be receptive to fellow learners. Some language students feel anxious about communicating because they are sensitive to the evaluations, real or imagined, of their peers (Horwitz et al., 1986). The degree of learners’ receptivity to fellow students can be affected negatively by the pressure imposed by peers. As mentioned by Allwright and Bailey (1991), the more proficient learners may feel that they have nothing to gain from interacting with the

less proficient. Likewise, the less proficient may feel demoralised when they compare themselves to the superior performance of others. It is essential, therefore, to lower anxiety generated by learner-learner interactions since it can have debilitating effects on self-confidence, self-perception of competence and consequently on effort and achievement.

4. STUDY AND RESULTS

Three broad themes that were thought to influence students’ anxiety levels in speaking were identified from the focus group interview transcripts. In reporting the findings, tables are used to give an overview of all the themes and categories that emerged from qualitative data along with a number of responses recurrence. In addition to that, sample instances of focus group interview transcripts are presented for every corresponding theme and subsequent category (Table 1).

Table 1
Anxiety, self-esteem and self-confidence in EFL speaking: Focus group 1 (N=8)

CATEGORIES	NUMBER OF RESPONSES RECURRENCE
Limited vocabulary	3
Limited knowledge about the topics	3
Teacher’s role	2

According to the responses of FG1 (Table 1), having a limited vocabulary and having limited knowledge about the topics were cited as major reasons influencing self-esteem and self-confidence in speaking. One subject stated: *‘Sometimes I’m not sure because I lose words. I’m worried when I haven’t many words to express myself’*. The same statement was made by other students of the first group. In this case, lack of vocabulary seems to pose problems for students who are anxious about the way they perform in the class. As a result, feelings of inefficacy can be generated when language learners fail to express themselves properly. Another student added: *‘When I know the topic and I have words to express my ideas I feel confident, and I begin to speak freely’*. As opposed to the previous example, it seems that self-confidence depends on the student’s knowledge of the topics and mastery of vocabulary.

When topics are unfamiliar, students are likely to experience anxiety and reluctance to intervene in class. Several subjects, for instance, said that they did not al-

ways feel confident in their oral classes. One student reported that he did not feel confident in some sessions and said: *‘I worry because I don’t know the topic’*. Another added: *‘Self-confidence depends on the topic. English is a new language for us, and I’m always worried to speak’*. Such comments indicate that when students are required to perform in their oral classes, they can be frustrated especially when the topics discussed are beyond their level of competence. As Daly (1991) hypothesised, the less familiar the situation, the greater the situational apprehension. When topics are unfamiliar, students may feel anxiety and low self-confidence.

Some students believed that the teacher’s assistance could help them overcome their feelings of inadequacy and lessen their anxiety. They emphasised the role of the teacher in nurturing self-confidence and situational self-esteem. One student described that he always worried and felt less self-confident in his oral class. He recognised that it was his oral teacher who helped him to build up self-confidence and said: *‘When*

the teacher helps me when I stop by giving me words, I feel confident, and I continue speaking'. Another student shared this comment and said: 'It depends on my teacher. If he helps me, I feel self-confident and I will not have problems in speaking. But if I try alone, I don't

feel sure and self-confident'. Such comments illustrate Horwitz et al.'s (1986) connection between self-confidence and communication apprehension. Students who lack confidence in themselves or their English suffer from communication apprehension.

Table 2

Anxiety, self-esteem and self-confidence in EFL speaking: Focus group 2 (N=8)

CATEGORIES	NUMBER OF RESPONSES RECURRENCE
Limited knowledge about the topics	1
Fear of classmates' reactions	4
Fear of being misunderstood	2
Classroom atmosphere	1

Interviewees from FG1, who reported experiencing low self-esteem and low self-confidence, referred to aspects somewhat different from those of FG2 like topics selection, fear of classmates, fear of being misunderstood, and the classroom atmosphere (Table 2). Responses of FG2 tend to support the view that learners' self-esteem and self-confidence in speaking are affected by having limited knowledge about topics selected for them. One student mentioned that she felt confident when she had ideas about the topics discussed. She went on to describe that 'other times I don't find what to say and I feel that I have no self-confidence'. In the same vein, another student shared the view that she would feel motivated and self-confident depending on the topic familiarity. She described that sometimes she had ideas but tended to eliminate original ones: 'I make myself superficial. I express myself in a way that I share the common opinion'.

