

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

Salam Khaliliaqdam, Department of English Language, Boukan Branch, Islamic Azad University,  
Boukan, Iran

*skhaliliaqdam@gmail.com*

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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

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## 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.

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, Mingyuh (2001) claims 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). 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-Paredes & 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, Mingyuan (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 & Crookall, 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 answered 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 4.1  
Reliability statistics of ESAS in pilot test

	Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
ESAS	.85	18

Table 4.2  
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 4.3.

Table 4.3  
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 4.3 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.

### Inferential statistics

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 4.4  
Pearson correlation between ESAS and MCS

		ESAS	MCS
<b>ESAS</b>	Pearson	1	-.43*
	Correlation		
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	85	85
<b>MCS</b>	Pearson	-.43 *	1
	Correlation		
	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 AND CONCLUSION

This study was after finding whether the use of metacognitive strategies is correlated with the amount of English Language Speaking Anxiety experienced in the classroom situation. Running a Pearson-product-moment correlation, it was found that the use of MCS correlates significantly with English Language Speaking Anxiety ( $r = -.43$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $n = 85$ ). The learners who have a relatively higher extent of MCS use reported less anxiety than those who have a relatively lower extent of MCS use. Based on these results, it can be concluded that the data could reject the null-hypothesis as there is a significant, but negative, statistical relationship between metacognitive strategy use and learner's speaking anxiety.

Anxiety in SL/FL classroom learning situations has been vastly researched and proved to play a predominantly negative role in learning the target language (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1992; Horwitz *et al.*, 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). As the findings of the study indicated, there was a significant correlation between EFL learners' level of anxiety and employment of monitoring and regulating strategies to cope with anxiety resulting from communication apprehension or fear of negative evaluations when engaged in speaking. The outcome of the present study is consistent with that of Lu and Liu (2015) who found a significant negative relationship FL reading anxiety and FL reading strategy use when probed the association between FL reading anxiety, FL reading strategy use, and their interactive effect on the FL reading comprehension performance. This piece of finding corroborates Noormohamadi's (2009) study who reported a significant negative correlation between levels of language anxiety and strategy use.

Biria *et al.*, (2013)'s study lends support to the finding of the present study. They endeavored to investigate the relationship between Language Learning Strategies (LLS) and Foreign Language Anxiety among Iranian university students. The findings pointed to the existence of a meaningful negative relationship between the degree of LLS use and the level of ELCA. The learners who have a relatively higher extent of LLS use reported less ELCA than those who have a relatively lower extent of LLS use

This finding is also in line with Ghasemi *et al.*, (2014) who have shown that there is a strong negative correlation between strategy use and listening anxiety which means that increase or decrease in listening anxiety significantly relates to increases or decreases in metacognitive strategy use. Likewise, Golzadeh and Moivaziri (2017) probed the relationship between the participants' level of listening anxiety and use of metacognitive listening strategies. It was detected that there was a weak but significant negative relationship between listening anxiety and metacognitive strategies use. They ascribed the weakness of this correlation to such factors as the participants' lack of enough attention when answering the questionnaires, the number of participants, as well as methods of data sampling and gathering. However, other scholars (e.g., Mohammadi Golchi, 2012; Lu & Liu 2015) found a strong negative correlation between strategy use and listening anxiety. In other words, any increase in the students' anxiety significantly relates to decreases in their employment of listening metacognitive strategy use and vice versa.

In the same vein, the outcome of the study by Han (2014) supports the current finding that there is a significantly negative correlation between listening anxiety and metacognitive strategy use. In other words, the lower anxiety students used significantly more planning, monitoring, and evaluation strategies than the intermediate and the high anxiety level students, while there are no statistical differences between intermediate and high anxiety students in their metacognitive strategy use in each metacognitive category. However, this outcome is not congruent with what has been suggested by Ghonsooly and Loghmani (2012) who found no significant relationship between foreign language reading anxiety and use of reading strategies.

Based on the findings of previous studies (Torkamani, 2010; Yang, 2009), which confirmed a positive relationship between metacognitive strategy and reading, listening, and speaking performance, this study hypothesized that there would be a similar relationship between metacognitive strategy use and proficiency in English.

Oxford (1990) is of the belief that "metacognitive strategies help learners manage: (1) themselves as learners, (2) the general learning process, and (3) specific learning tasks" (cited in Carter & Nunan, 2001, p. 197). The reason for the reduction of speaking anxiety when the learners resort to extensive use of metacognitive strategies may be justified with respect to the fact that metacognitive awareness equips a learner better for encountering the difficulties in learning a new language and encompasses such strategies as thinking about the learning process, planning for learning, monitoring of comprehension or production while it is taking place, and self-evaluation of learning after the language task is completed (Brown, 2000). In this regard, Wenden and Rubin (1987) state that learning strategies are strategies which make a contribution to the development of the language system which the learner constructs and affects learning directly. Therefore, it can be inferred that the knowledge and use of LLSs can result in improved language learning.

The participants' pattern of responses to the questionnaires indicated that almost all learners experienced some degree of language anxiety but with varying degrees. Like previous studies in the

literature, fear of making mistakes could be a viable cause of anxiety amongst the participants that can affect foreign language learning negatively and slow down the process of learning. Fear of negative evaluation was also another cause of speaking anxiety which is defined as apprehension about the evaluations of others, avoidance of evaluative situations, and the expectation that others will evaluate one negatively (Watson & Friend, 1969, as cited in Horwitz, *et al.*, 1986). This factor made students feel anxious to show their abilities directly in English, because students feel that their classmates will give negative comments on their performance. Students also feel anxious when their teacher gives them correction which make their self-esteem decrease in front of their peers specifically when it is accompanied by negative feedback.

This finding of this study can be justified on the grounds that while speaking anxiety can lead to the unpredictability and uncontrollability of causes, problems, and outcomes of language learning, metacognitive strategies such as planning, monitoring, and evaluation can help overcoming these kinds of problems. Speaking anxiety and metacognitive strategies seem to be independent but related because they both play a role in speaking process during which they interact with each other. In other words, it can be said that low anxiety plays a facilitative role in the speaking process; on the contrary, anxiety seems to have a devastating role in the speaking process. When there is a high level of anxiety, students are easily distracted from speaking. Many students walk into an FL classroom feeling nervous, uneasy, and having fear of failure and making mistakes. As a result, they tend to think more about their failure and the negative evaluation of their teachers, peers, and classmates than the process of speaking they are engaged in. Han (2014) argues that low anxious students put more energy on the task itself and their concentration is not divided; therefore, they are inclined to utilize more metacognitive strategies while they are involved in listening.

Although the upshots of this study are consistent with a series of studies (Biria *et al.*, 2013; Golzadeh & Moiiinvaziri, 2017; Han, 2014; Lu & Liu, 2015; Mohammadi Golchi, 2012), they are not in line with Ghonsooly and Loghmani (2012) who reported no significant relationship between foreign language anxiety and strategy use. What can be concluded from these outcomes is that further research is required to explore the reasons behind this inconsistency. Some of the anticipated reasons might be contextual and environmental factors, methods of study, types of participants, or a bunch of other affective or individual variables.

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