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**Research Article****EFL Learners' Self-made Psychological Barriers in Speaking Acquisition**Shiva Ghorbani<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT**

Hindering factors in the language classes are of various types ranging from teaching context, teacher-provoking factors, error correction procedures, tests impact, and finally the factors that are imposed by the learners themselves (Horwitz, 2001). The goal of this paper was to explore the factors that are suggested into the learning situation by the learners themselves in the teaching-learning context called self-made hindering factors. To his goal, 52 EFL learners establish the participants of the study. The learners belonged to the pre-intermediate level with the age range of 16 to 24. Two instruments were used to collect the data. The first was using a questionnaire to discover the self-made inhibiting factors that the learners were normally exposed to in the speaking class. It was a pre-designed questionnaire consisted of 30 statements that was used before by Yaseen (2018) in a study with EFL learners in Jordan. The other instrument was using PET standard speaking test that would tap the speaking level of the participants of the study. Teachers' role was introduced as the main factor of inhibition provocation and the second self-made source was the affective factor such as the level of motivation and the anxiety of the learners and the last category was the context and instructional environment. Moreover, a relationship could be explored between apprehension and the three levels. The results were significant and revealed some differences between the three levels and their inhibition sources.

**Keywords:** Psychological Barriers, Speaking, Inhibition, EFL Context

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The wide-spread use of English as an international language makes it highly important even in foreign language contexts (Ellis, 1994; Oxford, 1999). To assist the learners to master the language they learn, a lot of effort is underway to identify the obstacles and any other rehearsing factors that may block learning and language progress in any possible way (Awan, Azher, & Anwar, 2010; Mohamad & Wahid, 2009). In the learning process, affective variables have become an important issue (Awan et al, 2010). They include a vast area of factors that may be the goal of a great deal of research and investigation. Considering the significance of this area, Spielberger (1985) argued: "In fact, affective variables, such as attitude, orientations, anxiety, and motivation, have been shown to be at least as important as language aptitude for predicting L2 achievement" (p. 35). Oxford (1999), doing a lot of research in this area, asserts that the affective side of the learners is the most influential aspect in language learning success or failure.

Moreover, People come to any learning situations with their distinctive sets of personal characteristics, including assumptions, concerns, and expectations. Frequent exposure of the students to oral tasks and conversation classes is one of these situations which are viewed as critical and anxiety provoking for almost all of the language learners, the anxiety and apprehension that are introduced into the learning context either by the learners themselves, called self-made psychological barriers, or proposed by other factors. The idea, although being critical and essentially important in the educational systems, has been ignored drastically by the language teachers and educators (Price, 1991). Little attention has been given to the factors of increasing stress and anxiety in the language class and of different learners. However, this paper aims at exploring the factors that are suggested into the learning situation by the learners themselves in the teaching-learning context called self-made hindering factors.

## 2. LITRATURE REVIEW

Chan and Wu (2004) studied foreign language anxiety of EFL elementary school students in Taiwan. The population of this study was all fifth graders, 601 students, in 205 elementary schools of Taipei County. They used questionnaire and interview, classroom observations, and document collection as instruments. They found that six variables of English learning experience might affect learners' anxiety level. Through a combinational analysis of multiple data sources, also they found that low proficiency, fear of negative evaluation, competition of games, anxious personality, and pressure from students themselves and their parents were the five sources of language anxiety. They also indicated tests, speaking in front of others, spelling, incomprehensible input, and speaking to native speakers as the five anxiety-provoking situations. In another study, Elkhafaifi (2005) studied the role of anxiety in foreign language students' classroom performance. This study presents the results of the first empirical examination of the effect of general FL learning anxiety on students' achievement in an Arabic course and of listening anxiety on students' listening comprehension. The data came from 2 measures of anxiety and a background questionnaire administered to 233 postsecondary students of Arabic as a FL. Anxiety scores were correlated with final grades and listening comprehension scores. The results indicated that FL learning anxiety and listening anxiety are separate but related phenomena that both correlate negatively with



achievement. The study also revealed significant negative correlations among FL learning anxiety, listening anxiety, and selected demographic variables. These results suggest that reducing student anxiety and providing a less stressful classroom environment might enable teachers and Arabic programs to help students improve both their listening comprehension proficiency as well as their overall course performance.

