

Examining Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety Among Azerbaijani EFL Students: The Impact of Gender, Age, and Grade Level

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Abstract

It is a natural process for the level of anxiety to play an effective role in foreign language learners' fundamental skills (speaking, writing, reading, listening) and their use of these skills. This research aims to examine the factors affecting individuals' foreign language speaking anxiety and to analyze whether these factors differ in terms of demographic variables. Data were collected quantitatively through a questionnaire. A total of 39 English as a foreign language (EFL) students (Female $n=23$ and Male $n=16$) took part in the study. The study group of the research consisted of high senior students (Grade 10 $n=20$ and Grade 11 $n=19$). The findings of the study indicated that EFL students' language learning anxiety levels did not differ according to age and gender, but differed according to their grade level. Therefore, it is suggested that EFL student's anxiety levels can differ among different variables.

Keywords

Azerbaijani EFL learners, Anxiety, Age, Gender, Grade Level

1. Introduction

It is difficult to determine when, where and how the teaching of a foreign language started based on current information. However, a variety of information has been researched and discussed. Speaking is a unique skill given to human beings among creatures. Thanks to this skill, we convey our feelings and thoughts to the other party and communicate with our environment. The acquisition of this skill, which we first learn from the family, then from the environment, and then from the school in accordance with the rules and systematically, is a long process. For this reason, speaking skills have an essential place in both mother tongue and foreign language learning. In foreign language acquisition, it can be said that speaking skills are a more difficult process for language learners and teachers. Various problems are encountered in this process. While these problems are sometimes caused by the learner, sometimes they can be caused by the environment independent of the learner. In this context, to minimize the problems arising from the student while organising educational environments, the "student" should be put in the centre and the student's age, gender, education, socioeconomic status, intelligence, interest, and so on. Properties must be known. To minimize the problems arising from the environment, the physical environment and the tools and materials used in teaching should be arranged, and the foreign language classroom should be made an environment free of anxiety that will increase the self-confidence of the student. In parallel with this judgment, [1] state that transforming foreign language classes into a carefree educational environment will further increase success in language learning. For this reason, one of the issues that should be emphasized and investigated in the field of language learning and practical speaking of foreigners is undoubtedly the issue of "anxiety" that affects language teaching.

[2] highlights that anxiety plays a significant role in foreign language learning, positioning foreign language anxiety as a distinct research area from general anxiety studies. Research by [3,4] reveals that one of the main barriers to students' English speaking proficiency is a limited vocabulary. Except for writing, speaking demands students to retrieve words quickly, often leading to hardship by using the range of vocabulary they can apply in writing. Additionally, [4] notes that students often struggle with grammar while speaking, which diverts their attention from the content of their message as they focus on accuracy. This aligns with findings showing that fear of making mistakes can inhibit students from speaking in English. Another finding from the literature suggests that grammar- and expression-focused instruction limits opportunities to develop speaking skills in the classroom [4].

Individuals growing up in today's conditions; should both use their mother tongue effectively and have effective communication skills, and should learn a foreign language and use it competently. In today's world, where Turkey is going through the process of joining the European Union, the importance of knowing a foreign language and teaching a foreign language is increasing. [5] states that teaching a foreign language is an accumulative process and that this process includes cognitive behaviours and new psychomotor skills. In other words; learning a foreign language is the process of acquiring the skills necessary to use a language. The four basic skills that need to be acquired or acquired in language learning and teaching are listening, reading, writing and speaking. Of these skills, the most used, or even required, skill in daily life is speaking. One of the general goals of teaching a foreign language is to ensure that students can speak the language they learn in an understandable manner. Therefore, for learners to acquire speaking skills, it is

important to prepare suitable environments as much as possible and to teach the language through communicative methods.

With the popularity of the communicative approach in foreign language teaching, speaking skills have become one of the most important issues emphasized in the language teaching process. Teaching this skill plays an important role in communication, and developing this skill in the target language is directly proportional to the development of both comprehension and production skills of students. For this reason, most foreign language students think that speaking skills are more difficult than other skills such as reading and writing, as they require both comprehension and production processes.

While learning a foreign language brings many conveniences to people's social and academic lives, it also causes them to experience problematic situations. One of these is the anxiety that occurs during the language-learning process.

Anxiety is generally understood as a state of fear, tension, and restlessness that emerges in response to a perceived threat, manifesting through physical, emotional, and mental changes. It often presents as an undefined fear or unease toward an event or object, and while it serves as a natural, self-protective response that can enhance focus at moderate levels, excessive or insufficient anxiety disrupts an individual's well-being. Foreign language speaking anxiety, a particularly complex form of anxiety, involves heightened excitement, tension, and hesitation that may lead individuals to avoid speaking in groups or face-to-face settings [6,7]. This form of anxiety arises specifically from difficulties in self-expression during interactions with others and is distinct from general anxiety types [8].