It seems that such avoidance behaviour is adopted to cope with threatening situations. To explain why she avoided speaking differently this student said: 'In that case, my opinion contradicted the common one to the point that I'm always afraid of the reaction of my classmates'. Such comments are similar to Kleinmann's (1977) concept of avoidance behaviour. Language students avoid threatening situations – in this case, topic avoidance – to preserve self-esteem.

Besides, several references were made by the subjects in FG2 to the fear of being misunderstood. One of the interviewees argued that she preferred to be silent and avoided participation because of low self-confi-

dence. In an attempt to find out more about what contributed to her lack of self-confidence, this student cited her fear of negative reactions on the part of her classmates. She explained: 'I'm afraid of not expressing my ideas well... to be sometimes misunderstood'. Low self-confidence can be a result of low situational self-esteem, especially when students fear misunderstanding. Consistent with Horwitz et al.'s (1986) theory, adults' perceptions of the true self are challenged when a limited self is presented at any given moment in the foreign language.

The classroom atmosphere appeared to be another influencing variable from the students' responses. There was a common feeling that self-esteem and self-confidence in speaking can be achieved through a gradual process. For instance, one of the interviewees from FG2 recalled that she was not self-confident at the beginning of her oral class because she was doubtful about the attitude of her classmates and her teacher. This student went on to describe that at first she was forgetful and made a lot of mistakes. After some time, she began to feel sure and self-confident. She said: 'The atmosphere of the class pushes us to remember. When you are not at ease you forget ideas, you make many mistakes'. Many other students shared that attitude.

We can deduce that the classroom atmosphere is important in building up students' self-confidence. The students can judge themselves positively and perform without fear. In some research studies (Horwitz et al., 1986; Price, 1991), it has been suggested that learners with high self-esteem might handle their anxiety better

than those with low self-esteem. Just as self-esteem can be situational, comments from FG2 suggest that situational self-confidence may have a different role with anxious language learners.

Interviewees' comments from FG1 revealed that students worry about speaking in front of the class due to fear of speaking and self-criticism (Table 3). Specifically, some interviewees felt frustrated when asked to speak. As one said, *'I worry about speaking a foreign language'*. It was apparent from other comments that

some students developed negative beliefs that were potential sources of anxiety. One subject, for instance, brought up the notion of anxiety in speaking: *'I know that I'm not a good speaker and my English is bad. I do a lot of mistakes. I'm afraid when I speak English'*. Another said: *'Speaking makes me afraid and worried. I feel that I'm obliged to answer but I can't. So, this makes me worried. I'm not perfect'*. Expressions like *'I'm not a good speaker'* and *'I'm not perfect'* are possible indications of self-criticism that can lead to anxiety.

Table 3
Anxiety and speaking in front of the class: Focus group 1 (N=8)

CATEGORIES	NUMBER OF RESPONSES RECURRENCE
Fear of speaking a foreign language	1
Self-criticism	3
Fear of being ridiculed	4

It could be argued that being called on to speak unprepared in front of the class can increase anxiety when learners hold negative beliefs reflected as self-criticism. Perhaps this could sound like a good reason for what makes some low-ability students tongue-tied in their oral classes.

Several subjects referred to the fear of being ridiculed as another source of their embarrassment in speaking. Some subjects felt embarrassed at the beginning of their oral classes. They feared participation because of negative expectations. The subjects cited questions like *'How do they look at me?'* and *'What do they think about me?'* repeatedly when attempting to participate. One possible implication is that when learners have negative expectations of how others evaluate them, they would feel embarrassed. Such types of learners prefer to be silent rather than subject themselves to criticism or humiliation.

