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English Speaking Anxiety: A Study of the Effect of Gender on Iranian EFL University Students' Perceptions

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to examine Iranian EFL university students' level of anxiety and their perceptions towards in-class activities during speaking courses and possible causes of apprehension. Moreover, this study investigated whether or not EFL university students' gender differences affect their perceptions of foreign language speaking anxiety. To this end, data were collected from 175 Iranian EFL learners; 125 females and 50 males through Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) adopted from Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) followed by a structured interview. The findings showed that the level of females' anxiety was significantly higher than that of males in impromptu speaking activities. Moreover, instructors could have an essential role in reducing the speaking anxiety. Results of the interviews confirmed the findings obtained through the questionnaire.

Keywords: FLCAS, foreign language anxiety, perceptions, speaking anxiety

1. Introduction

The universal development of English language has increased the demand for good communication skills in English. It is a general idea among learners that speaking is harder than other skills of learning English and it may be more important than other skills (Harmer 2007; Nunan, 1999). Language learners are faced with the problem of anxiety when they happen to speak in front of the classroom without preparation (Mak, 2011).

Anxiety is that state of an individual when he/she feels "uneasiness, frustration, self-doubt, apprehension, or worry" similar to any other specific anxiety (Scovel, 1978, p.134). Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) define foreign language anxiety as "a distinguished multipart of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning derived from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (p.128). Foreign language anxiety is one of the issues in the area of language learning and teaching which was broadly investigated by many scholars in the field (Awan, Azher, Nadeem, & Naz, 2010; Fariadian**,** Azizifar, & Gowhary, 2014; Heng, Abdullah, & Yosaf, 2012; Öztürk, 2009).

Brown (2007) believes that personality factors (i.e. gender, foreign language anxiety, shyness, willingness to communicate, etc.) are essential parts of the affectivity that raises our success in language learning. Elsewhere, Brown (2000) asserts that gender, which is a psychological factor, influences language learning and is a substantial factor in language learning which has a critical role in foreign language learning. Many researchers (Bashosh, Abbas Nejad, Rastegar & Marzban, 2013; Gerencheal, 2016; Jebreil, Azizifar, Gowhary, & Jamalinesari, 2015; Wu, 2015; Zhao, 2007) have inspected the difference of anxiety levels between female and male language learners over the world and found contradictory results.

The number of studies on Iranian language speaking anxiety is abundant (Azarfam, 2012; Fariadian**,** Azizifar, & Gowhary, 2014; Mahmoodzadeh, 2012; Nahavandi & Mukundan, 2013); however, studies related to the relationship between language learners' demographic characteristics and their foreign language anxiety are rare. Moreover, with regard to the contradictory results on the relationship between foreign language speaking anxiety and gender and due

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to the fact that the studies focusing on the relationship between gender and anxiety are rare in the Iranian context, this study is an attempt to bridge this gap and investigate the effect of gender on the level of Iranian EFL learners' anxiety.

2. Review of the Literature

Scovel (1978) defined anxiety as an affective state, an uncomfortable emotional state, in which one discerns danger, feels powerless, and experiences tension in the face of an expected danger. According to Scovel (1978), anxiety can be classified into three types: trait anxiety, state anxiety, and situation-specific anxiety. Trait anxiety is a stable feature of personality, an acquired behavioral disposition that leads an individual to perceive a wide range of non-dangerous situations as threatening (Spielberger, 1966). Spielberger (1966) defined state anxiety as an ephemeral and temporary characteristic of an individual's personality which varies in intensity and fluctuates over time. According to MacIntyre and Gardner (1991), individuals with situation-specific anxiety may consider a certain situation as anxiety provoking in certain environments. Research into language learning anxiety has shown that language learning is classified as situation-specific (Horwitz, 2001; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991).

Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) identified three components of foreign language anxiety: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Communication anxiety refers to a fear of involvement in real communication with others. Horwitz and Young (1991) defined test anxiety as the fear of failing in tests and a displeasing experience that learners hold either consciously or unconsciously in many situations. Watson and Friend (1969) defined the fear of negative evaluation as the anxiety towards others' evaluations, distress over their negative evaluations, and the assumption that others would evaluate oneself negatively (cited in Chan & Wu, 2004). According to Mahmoodzadeh (2013), limited English proficiency, lack of confidence, fear of negative evaluation, and lack of teaching experience are among the sources of language anxiety.

Gender is a critical factor and has a significant role in foreign language learning. A survey of previous studies showed that gender influences the level of foreign language anxiety among learners. It was thought that females are more anxious than males (Naghadeh, et al., 2014; Park & French, 2013), but this concept is confusing because many other studies showed that male language learners have more anxiety than female language learners (Lian & Budin, 2014) and few studies indicated no differences in language anxiety between genders (Alsowat, 2016; