Research Paper

Relationship between EFL Learners' Speaking Anxiety and Their Metacognitive Strategy Use

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Abstract

Different factors during the speaking process may cause uneasiness, tension, and anxiety for language learners. One solution to this problem could be regulating one's own learning through the use of metacognitive strategies. The study was an attempt to examine the relationship between EFL learners' extent of metacognitive strategy use and level of speaking anxiety. To this end, 85 EFL learners were asked to answer two questionnaires: (a) the English-speaking anxiety scale (ESAS), and (b) the Metacognitive strategy use scale (MCS). The participants were studying at several private language institutes in Urmia. They were selected based on convenience sampling method and their availability at the time of data gathering. The results of this study revealed that metacognitive language learning strategies correlated meaningfully and significantly with language anxiety. This correlation was negative ($r = -0.43$) which means that the higher use of metacognitive strategies is related to a lower amount of speaking anxiety. In other words, the learners who applied more metacognitive strategies during speaking were found to experience lower levels of anxiety. It is hoped that this study can help teachers to consider their learners' characteristics in the instruction of suitable metacognitive strategies and learners to become more conscious and self-regulated in their speaking performance.

Keywords: EFL learners, Speaking Anxiety, Metacognitive Strategy, Urmia

INTRODUCTION

Speaking is one of the major language skills through which individuals communicate and interact verbally. In other words, speaking refers to the "oral communication which is a complex and multifaceted language process" (Murphy, 1991, p.51). As Nunan (2003) asserts, teaching speaking could include not only learning speech sounds/patterns, words and sentence stress, intonation patterns, use of appropriate words and sentences based on the proper social context and audience, but it also requires the fluent use of language in order to be able to express values and judgments. Therefore, teaching speaking requires following certain systematic rules and norms. However, following particular rules in order to "learn speaking by conforming to a particular standard is actually giving birth to speaking anxiety in ESL and EFL language classrooms" (Mahmoodzadeh, 2012, p. 467). In the educational world, speaking is seen as a necessary positive personal characteristic (Daly, 1991). However, foreign language learners often express feelings of stress, nervousness, or anxiety while learning to speak the target language and claim to have 'mental block' against learning. It seems that anxiety is negatively related to language acquisition, but anxiety can be good for people because it builds character, improves creativity, and increases awareness of life possibilities; however, abnormal anxiety is not good.

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With respect to the effect of anxiety on language learning, some studies found a strong association between anxiety and foreign language learning (Bless & Fiedler, 2006; Horwitz, 2001). Horwitz (2001) contends that there is a clear relationship between anxiety and poor language learning. A common assumption exists that anxiety stands as a main obstacle in the way of progressing in a foreign language, especially when it comes to speaking in the foreign language (Minghe & Yuan, 2013). Regardless of the type of anxiety, it is often acknowledged that it exerts an effect on three functioning systems of individuals: cognitive, physical, and behavioral (Ormrod, 2005). It is said that these functioning systems are activated together; that is, if a learner worries about speaking in front of the class (cognitive function), he/she may start to experience physical symptoms such as shaking (physical), and he/she decides to avoid participating in the speaking activities in the tasks that follow (behavioral). Such inhibition of oral practice in the target language is often regarded by language professionals as a negative factor in language learning.

Because of the paramount role of anxiety in the acquisition of a foreign language, teachers and researchers generally agree that there is a need to reduce the amount of language anxiety experienced by language learners; as such, many anxiety-reduction techniques and activities have been proposed. Horwitz (1988), for example, suggests that instructors and students discuss the latter's language learning beliefs in order to help them set realistic goals. Crookall and Oxford (1991) point out that teachers need to address language anxiety directly through the use of games and simulations such as an "agony column" activity where students are encouraged to express their fears in order to receive helpful peer feedback. Phillips (1991) proposes the use of metacognitive learning strategies as a means to help students control their own anxiety much in the same way that strategies could be used in the language learning process itself. Meta-cognitive strategies are those strategies that involve the planning, organization, and evaluation of learning (Oxford, Lavine, & Crookall, 1989) and that provide learners with a general direction for language study. Anderson

(2002) suggests that "use of metacognitive strategies ignites one's thinking and can lead to more profound learning and improved performance, especially among learners who are struggling" (p.3). It seems that metacognitive language learning strategies are the most important strategies that both the language learners and teachers have to take into account to ensure effective learning. With respect to the importance of metacognitive strategies, Mingyuah (2001) claims that "when a meta-cognitive strategy was used as an independent variable, the result indicated that the more the students used this particular strategy, the more progress they made in their overall language proficiency" (p. 65). Some studies indicated that the majority of students lack or ignore metacognitive skills (Nyikos & Oxford, 1993).