Melouah (2013) investigated the nature of speaking anxiety by conducting a case study on First-year LMD students of English. She used Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale to measure the level of speaking anxiety exhibited by the participants. Melouah (2013) found that foreign language speaking anxiety was pervasive among first-year LMD students and appeared to mostly stem from fear of interaction, error correction, language proficiency, low self-confidence and self-esteem. Moreover, Öztürk and Gürbüz (2014) investigated the level, major causes, determining factors of foreign language speaking anxiety and students' perceptions of it in a Turkish EFL context among 383 pre-intermediate students. They collected data using questionnaire, and interviews. With a discrepancy in the outcomes, the results of the quantitative data revealed a low level of EFL speaking anxiety, and the quantitative data demonstrated that most of the students perceive speaking skill as an anxiety provoking factor. They mentioned that pronunciation, immediate questions, fears of making mistakes and negative evaluation are the major causes of EFL speaking anxiety. Finally, they concluded that foreign language speaking anxiety is a separate phenomenon with its own sources, aspects, variables and effects on learners.

In another context, Fiadzawoo (2015) studied the level, main causes, determining factors of foreign language speaking anxiety and students' perceptions of it in the Ghanaian context. He deployed a questionnaire to collect the data regarding the level of the French speaking anxiety of the students and then interviewed 20 students to get detailed data on speaking anxiety. The results revealed that students experienced a considerable high level of French language speaking anxiety. Moreover, the qualitative data demonstrated that most of the students perceive speaking skill as an anxiety provoking factor. It was also established that pronunciation, unpreparedness for immediate questions, fears of making mistakes and negative evaluation are the major causes of French speaking anxiety. Finally, this study like the previous one, portrayed that foreign language speaking anxiety as a separate phenomenon with its own sources, aspects, variations and effects on learners. This study aimed at finding answers for the following questions:

1. What are the most important sources of self-made obstacles in the speaking class by the EFL learners?
2. Is there any meaningful relationship between the sources of self-made obstacles and the levels of the EFL learners?

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

The study being a quantitative study aimed at investigating the attitudes of the language learners on the sources of anxiety in their language concerning their oral production. Since it was believed that self-made inhibiting factors could impact the performance of the EFL learners in the speaking class, the study aimed to investigate this idea.

The population of the study, both genders, was consisted of all pre-inter EFL learners who



were studying English in a language institute in Kerman. The study sample were chosen from the given population using the availability sampling procedure. To this purpose, first a test of homogenization was given to the population and after this step, a sample of 52 participants establish the participants of the study. The learners belonged to the pre-intermediate level with the age range of 16 to 24. To estimate the levels of the candidates, speaking tests were administered and as a result, the whole population was categorized into three levels of high, mid and low as table 1 shows:

Table 1:  
*The learners' speaking levels*

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	High	12	23.1	23.1
	Mid	26	50.0	73.1
	Low	14	26.9	100.0
	Total	52	100.0	100.0

According to the table 1, 23% of the subjects were classified as high achievers, 50% as mid and 26% as low achievers.

Two main instruments were implemented in order to collect the data of the study. The first was using a questionnaire to discover the self-made inhibiting factors that the learners were normally exposed to in the speaking class. It was a pre-designed questionnaire consisted of 30 statements that was used before by Yaseen (2018) in a study with EFL learners in Jordan. In order to adapt the questionnaire to the context of this study, some minor changes in terms of the context and location of the study were required to do.

The questionnaire was made up of three components related to the 1) affective factors 2) teachers' role and 3) environmental factors.

Table 2:  
*Questionnaire Sub-categories*

Components	Items	No.
Affective Factors	Items 1 to 13	13 items
Teacher's role	Items 14 to 23	10 items
Instructional environment	Items 24 to 30	7 items

The participants respond to a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Since this questionnaire was already used for the same purpose, it can be claimed that it was valid. In order to examine the questionnaire reliability, Cronbach's Alfa was used. The following table presents the reliability data.



Table 3:  
*Reliability Index*

Domains	Cronbach alpha
Affective Factors impacting students' speaking skills	0.87
Factors related to teacher's role in teaching speaking skills	0.80
Factors affecting students speaking related to environment	0.79
Total	0.89

The other instrument was using PET standard speaking test that would tap the speaking level of the participants of the study. To this goal, all of the participants were interviewed one by one to determine their speaking level. To assign reliable scores to the participants, two other raters were asked to help the researcher to rate each learner and then the mean of the learners established the final score of each individual. As the next step, based on the achieved scores, the learners were divided into three groups of high, mid and low achievers. Then the learners' scores were correlated with their responses to the questionnaire items to know if any relationship could be investigated between the self-made inhibiting factors and the speaking achievement of the learners.

#### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Based on the data, the means for the role of the teacher is higher than the other two factors. The high mean is an indication of high agreement of the learners with the items of the questionnaire. It proves that the candidates believe that the teachers' role is the most important inhibiting factor for the obstacles that the learners made in the speaking class. The second category was affective factor in terms of the motivation, the anxiety of the learners, the role of examinations and their negative effects on the learners' performance, etc. The third inhibiting factor in the speaking class was the role of the instructional environment in terms of the classroom, the use of suitable equipment, the provision of the necessary facilities, etc. all these revealed that the learners felt apprehended. The way the teacher treated the learners and tried to deal with any teaching situation could impact the learners in a negative way.

Table 4:  
*Descriptive Data of Subcategories*

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness		Kurtosis
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic
Affective Factors	52	4.0919	1.21868	-1.077	.304	.802
Teacher's role	52	4.6935	.53066	-1.522	.304	1.482
Instructional environment	52	3.6359	.86595	-.440	.304	-.798



Table 5 shows the rank order of each category. According to the data, the most effective factor that may lead to inhibition is the teachers' role. The ranking shows that the teachers' behavior can increase the learners' inhibition in the speaking class. It may threaten the learners or criticizing them because of which the learners may feel disappointed or threatened.

Table 5:  
*Levels and Ranks of Each Category*

	<b>N</b>	<b>Means</b>	<b>Ranks</b>
Affective Factors	52	4.0919	2
Teacher's role	52	4.6935	1
Instructional environment	52	3.6359	3

Table 6 offers Pearson Chi-square data for levels and subcategories to know if any relationship can be observed. As it is clear, there is meaningful relationship between all three categories and the levels since all the significance among them is meaningful.

Table 6:  
*Chi-square Data*

<b>Subcategories</b>	<b>Value</b>	<b>Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)</b>
Affective Factors	24.027 <sup>a</sup>	.008
Teacher's role	18.383 <sup>a</sup>	.000
Instructional environment	26.095 <sup>a</sup>	.031

As the data indicates, three sources of inhibition were identified for the speaking acquisition by the learners:

Teachers' role was introduced as the main factor of inhibition provocation and the second self-made source was the affective factor such as the level of motivation and the anxiety of the learners and the last category was the context and instructional environment. Moreover, a relationship could be explored between apprehension and the three levels. The results were significant and revealed some differences between the three levels and their inhibition sources. In other words, the three levels viewed the inhibiting factors in different ways, indicating that the low-level learners were exposed more to the inhibition than the middle or advanced level learners. In fact, the sources and degree and level of inhibition among the different levels of learners are not equal or the same. These results are consistent with the findings of Park & Lee (2005), Tsiplakides and Keramida (2009) and Al Hosni (2014) who found that anxiety, fear and inhibition lead to speaking difficulties and affected EFL students' speaking fluency. The findings of Al Hosni study were that a lot of students' fear of criticism from their peers, and feel inhibited by other students were the other sources of inhibition. The results of the students' questionnaire indicated that inhibition, anxiety, fear of peer judgment, lack of self-confidence, lack of vocabulary and topical knowledge, lack of encouragement by the surrounding environment were the most effecting factors that affected students' speaking.



## 5. CONCLUSION

Since the basic obstacle for EFL students is anxiety, which may occur because they are afraid of committing errors in front of their peers, a good recommendation for teachers is to perform interactive tasks in class, like debates, role-playing, and interviewing people. To achieve this, students are assigned in groups or pairs, which will allow the anxious students to gradually lose their anxiety, and become indulged in performing the speaking task assigned. Teachers should foster a friendly class environment; this will reflect positively on students' motivation to perform the speaking tasks efficiently.

To reduce the role of teachers and the amount of fear and anxiety that the learners feel can be an important undertaking that may lead to more learning. The more the teachers use collaboration and group work, the less the learners will feel anxious. Tsiplakides & Keramida (2009) found that even within classes using the Natural Approach – a language teaching method specifically designed to reduce learners' anxiety – learners were more comfortable participating in some activities, such as pair-work and personalized discussions, than others. In almost all cases, any task that was judged “comfortable” by some language learners was also judged “stressful” by others. They conducted a detailed analysis of learners' emotional reactions to specific types of classroom activities and instructional techniques. Their participants rated oral presentations, skits, and role playing as the most anxiety-producing. They concluded: “Consequently, activities and instructional techniques should not be thought of as intrinsically ‘good’ or ‘bad’ but rather ‘useful’ or ‘not recommended’ for certain students at particular levels of language. Teachers need more training on methodologies and techniques of teaching speaking skills and communicative approaches.

The results of the study are helpful to assist language teachers to empower some language traits of their students that may lead to their inhibition and failure. In doing so, the learners will perform better and more actively in the language classes. In other words, teachers in their job have to consider both linguistic and non-linguistic characteristic of the students if they mean their learners to communicate actively and to feel less inhibited. The result can also give ideas to textbook designers and practitioners to provide more learning opportunities so as for the learners to learn better and faster. One aspect is encouraging teachers and learners to consider both linguistic and psychological needs of the learners and their special qualities. The other is changing to role of the teachers and encourage more of learner-centered classes rather than teacher-based ones. The next idea is suggesting group and pair work. It means to encourage collaboration among the learners in order to lower down the fear of failure in front of other classmates and learners.



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