




*Assessing the Influence of Peer Interaction and Language
Anxiety on Speaking Skills Performance*

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تقييم تأثير التفاعل بين الأقران والقلق اللغوي على مهارات الاداء

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Abstract:

This study aims to assess the influence of peer interaction and language anxiety on speaking skills from the EFL 4th grade female students' perspectives. The participants were 28 female students from the Department of English (Evening Studies) from the College of Education for Women, University of Anbar. The pilot sample consists of 9 female students who were excluded from the participants who participated in the survey. The design of the study is a survey study. A questionnaire was built to collect the data for the study. The validity and the reliability of the questionnaire were verified. The results revealed that peer interaction has a significant positive influence on reducing students' language-speaking anxiety. Peer interactions have supported students' confidence during speaking activities, developed their speaking performance, and overcame students' language anxiety in communication orally, face to face, tasks inside and outside the classroom, meaning in an authentic context.

Keywords: language assessment, peer interaction, language anxiety, and speaking skills.

المخلص:

تهدف الدراسة إلى تقييم تأثير التفاعل مع الأقران والقلق اللغوي على مهارات التحدث من وجهة نظر طالبات الصف الرابع في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية. بلغ عدد المشاركات ٢٨ طالبة من قسم اللغة الانجليزية (الدراسات المسائية) من كلية التربية للبنات - جامعة الانبار. وتتكون العينة الاستطلاعية من ٩ طالبات تم استبعادهن من المشاركات الذين شاركوا في الاستطلاع. تم تبني التصميم المسحي لغرض تحقيق هدف الدراسة. وتم بناء استبانة لجمع البيانات الخاصة بالدراسة. وتم التحقق من صدق وثبات الاستبيان. وأظهرت النتائج أن التفاعل بين الأقران له تأثير إيجابي كبير على خفض قلق التحدث باللغة الانجليزية لدى الطالبات. لقد عززت التفاعلات بين الأقران ثقة الطالبات أثناء التحدث، وطورت أداء التحدث لديهن، وتغلبن على القلق اللغوي في التواصل الشفهي، وجهاً لوجه، والمهام داخل الفصل الدراسي وخارجه، أي في سياق الطبيعي الواقعي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تقييم اللغة، التفاعل مع الأقران، القلق اللغوي، مهارات التحدث.

Statement of the Problem

Teaching speaking skills in the Iraqi context is not an easy task, several factors affect the teaching and learning process. The researchers realized that the fourth-grade students at the Department of English despite learning English for four years have good knowledge of the grammatical and linguistics structures of the English language system, but do not have the ability (competence) to speak fluently or/ and to communicate smoothly, this realization has been proved by some recent Iraqi studies investigated the factors and reasons behind students' weakness in speaking skills such as Al-Khazaali (2022); Al Odeesh (2022); Idham, et al. (2022); Azeez (2021); and Dehham (2021) who found various factors that influence EFL speaking skills performance. The effect of peer interaction and language anxiety factors on speaking skills performance have been investigated in the Iraqi context separately and in a very limited scope. This fact is derived from the literature review, most of the studies in the Iraqi context that were conducted between the years 2000 to 2023 investigate the speaking anxiety factor such as Batiha, et al. (2016); Anwar and Louis (2017); Rafada and Madini (2017). Abdullah, et al. (2021); and Ali and Anwar (2021), while the researchers did not find studies that investigate the influence of peer interaction on speaking performance during the mentioned period. This study tries to bridge the gap in the Iraqi literature

concerning the influence of the peer interaction factor and anxiety factor on EFL university students' speaking performance.

The Aim

This study aims to reveal the influence of the peer interaction and anxiety factors on EFL 4th grade students' speaking performance.

The Question

To achieve the aim of the study, the researchers set the following question "To what extent do fourth-grade female students express attitudes toward the influence of influence of the peer interaction factor and anxiety factor on EFL university students' speaking performance?"

The Significance

To investigate the fourth-grade female students' attitudes toward the influence of the peer interaction factor and anxiety factor on EFL university students' speaking performance can have significant effect on the students' language performance and achievement. Students need to know the effect of the learning with colleagues and also the effect of the factor of anxiety on their language achievement. The positive effect of learning with colleagues will encourage students to adopt the peer interaction strategy, and also revealing the factors of language anxiety will help students to be aware and overcome these negative factors that influence their achievement.

Also, the outcomes can be good indicators for the EFL instructors when teaching speaking skills, and for the other instructors who blame the students' weakness in speaking and communication.

The Variables

The independent variables are the peer interaction and anxiety , and the dependent variable is the speaking skill.