Perhaps this can be true since some participants had memories of stressful situations where they were ridiculed as one recalled, *'I feel embarrassed especially when my friends laugh at me'*. Another interviewee commented: *'I feel embarrassed speaking especially when I begin with a mistake'*.

For most of the subjects from FG2 (Table 4) being asked to speak and express personal opinions can reflect their personalities. As such, the fact of taking the risk of revealing personal views can lead to anxiety.

One participant described that she was fearful when she failed to express herself fully or showed little of her knowledge, while another said: *'I worry about the way I'm presenting myself because our speaking reflects our personality'*. Another participant reported: *'I'm afraid of being misunderstood by the others'*. In addition to that, other interviewees were fearful of being misunderstood, especially by the teacher, as can be observed in the following comment made by one of the subjects: *'I'm sometimes not at ease. I could not express all my ideas. I'm afraid that other students would judge me negatively. I worry about the teacher'*.

It is possible that speaking unprepared can be stressful for learners who have the personal knowledge that they are revealing themselves in front of the class. This is justified by the fact that most of the oral classes include argumentation and discussion groups where learners are required to present personal views most of the time. As predicted in the literature, anxious students feel a deep self-consciousness when asked to risk revealing themselves by speaking the foreign language in the presence of other people (Horwitz et al., 1986). Accordingly, it is possible to evaluate this result in terms of the predictions put forward by MacIntyre and Gardner (1989). They have proposed that anxiety stems when language learners have mature thoughts and ideas but immature language vocabulary with which to express them.

Table 4
Anxiety and speaking in front of the class: Focus group 2 (N=8)

CATEGORIES	NUMBER OF RESPONSES RECURRENCE
Fear of being misunderstood	3
Lack of interest in speaking topics	1
Forced participation	1
Some negative beliefs	3

Several interviewees of FG2 denied that they would feel embarrassed about participation but others commented differently. Some participants reported that they felt embarrassed in speaking due to lack of interest, forced participation, and some negative beliefs. One student pointed out how she was frustrated when the topic did not interest her and said: *'I feel embarrassed when the topic doesn't interest me'*. This implies that students are unwilling to speak when they are disinterested or forced to participate. Another subject replied: *'I feel embarrassed when I find myself obliged to answer'*. Thus, there is an indication that forced participation can be problematic for students who are not ready to take risks in their oral classes. Some teachers may force students to participate while students are dis-

interested or fearful. The tendency to have some negative beliefs is of importance to us in accounting for the lack of voluntary classroom participation. One of the participants, for instance, reported that she was fearful about the attitude of her peers. She said: *'I feel always restricted and limited by the students'*. This negative attitude can be aggravated so that students avoid participation continuously. Such negative attitudes are possibly affected by students' fears of making mistakes in front of the class.

An example of this can be seen in the following comment: *'I feel embarrassed when answering in the classroom because I don't like mistakes. I avoid participation most of the time. I participate only when asked by the teacher'*.

Table 5
Anxiety in speaking and classroom interaction: Focus group 1 (N=8)

CATEGORIES	NUMBER OF RESPONSES RECURRENCE
Low ability level in EFL	6
Fear of the teacher	2

According to the interviewees of FG1, feelings of uneasiness and worry before speaking in the speaking class were related to low ability level in EFL and fear of the teacher (Table 5). Particularly, fear of speaking was attributed to vocabulary inadequacies, as one subject described it: *'I don't feel relaxed because when I begin to speak I don't find words. I think always about my English and how I can express ideas'*. Another added: *'Before speaking I'm not relaxed because I don't know all the words'*. Several subjects were aware that their low ability level was due to poor vocabulary, which affected their anxiety before speaking. Another in-

terviewee, for instance, commented: *'I feel anxious before speaking in class because of my poor vocabulary. Since we are in the first year, it is difficult to speak. I feel anxious'*. Besides, the subjects of FG1 were also concerned about the attitude of their instructor, which played a significant role in the amount of anxiety they experienced. The following comment represents an opinion, which was shared by most of the participants: *'I don't feel relaxed before speaking never and ever. I don't know if I will speak very well or not. I think of the teacher. It depends on the teacher. When he looks at you as if you are making something wrong'*.

There is an indication that instructors might increase students' anxiety in an oral class. We may also explain speaking class anxiety by the fact that some be-

ginners perceive speaking as a threatening situation when the teacher intimidates them by correcting or criticising their performance.

Table 6

Anxiety in speaking and classroom interaction: Focus group 2 (N=8)

CATEGORIES	NUMBER OF RESPONSES RECURRENCE
Classroom atmosphere and peers' roles	5
Classroom atmosphere and teacher's role	3

As opposed to FG1 comments, responses from FG2 (Table 6) revealed that advanced students were less prone to anxiety in the speaking class. Most of the participants expressed feelings of easiness and relaxation before coming to the speaking class. Besides, interviewees spoke of the speaking class as their preferable class as one stated that he felt *'relaxed in the speaking class more than other classes'* and another added that he *'felt at ease before coming to the speaking class because speaking helps us to know each other'*.

Overall, it was apparent from the subjects' comments that the speaking class could be a non-threatening classroom as the class members get to know each other. *'When I come to the speaking class, I feel very relaxed. My classmates understand me'*, said one of the respondents to emphasise the importance of having a shared understanding between peers. Another interviewee pointed out the impact of peers' support in alleviating anxiety: *'I always feel relaxed when speaking in the class. Maybe the participation of my classmates makes me more relaxed. The atmosphere of the class is very friendly'*. It might be said accordingly that speaking anxiety can be reduced when peers build positive attitudes about the speaking class gradually.

Some other interviewees addressed the issue of the speaking class atmosphere as affected by the instructor's roles. One of the participants noted: *'I feel relaxed before coming to the speaking class because I know the atmosphere is good and I'm not going to be intimidated by the teacher'*. Contrastingly, anxiety in speaking can be high when students perceive every correction as a failure as other students described. For instance, one of the interviewees commented: *'If the teacher blames me or evaluates me negatively, I would hate their class. I would not feel at ease. I would feel anxious'*. Such comments are important to account for the instructors' role in lowering anxiety in speaking classes.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. EFL learners' self-esteem and self-confidence

The research outcomes showed that reduced self-esteem and reduced self-confidence can lead to considerable anxiety in speaking for most of the students. Our findings suggest that EFL speaking teachers may boost students' self-esteem and self-confidence by providing encouragement and positive reinforcement. Teachers can contribute to building students' self-esteem and self-confidence by drawing students' attention to their abilities and strengths (Dörnyei, 2001). Encouragement can explicitly make the learner aware of personal strengths and abilities, or it can indirectly communicate that we trust the person. Sometimes a small word of encouragement and positive reinforcement can create an atmosphere of security and trust for the anxious student (Dörnyei, 2001).

In the light of the findings of the present study, several students expressed the view that they would feel more confident if the teacher gave notice to everyone and when he or she understood the difficulties encountered by students. Helping students with necessary vocabulary appeared to increase students' self-esteem and self-confidence, especially low ability students. An increase in self-confidence and self-esteem may lead to increased learner effort in speaking. The students can participate in classroom discussions and continue to make their views understood when teachers provide necessary assistance.

5.2. Vocabulary practice

Based on the findings of this study, vocabulary practice is indicated to help learners overcome their difficulties in speaking. Having limited vocabulary knowledge contributed to students' anxieties. Therefore, more instructional effort has to be given to the teaching of vocabulary. Integrating vocabulary practice

'Based on the findings of this study, vocabulary practice is indicated to help learners overcome their difficulties in speaking. Having limited vocabulary knowledge contributed to students' anxieties. There-fore, more instructional effort has to be given to the teaching of vocabulary'

into the speaking skill instruction can be helpful for students who suffer language inadequacies in speaking the foreign language. Teachers may think of selecting some vocabulary activities to ensure that students encounter situations that are at an appropriate level of difficulty. In this way, the students get accustomed to having the teacher both provide the necessary vocabulary for speaking tasks and practising that vocabulary in meaningful contexts for more classroom interaction. Moreover, teachers may find it useful to present new vocabulary through a variety of word choices and contextual appropriateness.

5.3. Topics for speaking classes

Unfamiliar free topics are likely to increase students' frustration in speaking as revealed in the findings of this study. Most of the time, the topics for speaking classes are based on the teacher's choice, giving less consideration to students' background. Sometimes students are confronted with similar topics over the years of studying at university level. This instructional practice can generate boredom and lack of interest in students. Besides, they might be fearful when asked to speak about topics about which they have nothing to say. Free topics do not usually appeal to students of low ability levels because they require a certain degree of spontaneity and risk-taking. Therefore, if we decide to include free topics, they have to be relevant to the students' own lives and interests. Teachers of speaking could present students with different topics and design activities based on students' preferences and suggestions.

5.4. Time to formulate answers

Students might experience anxiety when having limited time to formulate answers. Allowing students to check their answers before giving them to the whole class could ease much of the tension experienced in speaking. Needing enough time is particularly interesting. Instead of expecting the students to perform directly

in front of the whole class, speaking teachers may think of giving sufficient time to students to respond to compensate for their anxiety. However, giving too much time has the opposite effect on some students. Some students expressed great uneasiness and frustration when the teacher allotted more than the time needed to perform in the speaking class.

5.5. Calling on students in the EFL speaking class

Being called on to speak in front of the class could be an anxiety-provoking factor for some apprehensive EFL learners. Most of the time, teachers call on students randomly trying perhaps to keep them attentive or monitor their performance. This random questioning can cause great anxiety for highly anxious students. According to Daly (1991), the performance being sought is a verbal one and any failure in a speaking activity represents in the words of an apprehensive individual a nightmare experience. Letting students volunteer to participate or providing predictable participation patterns such as calling students row-by-row or seat-by-seat would decrease much of the tension raised by the randomness of the questioning in the speaking class.

5.6. Correcting errors in EFL speaking

The selection of speaking correction techniques should be based on reducing negative reactions in students. When the student is speaking in a large group, corrections should be made as tactfully as possible. Students tend to be more comfortable about speaking when they view the classroom as a place for learning and communication rather than as a place where they perform for the instructor (Price, 1991). Providing corrections and feedback on gradual basis would decrease much of the anxiety in EFL speaking. Ölmezer-Özturk (2021) studied the impact of a process enriched with mini speeches activities and presentations on EFL learners' speaking anxiety. The researcher found that scaffolded feedback was effective in reducing anxiety, increasing self-confidence, and getting more opportunities to speak the EFL.

During speaking classroom activities, it is advisable that teachers focus on the message the student is trying to communicate rather than on the accuracy of their grammar and pronunciation (Beebe, 1983). Since 'errorlessness' in speech is beyond reach, students need to be reminded of the value of making mistakes and how much they can learn from those mistakes. However, we do not advocate that EFL speaking teachers should tolerate any sort of mistakes. For some of the participants

in the study, the teacher's manner in correcting mistakes was more influential than the corrections themselves. Students need a reaction to meaning not an evaluation of form (Beebe, 1983). It is suggested that providing the former would be more helpful to students to encourage risk-taking. We may cite Beebe's (1983) recommendation when she states that *'if students understand an exercise to be commutative, and they reveal personal views, they seek a substantive reaction from the teacher, not a correction of the technical accuracy of their words'* (Beebe, 1983, p. 61).