Purpose of the Study

It should be noted that most Iranian students often encounter difficulties in their classes when engaging in speaking activities. The existence of individual differences is one of the main sources of problems confronted by those students (Pérez-Paredez & Martínez-Sánchez, 2001). Among these personal differences, anxiety is assumed to play a prominent role, which affects language learning negatively (Gardner, 1985). In support of this statement, Skehan (1989) contended that individual learners' differences, such as anxiety, are the most important factors in learning foreign languages. In the similar fashion, Horwitz *et al.*, (1986) noted that both teachers and students contributed anxiety to the conditions in which the language is spoken. Therefore, the need to study such variables in Iranian context is deemed necessary.

Many researchers believe that "even without empirical proof, the mere awareness of foreign language anxiety, even on an intuitive level, is testimony enough to its existence and worthy of fuller investigation" (Shams, 2006, p. 14). Ohata (2005) claims that language anxiety cannot be defined in a linear manner but rather it can be better construed as a complex psychological phenomenon influenced by many different factors. Thus, it seems to be more appropriate to deal with this issue from different perspectives or approaches (Young, 1992). Since a

low-stress language learning environment is believed to facilitate acquisition of the foreign language (Krashen, 1982), investigating the factors that alleviate this negative affective category will improve the performance of language learners.

Significance and Justification of the Study

The issue of language anxiety is being studied with increasing frequency in recent years because of the influence it can have on foreign language learning, performance, and ultimate achievement. This study will be of considerable interest to language educators and students because of the potentially negative impact of foreign language anxiety, not only on the various domains of language performance, but also on students' attitudes and perceptions of language learning in general (Phillips, 1992, as cited in Onwuegbuzie *et al*., 1999).

The importance of this study lies in the students' needs to be able to speak English proficiently and naturally through the application of the metacognitive strategies. The significance of this study can be reflected on what some researchers have said about this topic. For example, Mingyuah (2001) asserts that "when a metacognitive strategy was used as an independent variable, the result indicated that the more the students used this particular strategy, the more progress they made in their overall language proficiency" (p.65).

Explicit training regarding affective domains can help students manage anxiety related to language learning. Research suggests that when students are informed about the use, monitoring, and evaluation of specific strategies, their performance will improve (Oxford & Crookal, 1989). Nyikos and Oxford (1993) stated that modeling appropriate strategies while presenting particular language points is probably the best approach to strategy training. This can help reduce ambiguity concerning how and when to apply strategies.

Research Question and Hypothesis

The present study embarked on examining the relationship between speaking anxiety and metacognitive strategy use by answering the following research questions and forming the resulting hypothesis.

RQ: Is there any significant relationship between the level of speaking anxiety and use of metacognitive strategies among the Iranian EFL learners?

Based on this research question, the subsequent hypotheses were formulated:

H0: There is no significant relationship between the level of speaking anxiety and use of metacognitive strategies among the Iranian EFL learners.

METHODOLOGY

The initial participants of this study were 102 Iranian EFL learners (62 males and 40 females) studying English at several prominent language institutes in Urmia, Iran. The number of the participants was reduced to 85 (52 males and 33 females) at the second stage because some of the participants did not completely answer the questions. So, these participants were excluded from the study. They were all learners of English, ranging from 17 to 26 years old. Their native language was Kurdish and Turkish. They were selected from several intact classes based on convenience sampling method; that is, their availability at the time of distributing the questionnaires.

The data in this study was collected via the following questionnaires: 18-item English-speaking Anxiety Scale and 9-item Metacognitive strategy use questionnaire.

Considering the analytical purposes, two questionnaires were printed in one paper and given to each participant. After obtaining the permission from institutes' authorities and teachers, the questionnaires were distributed among the EFL students during their class time. First, the researcher explained the purpose of study and format of the questionnaires and assured the participants that their data would be kept confidential, and the students were informed that it is not an exam with right or wrong answers. It was not necessarily for the participants to write their names; they only need to mention their age and gender. They were encouraged to provide complete and genuine

answers. It took about 30-35 minutes for the students to complete the questionnaires.