Foreign language speaking anxiety, first mentioned by Young (1991), has been recognized as one of the most challenging aspects of language learning, often causing heightened anxiety for students. Research indicates that evaluating speaking skills in exam settings can further intensify this anxiety. Chen (2015), in his master's thesis, highlighted that students frequently experience significant anxiety during oral presentations, which negatively impacts the development of their speaking skills. Similarly, Çubukçu (2008) observed high levels of speaking anxiety among university students, while [9] define anxiety as "an arousal state that manifests itself with physical, emotional, and mental developments that a person experiences when faced with a stimulus."

2. Literature Review

Research on anxiety has advanced day by day and the positive and negative effects of anxiety have begun to be investigated in different fields. One of these areas is "foreign language learning". [7] revealed in their study that anxiety is very effective in language learning.

It is widely believed that the first studies on the concept of anxiety started towards the middle of the 19th century and that Sigmund Freud was the first to use this term in the field of psychology.

Although anxiety is generally perceived as negatively affecting language learning, it should not be forgotten that a certain level of anxiety has a stimulating and motivating effect on the organism and positively affects language learning in this direction. So much so that, after scanning many studies on the relationship between anxiety and success, suggested the distinction between "facilitating and inhibiting anxiety". While facilitating anxiety leads the learner to struggle in new learning environments; inhibitory anxiety causes the individual in new learning environments to adopt avoidance behaviour. According to some studies, low and moderate anxiety provides success in language learning activities [10,11] stated that high and low levels of anxiety negatively affect academic achievement. For this reason, in order to understand whether anxiety is positive or negative, the severity of anxiety must first be well-known.

Foreign language teaching literature can say that speaking skills are the skill area where students have the most difficulty with writing skills. One of the factors at the source of the difficulty is speaking anxiety. According to [12], the effort to use a foreign language in accordance with the rules causes individuals to see themselves as inadequate in terms of correct pronunciation, and this creates additional anxiety in students. Studies on speech anxiety have shown that speech anxiety is related to speech disposition and that the reaction developed against speech has negative effects on the quality of speech and speech success. It has been emphasized that this causes students to avoid speaking and not want to speak [13].

In some studies, the effect of socio-demographic characteristics on foreign language anxiety was investigated. [14] stated that there is no relationship between gender and foreign language learning anxiety. [15] also stated that there is no relationship between gender and foreign language learning anxiety and that foreign language learning anxiety has a significant and positive relationship with the learner's self-efficacy and the use of the language at home and outside the classroom. According to [16], there is no relationship between age and gender and foreign language learning anxiety, but the time spent on foreign language learning is effective in foreign language learning anxiety. [17] concluded that there is no significant relationship between gender and foreign language learning anxiety. In studies on grade level and foreign language learning anxiety was concluded that as the grade level increases, the level of anxiety decreases [18].

There are different results in studies on speaking anxiety and affecting factors in foreign language learners. In this context, it is necessary to conduct research on the determination of speaking anxiety and the factors that may affect English as a foreign language learner's English learning. This study tries to determine the speaking anxiety levels of EFL students and to see whether their speech anxiety levels are affected by demographic variables.

To be able to reach the aim the following research questions will guide this study:

Do the foreign language speaking anxiety levels of Azerbaijan EFL students differ according to

A. Gender?

B. Age?

C. Class?

3. Method and Materials

3.1 Research Design and Procedures

A quantitative research design was employed in this study. An online survey was implemented to address a large sample group and is a study model that aims to "collect data to determine certain characteristics of a group" describing an existing situation as it exists. In this study, since the speaking anxiety of foreign language learners was determined with 12 items on a five-point Likert scale adopted by [19], the survey model was chosen as the most appropriate research design for the nature of the research. The items which were used in the questionnaire were selected according to the grades (10 and 11) and levels of the students. The research scales were delivered to the students online. General information about the scales was provided and they were filled in. Students were given 20 minutes to fill out the research scales.

3.2 Participants and Sampling

The students studying in Azerbaijani in the 2022-2023 academic year constituted the population of this study, aiming to determine speaking anxiety among the students by examining several variables. The study group of the research consisted of high senior students (Grade 10 n=20 and Grade 11 n=19) learning English at Fully Secondary State school in Azerbaijan. A total of 39 (Female n=23 and Male n=16) students participated in the study.

The distribution of the students participating in the study according to their demographic characteristics is stated in Table 1. Table 1 shows that 59% of the students are girls and 41% are boys, %5.1 of the students are 14 age, %25.6 students are 15 age, %35.5 of the students are 16 age, %20.5 of the students are 17 age, %10.3 of students are 18 age, 51.3% of the students are in the 10th grade and 48.7% are in the 11th grade.

Table 1. Distribution of Students by Gender, Age and Grade Levels

	Gender	Frequency	Per cent
Gender	Female	23	59.0
	Male	16	41.0
	Total	39	100.0
Age	14	2	5.1
	15	10	25.6
	16	15	38.5
	17	8	20.5
	18	4	10.3
Grade levels	10	20	51.3
	11	19	48.7

3.3 Data Collection

The data that formed the basis of the research was obtained from the " Foreign Language Speech Anxiety Scale" and the "Personal Information Form".