In the focus groups, some interviewees reported that sometimes they did not concentrate on the teacher's corrections. They focused their attention on the uncertainty involved in the act of communicating their views, not on the chance of making errors in syntax or pronunciation. So, it is up to the teacher to decide which corrections are more suitable for his or her learners.

5.7. Testing EFL speaking

Tests given orally can bring about test anxiety and communication anxiety. When testing speaking, teachers should not ignore affective factors that can influence students' performance. As pointed out by Phillips (1992), part of the students' anxiety maybe worry about appearing anxious. Realising that the teacher or the evaluator understands the tension caused by being anxious about appearing anxious reduces part of the learners' test anxiety.

5.8. Cooperation instead of competition

Another recommendation would be to include several cooperative activities. They would allow the anxious student to practise the target language in a small group. According to Crandall (1999), cooperative learning has been shown to encourage and support most of the affective factors, which correlate positively with language learning, such as reducing debilitating anxiety, increasing motivation, and promoting self-esteem. In large groups, the use of pair work, group work or cooperative activities can be helpful for anxious students. EFL speaking teachers can group students in groups of three or four to encourage all the members to participate and to benefit from multiple ideas. This practice allows for more face-to-face group interaction. Cooperative activities can provide learners with social skills that facilitate teamwork, create trust and enhance communication, leadership, problem-solving and decision making in group interaction (Crandall, 1999).

'In teaching EFL speaking, it is advisable to present students with models of successful interactional styles through exposure to natural dialogues, the use of video and audiotapes, films and TV programmes. The selection of materials has to be rationally based on situations and topics the learner is most likely to encounter in the real world'

5.9. Aspects of the target language culture

Providing exposure to successful interactional styles seems to be appealing to foreign language students (Scarcella, 1990). In teaching EFL speaking, it is advisable to present students with models of successful interactional styles through exposure to natural dialogues, the use of video and audiotapes, films and TV programmes. The selection of materials has to be rationally based on situations and topics the learner is most likely to encounter in the real world.

In an EFL context like ours where contact with the target language and its speakers is very rare outside formal settings, it is crucial to raise students' cultural awareness of EFL. Instead of limiting video sessions to literature and civilisation classes, we may increase and expand such sessions into videos about British and American lifestyles. In addition, speaking teachers can think of scheduling sessions based on interactions with native speakers both in natural communication and simulated conversations. One should note that the participants in this study expressed great willingness to converse with target language speakers. Such classroom practice can increase students' motivation to participate in the class and encourage apprehensive speakers to have active roles in classroom activities.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper discussed the major research findings of the qualitative study. It was shown that foreign language speaking anxiety could impede students' performance in various instances. The answers to the research questions further helped to clarify the role of anxiety in learning to speak a foreign language in the classroom.

The study has revealed that students, regardless of their ability levels, might be intimidated by numerous speaking anxiety-provoking situations, and possible sources of anxiety were identified. Low-ability students' speaking anxiety originated from limited vocabulary

mastery, self-criticism, and teacher fear while high-ability students referred to fear of classmates' reactions, of being misunderstood, and classroom atmosphere as a whole. In the final part, ways to deal with anxiety were suggested, inspired both by existing EFL anxiety research and the findings of this study. Such ways included teacher's assistance in terms of providing relevant vocabulary, boosting self-esteem and self-confidence,

selecting topics that appeal to students' interests, considering time devoted to speaking, reassuring anxious students when taking speaking tests, and raising awareness about the EFL culture. Though the study was carried out with a restricted group of students, it might be helpful in understanding some of the ways educators might possibly use to cope with EFL students' speaking anxiety.

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CHAHRAZAD MOUHOUBI-MESSADH

University of Algiers 2 | 02 Jamal al-Din al-Afghani Str., Bouzeréah, Algeria
chahrazad.mouhoubi@gmail.com

KAMEL KHALDI

University of Algiers 2 | 02 Jamal al-Din al-Afghani Str., Bouzeréah, Algeria
kamel.khalidi@univ-alg2.dz