The Limits

The outcome of this study is limited to:

- 1- Participants: The participants are from the 4th grade (Evening Studies).
- 2- Spatial: The study was conducted at the Department of English, College of Education for Women, University of Anbar.
- 3- Instrument: A questionnaire was prepared to collect the data.
- 4- Duration: This study was conducted during the first semester of the academic year 2023-2024.

Literature Review

Peer influences and interactions are increasingly recognized as crucial for language development. Evidence suggests that peers significantly contribute to each other's language skills. However, the impact of peer interaction on EFL students varies. Some suggest that students with high baseline language skills benefit

more from peer interactions, while others show the largest gains. Some studies show that students with higher baseline language skills show greater improvements in receptive and expressive language competencies due to peer expressive language exposure (Washington-Nortey, et al., 2022).

Preparing moment dialect (L2) learners to associate viably with peers is accepting developing consideration in L2 interaction inquire about. One of the essential objectives of educational preparation is to address the inadequacies of learner-learner (peer) interaction (e.g. deficiently consideration to make, occasional connections criticism, non-collaboration) and subsequently amplify L2 learning openings such as honing dialect utilize, talking about dialect frame, giving and accepting criticism, and/or locks in collaborative learning (Sato & Loewen, 2018).

When students talk and play together, they work as a team to learn something new. Peer interaction means interacting with someone similar to you in some way, like age or experience, the ability of the students taking part (Moon, et al., 2019).

Peer interaction brings several psycholinguistic benefits for L2 learning. For example, peer interaction could be a flexible setting in which learners can lock in with L2 learning openings such as getting adjusted input, taking note of dialect mistakes, creating yield, arranging for meaning, and giving and getting connections input. Peer interaction gives learners openings to

explore, adjust, and clean language. Additionally, peer interaction is accepted to be less stressful since it isn't as carefully checked as teacher-learner interaction, and thus it may decrease the cognitive stack for preparing input and yield, and offer assistance to learners to take note of blunders, alter their yield when advertised input, possibly stress less around making mistakes, and create more dialect (Dao, 2020).

Past studies have shown that talking to friends can help you learn a new language better. For instance, when students talk and work together, they can learn a second language in many different ways. They can hear the language spoken slowly and clearly, notice mistakes, speak themselves, figure out what words mean in conversation, and give and get feedback (Mackey, 2012).

Talking to and working with classmates helps students try out, fix, and improve their language skills. Also, talking to classmates is thought to be less stressful than talking to the teacher. This might help students to focus better and make fewer mistakes when speaking or writing. It could also make them feel less anxious about making errors and help them to speak or write more (Sipple & Jackson, 2015).

Peer interaction is a social and affective phenomenon that is susceptible to social, contextual, and individual factors. Non-collaborative interactional patterns may hinder L2 learning for learners with less collaborative mindsets. Conversely, learners

may avoid using the target language due to perceived showing off' or perceived unnecessary behaviours. This avoidance limits language use and inhibits active participation in interaction. Additionally, learners' comfort in peer interaction is not necessarily stable and can change due to social relationships established during the interaction and perceptions of their partners' behavior and proficiency level. Therefore, while peer interaction can provide opportunities for language production, it is not a stable experience (Dato, 2020).

The above-mentioned introduction to peer interaction has paved the way for the influence of the language anxiety to use the English language in speaking and communication.

Feeling very anxious can make it harder to speak well, which might mean not being very good at English. If you feel very anxious when you're trying to learn a new language, you might make more mistakes when you speak in a tense situation (Dornyei, 2005).

Speech anxiety means feeling nervous before or during a speech. Sweaty hands, a shaky voice, feeling like your throat is dry, having trouble breathing, and even forgetting things are typical signs of anxiety (Young, 1992).

Anxiety is an important factor that affects how well you learn a new language. Language anxiety is when people feel worried and afraid when they are learning or using a language that is not

their first language. It is believed that your mindset can affect how well you learn a language (Lamila and Wijayanto, 2020).

Jameel and Mahmood (2023) found that anxiety is when students feel worried, nervous, and tense when they are trying to learn a new language. Feeling anxious can make it hard to learn a new language. In simpler terms, feeling worried or stressed can make it harder for students to learn a new language. So, we should also think about this factor when we are learning.

Young (1992) says that feeling nervous in a language class is a complex thing that is hard to measure, but it definitely affects how well you learn the language. Learning a new language means talking to people who speak it and understanding their culture. "Communication apprehension" is one part of being anxious about learning a language. It means being scared to talk to people and might show as being shy. The second part is being afraid of being judged. Students avoid situations where they might be judged negatively or not meet the expectations of others. The third part is being anxious about tests. People might feel nervous because of tests or school evaluations. However, the researchers stated that language anxiety is more than just these individual components. It should be seen as a complex learning concept that includes beliefs, actions, and emotions inside and outside the classroom, which arise from the language learning process as a whole (Alamer and Almulhim, 2021).

Speaking is one way people communicate their thoughts and feelings. This could be through giving a speech, asking and answering questions, seeking help, or chatting with others. Some people are too afraid to speak because they worry about what others might think of them. This makes them choose to stay quiet, this is also called speaking anxiety (Jameel and Suleiman, 2023).

Putri (2014) found that students who are anxious perform worse in speaking activities. The scientists discovered that there are only three things that make people nervous when speaking. These are about how we behave with others, rules in the classroom, and exams for language. Next, the researchers discovered 5 ways to reduce anxiety when speaking. They are getting ready for change, facing stressful situations, improving how they talk to people and get along with them, getting better at giving speeches with confidence, and not stressing so much about being perfect.

The above mentioned facts emphasize the strong relation between anxiety and learning speaking skills, which this study is focusing on.

Previous Related Studies

Palermo and Mikulski (2014) investigated the influence of students' positive interactions with peers and the received feedback from them during social interactions. The participants were 107 students. An observation check list, standardized

assessments, and questionnaires were used to collect the data. The result revealed that there are association between peer English exposure and students' English vocabulary letter-word skills and oral proficiency. Also, the results highlight the significance of peer experiences in enhancing speaking English vocabulary.

Washington-Nortey, et al. (2022) investigated the role of peer interaction in students' communication abilities. The sample consisted of ten studies published between 2008 and 2019 that investigated the influence of peer interactions among students' language learning. The results revealed that even though students who are learning English as a foreign language may not know a lot of words, they can still have deep conversations with their friends. But, how often students talk and the way they talk can change how well they learn to communicate with others.

Na (2007) investigated secondary school students' English learning anxiety. The participants were 115 secondary school students. A questionnaire was used to collect the data. The results revealed that the male students have high anxiety than the female students in learning English language, and the anxiety has hinder the students learning English language and to be fluent in communication. The students need to overcome their language anxiety to enhance the learning process.

Lamila and Wijayanto (2020) investigated the types of speaking anxiety, describe the types of speaking anxiety that often arise, and

describe the causes. The participants were 18 male and female students from the Department of English Education of Muhammadiyah University of Surakarta. An interview (Semi-structured interview) observations, and a questionnaire were used to collect the data. The results revealed that there are seven factors of trait anxiety, eight factors of state anxiety, and 6 factors of situation-specific anxiety.

Methodology

The Participants

The participants were 28 female students from the Department of English (Evening Studies) from the College of Education for Women, University of Anbar. The pilot sample consists of 9 female students who were excluded from the participants who participated in the survey.

The Design

The study is a survey research design because the instrument of the study is a questionnaire.

The Instrument

To collect the data, the researchers prepared a questionnaire. The items of the questionnaire were elicited from the literature review related to both the peer interactions questionnaires and

language learning questionnaires. The questionnaire's validity and reliability were verified.

Content and Face Validity

The questionnaire was given to a jury members of experts major in the field of applied linguistics, methodology, and English language university professors to verify the content and face validity of the questionnaire. The experts' recommendations and suggestions were taken in consideration, about 12 items were omitted from the questionnaire, also 3 dimensions were emerged to be one dimension, and the questionnaire final version consisted of one dimension and 15 items only. Also, some language modification have been done.

The Reliability

The reliability of the questionnaire was verified by using Test-Retest Reliability. The questionnaire was administered to 9 female students. After 10 days, the researchers re-administer the questionnaire to the same students. The Pearson correlation coefficient was used to verify the correlation between the first and the second students' responses. The result revealed that there is a high correlation of 0.89 which indicates good test-retest reliability.

The Result

To answer the question of the study that states "To what extent do fourth-grade female students express attitudes toward the influence of the peer interaction factor and anxiety factor on

EFL university students' speaking performance?" frequencies and percentages were used. Table 1 shows the results.

Table 1: Frequencies and percentages of students' responses on the Items of the questionnaire

No	Item	Agree		Disagree		Not Sure	
		F*	P*	F*	P*	F*	P*
1.	Engaging in peer interactions during speaking activities boosts my confidence in using English.	27	96.42	0	0.00	1	3.58
2.	I feel more motivated to participate in speaking tasks when I have the opportunity to interact with my peers.	22	78.58	4	14.28	2	7.14
3.	Peer interaction positively impacts the development of my speaking skills in English.	20	71.44	3	10.71	5	17.85
4.	I am more likely to take risks and express myself verbally when working with classmates during language activities.	24	85.71	3	10.71	1	3.58
5.	I believe that peer feedback enhances my speaking proficiency in English.	26	92.84	1	3.58	1	3.58
6.	Collaborative speaking tasks with peers make the language learning process more enjoyable for me.	25	89.28	1	3.58	2	7.14
7.	Peer interaction provides valuable opportunities for me to practice and improve my English speaking skills.	24	85.71	1	3.58	3	10.71

8.	Peer interaction and managing language anxiety are essential factors in the development of my speaking skills.	23	82.15	2	7.14	3	10.71
9.	Interacting with classmates helps reduce my feelings of anxiety when speaking.	27	96.42	1	3.58	0	0.00
10.	I believe that peer interaction is crucial for overcoming anxiety in speaking tasks.	26	92.84	1	3.58	1	3.58
11.	Language anxiety hampers my ability to communicate effectively in English during classroom activities	24	85.71	1	3.58	3	10.71
12.	Language anxiety hinders my ability to speak confidently in English.	27	96.42	1	3.58	0	0.00
13.	I find it challenging to express myself verbally in English when experiencing language anxiety.	24	85.71	1	3.58	3	10.71
14.	The fear of making mistakes in front of peers negatively affects my willingness to participate in speaking activities.	26	92.85	0	0.00	2	7.15
15.	The fear of being judged by peers negatively impacts my willingness to participate in speaking activities.	23	82.14	1	3.58	4	14.28

Table 1 shows that the students' attitudes toward the peer interactions factor and anxiety factor on EFL university students' speaking performance are positive. The students' replies can be

divided into three areas. First the area of students' attitudes toward the influence of peer interactions toward speaking skills are positive, about 96.42 of the students believe that "Engaging in peer interactions during speaking activities boosts their confidence in using English", also 92.84 of the students believe that " peer feedback enhances their speaking proficiency in English", also about 89.28 of the students believe that "collaborative speaking tasks with peers make the language learning process more enjoyable for them".

In other hand, the second area is the students' attitudes toward the influence of peer interactions on speaking anxiety. About 96.42 of the students believe that " Interacting with classmates helps reduce feelings of anxiety when speaking", and 92.84 of the students "believe that peer interaction is crucial for overcoming anxiety in speaking tasks", while 85.71 of the students believe that "Language anxiety factor obstacles students' ability to communicate effectively".

The third area is the influence of anxiety factor on speaking skills. About 96.42 of the students believe that "Language anxiety hinders the ability to speak confidently in English", and about 92.85 of the students believe that "The fear of making mistakes in front of peers negatively affects the willingness to participate in speaking activities".

Discussion of the Results

The results revealed that the students have high positive attitudes toward the influence of peer interaction and language anxiety on speaking skills performance. The peer interaction technique is very closed to the students' behavior and they feel comfortable when they cooperate with each other. The questionnaire items show that most of the students' language anxiety is the reaction of the peers, thus working with peers cooperatively will break the feel of anxiety.

For example, when a student engaged in a speaking activity, s/he will feel shy to speak, but when s/he interact with group of students the productivity will be better and the learning process will achieve the aim of teaching speaking skills.

The peer interactions is based on the Social Development Theory by Lev Vygotsky. Vygotsky's theory emphasizes that social interactions can help learners develop their ability to use language and achieve educational aims. The students' replies to the items of the questionnaire are natural and logical replies based on the theory. This fact is supported by the result of Verga and Kotz (2013), Kuhl, et al. (2003), Hellermann and Cole (2009), and Li and Jeong (2020) who found that social interaction has positive influence on students language learning performance, in addition the social interaction has decreased the fear of fear, anxiety, shyness, and hesitation among language learners.

In other hand, the language anxiety is derived from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety theory by Elaine Horwitz and her colleagues. The theory focuses on anxiety in the language learning context, and there are several factors that responsible for emerging the students' feeling of anxiety. The students' positive responses that show their awareness of the influence of anxiety of mastering speaking skills, and how the feel of anxiety hinder their speaking performance due to several factors as mentioned previously in the items of the questionnaire.

Conclusion

In light of the results of this study, the peer interactions technique is considered a significant factor that EFL students and university instructors have to take care of it. The students have to be aware of the peer interactions technique to be able to overcome many social learning obstacles such as language anxiety and alike. It has been proved that when peer interactions technique increase the language anxiety decrease.

Also, the students' language anxiety factor has revealed the reasons behind students' low achievement in speaking performance. language anxiety revealed the students' weakness in productive skills, especially the speaking and communication skills.

The study shows the strong connection between peer interactions and the language anxiety. The results are significance in Iraqi pedagogical context, especially at the university level.

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