To determine reliability of English-speaking anxiety scale and metacognitive strategy questionnaire, Cronbach alpha was estimated. In the current study, Pearson correlation was computed between the speaking anxiety and metacognitive strategy use questionnaires. Therefore, for answering the question of the study, Pearson Product-moment correlation coefficient was run.

RESULTS

As earlier stated, to make sure of the statistical reliability of the two scales, a pilot test was carried out on 40 students who were randomly selected from the whole population under study. As mentioned earlier, some learners did not answer the questionnaires completely, so these participants were excluded from the study, and the number of participants was reduced to 85 (52 males and 33 females).

Table 1
Reliability statistics of ESAS in pilot test

Cronbach's Alpha		N of Items
ESAS	.85	18

Table 2
Reliability Statistics of MCS in Pilot Test

Cronbach's Alpha		N of Items
MCS	.89	9

According to Table 4.1 and Table 4.2, the reliability indices of English-Speaking Anxiety Scale (ESAS) and Metacognitive Strategy use questionnaire (MCS) amounted to 0, 85 and 0.89, respectively, indicating an acceptable level of reliability coefficient.

Descriptive Statistics of the ESAS and MCS
The ESAS and MCS were administered in the study in order to evaluate the EFL learners' speaking anxiety and their application of metacognitive strategy. The descriptive statistics (i.e., means and standard deviations) of participants' responses to both scales are demonstrated in Table 3.

Table 3
Descriptive statistics of ESAS and MCS

	ESAS	MCS
N	85	85
Mean	51.84	32.96
Std. Deviation	12.28	6.43
Minimum	24.00	15.00
Maximum	75.00	40.47

The findings shown in Table 3 indicate that the number of the participants in this study was 85, and the total speaking anxiety scores of participants (from total questionnaires' items) ranged from 24- 75 with the mean and standard deviations of 51.84 and 9.14, respectively. Likewise, total metacognitive scores of participants ranged from 15- 40.47 with the mean and standard deviations of 32.69 and 6.43, respectively.

To test the null hypothesis, i.e., ***"H0: There is no significant relationship between the level of speaking anxiety and use of metacognitive strategies among the Iranian EFL learners",*** a correlational analysis was run. Pearson's Product –Moment Correlation Coefficient was used to measure the strength and direction of the relationship between EFL learners' extent of metacognitive strategy use and level of foreign language speaking anxiety. For the correlation to be significant, the significant level needs to be lower than .05.

Table 4
Pearson Correlation Between ESAS and MCS

		ESAS	MCS
ESAS	Pearson Correlation	1	-. 43*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		. 000
	N	85	85
MCS	Pearson Correlation	-.43 *	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	85	85

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

As mentioned above, the only null hypothesis in this study states that there is no significant relationship between the degree of speaking anxiety and use of metacognitive strategies among the Iranian EFL learners. According to Table 4.3, there is a significant and negative

relationship (r = -.43, p <.05, n= 85) between extent of metacognitive strategy use and speaking anxiety experienced by EFL learners. This finding supports an inverse significant relationship between ESAS and MCS use, i.e., students who use more metacognitive strategies, undergo less anxiety than those who use less metacognitive strategies. In other words, the more metacognitive strategy employed by EFL learners, the less anxiety experienced by EFL learners when engaged in speaking task. This result can lead us to reject the null hypothesis.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study confirm that the use of metacognitive strategies (MCS) is significantly correlated with English Language Speaking Anxiety (ELSA) in classroom settings. Specifically, the Pearson-product-moment correlation (r = - .43, p < 0.01, n = 85) indicates a negative relationship, meaning that students who employ MCS to a greater extent experience lower levels of speaking anxiety. This result aligns with previous research, reinforcing the widely accepted notion that anxiety plays a predominantly negative role in second language (L2) learning (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1992; Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994).

The correlation observed in this study is consistent with Lu and Liu's (2015) findings regarding foreign language (FL) reading anxiety and strategy use. They demonstrated a significant negative relationship between FL reading anxiety and FL reading strategy use, further supporting the claim that metacognitive strategies play an essential role in mitigating anxiety. Similarly, Noormohamadi (2009) reported a significant negative correlation between language anxiety and strategy use, reinforcing the premise that metacognitive awareness helps learners manage language learning challenges.