Personal Information Form: This form was prepared by the researcher and consists of the variables such as gender, age and class of the participants.

Language Speech Anxiety Scale: The scale was developed by [19] and was used to collect the data. The scale consists of 12 items. The scale is a 5-point Likert type (5) Extremely 4) Very 3) Moderately 2) Slightly 1) Not at all). The preparation process of the scale to measure speaking anxiety started with the creation of a 12-item questionnaire based on the studies in the literature

3.4 Data Analysis

SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) version 2.0 was used for statistical analysis. In the study, the level of significance was taken as $\alpha=0.05$. Descriptive statistical information (mean, standard deviation, median, frequency, ratio, minimum, maximum) was included for evaluating the study data. As a result of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov analysis ($p=0.057$) was determined that the given distribution showed normal distribution. Accordingly, the independent sample t-test was used for the comparison of the normally distributed variables in two groups, and the One-way ANOVA test was used for the comparisons of three or more groups.

4. Findings and Discussion

The data obtained in the research were analyzed using the SPSS 26 package program. The findings are presented in tables.

4.1 Gender

Speech anxiety levels of students according to gender were evaluated with an Independent Samples t-test (Table 2). According to this analysis, the speaking anxiety levels of students do not differ statistically according to gender ($p \geq 0.05$). This is due to the fact that the students included in the study have similar levels of foreign language anxiety.

Table 2. Examination of Students' Speech Anxiety Levels by Gender

	Gender	N	Mean±Std	t	p*
LSAS	Female	23	41.52±4.14	0.209	0.835
	Male	16	41.81±4.44		

* $p \leq 0.05$ There is a statistical difference. LSAS: Language Speech Anxiety Scale

According to the results of the research, it was determined that foreign language anxiety did not differ between male and female students. It is thought that the different results reported between the gender variable and foreign language anxiety are due to sample differences. Our research results are in line with studies showing that there is no significant relationship between gender and foreign language anxiety [20,21]. However, there are studies in the literature reporting that female students are more anxious than male students [22,10,23]. Some other studies have reported that male students are more anxious than female students [24,25,26].

4.2 Age

The results of the ANOVA test, which was conducted to determine whether the anxiety states of the students differ according to their age levels (Table 3) reported that the speaking anxiety levels of students do not differ statistically according to age ($p \geq 0.05$).

Table 3. Examination of Students' Speech Anxiety Levels by Age

	Age	N	Mean±Std	F	p*
LSAS	14	2	41,5±6,36	2,341	0,075
	15	10	44,5±4,14		
	16	15	41,6±3,75		
	17	8	39,37±3,50		
	18	4	39,25±4,11		

* $p \leq 0.05$ There is a statistical difference. LSAS: Language Speech Anxiety Scale

According to the results it was determined that foreign language anxiety did not differ between ages. This result is thought to be due to the fact that the number of participants in the age groups of the students is not homogeneous. This is in line with the study carried out by [21] who also stated that foreign language speaking anxiety did not differ according to age. Likewise, [27] reported that the age variable was not effective in a study investigating the anxiety levels of foreign language learners regarding listening and reading skills. In some studies students in the younger age group experience high language anxiety [28,29]. It is seen that the results of the studies on the differentiation of foreign language anxiety according to age do not differ.

4.3 Class

The results of the ANOVA test, which was conducted to determine whether the anxiety states of the students differ according to their class levels (Table 4) reported that speaking anxiety levels of students differ statistically according to age ($p \leq 0.05$). Accordingly, it was determined that the foreign language speaking anxiety of 10th-grade students was higher than that of 11th-grade students.

Table 4. Examination of Students' Speech Anxiety Levels by Class

	Class	N	Mean±Std	T	p*
LSAS	10 th	20	43.65±4.19	3.469	0.001
	11 th	19	39.52±2.95		

* $p \leq 0.05$ There is a statistical difference. LSAS: Language Speech Anxiety Scale

According to the results of the research, it is determined that foreign language anxiety differs between grade levels. This is similar to the study who highlighted that first-year students are more anxious than upper-class students. There are studies reporting that there is no significant difference between grade level and foreign language learning anxiety [30]. It is thought that the difference in results in studies on whether foreign language learning anxiety differs according to grade level is due to grade level group and anxiety level differences.

5. Conclusion

In the study was concluded that the language learning anxiety levels of students learning English as a foreign language did not differ according to age and gender, but differed according to grade levels. According to these results, it is recommended to study language learning anxiety levels at different grade levels. Giving students time to prepare will have a positive effect on reducing foreign language learning anxiety. This makes it easier for students to learn the language. It also helps students move away from a worrying environment. Encourage students to speak native English as much as possible, It is recommended not to be afraid of making mistakes in the foreign language learning process.

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