The current findings are also supported by Biria et al. (2013), who found a negative relationship between Language Learning Strategies (LLS) and Foreign Language Anxiety among Iranian university students. Their study revealed that learners who used LLS more extensively reported lower levels of English Language Classroom Anxiety (ELCA). This pattern is further corroborated by Ghasemi et al. (2014), who identified a strong negative correlation between metacognitive strategy use and listening anxiety. Their results suggest that fluctuations in listening anxiety are significantly related to the extent of metacognitive strategy use. Similarly, Golzadeh and Moiinvaziri (2017) found a weak but significant negative relationship between listening anxiety and metacognitive strategy use, attributing the weak correlation to factors such as participant attention, sample size, and data collection methods.

Other studies (Mohammadi Golchi, 2012; Lu & Liu, 2015) have consistently demonstrated that increased anxiety is associated with decreased use of metacognitive strategies, underscoring the critical role that these strategies play in alleviating speaking anxiety. Han (2014) further supports these findings, showing that students with lower anxiety use significantly more planning, monitoring, and evaluation strategies. However, it is important to acknowledge conflicting research, such as Ghonsooly and Loghmani (2012), who found no significant relationship between FL reading anxiety and reading strategy use.

The responses of participants in this study indicate that nearly all learners experience some degree of speaking anxiety, though the severity varies. The findings suggest that fear of making mistakes and fear of negative evaluation contribute significantly to speaking anxiety. Such fears often lead students to avoid speaking tasks, affecting their language learning progress. The anxiety induced by teacher corrections and peer feedback further exacerbates this issue, highlighting the need for anxiety-reducing interventions in language classrooms.

CONCLUSION

This study provides strong empirical support for the negative correlation between metacognitive strategy use and English Language Speaking Anxiety. Learners who frequently employ metacognitive strategies such as planning, monitoring, and evaluation experience significantly lower levels of speaking anxiety. This finding reinforces the importance of fostering metacognitive awareness in language learning contexts to help students

cope with anxiety and enhance their speaking proficiency.

Theoretically, this study supports Oxford's (1990) perspective that metacognitive strategies enable learners to regulate their learning processes effectively. Metacognitive awareness helps learners plan, monitor, and evaluate their learning, allowing them to overcome language learning challenges with greater confidence. This aligns with Wenden and Rubin's (1987) argument that learning strategies contribute directly to language development.

Despite the consistency with prior research, some discrepancies remain. For instance, Ghonsooly and Loghmani (2012) found no significant relationship between FL reading anxiety and strategy use. This contradiction suggests that the relationship between strategy use and anxiety might vary depending on contextual factors such as the skill being assessed (reading vs. speaking), instructional methods, and learner characteristics.

The study also highlights the detrimental impact of high anxiety on the speaking process. Learners with elevated anxiety tend to focus on potential failure and negative evaluations rather than on the speaking task itself. In contrast, low-anxiety learners devote more cognitive resources to language production, making them more likely to use metacognitive strategies effectively. This insight is valuable for educators seeking to implement strategies that reduce language anxiety and improve speaking performance.

Suggestions for Further Research

While this study establishes a significant relationship between metacognitive strategy use and speaking anxiety, further research is needed to explore several critical areas:

--**Longitudinal Studies**: Future research should examine the long-term impact of metacognitive strategy training on speaking anxiety reduction. A longitudinal study would help determine whether sustained strategy use leads to lasting reductions in anxiety.

--**Intervention-Based Research**: Experimental studies involving targeted interventions could assess whether explicit instruction in metacognitive strategies leads to significant improvements in speaking confidence and performance.

--**Cross-Cultural Comparisons**: Investigating whether the relationship between strategy use and anxiety differs across cultural and educational settings would provide deeper insights into the universality of these findings.

--**Skill-Specific Anxiety**: Since prior research has yielded inconsistent results regarding the relationship between strategy use and anxiety in different language skills (reading, listening, and speaking), future studies should explore whether the strength of the correlation varies depending on the specific skill being studied.

--**Psychological and Personality Factors**: Future research could examine how individual differences, such as personality traits, motivation, and self-efficacy, mediate the relationship between metacognitive strategies and speaking anxiety.

--**Classroom Implementation Strategies**: More research is needed on effective ways to integrate metacognitive strategy training into language curricula to ensure that students can apply these strategies effectively in real communication settings.

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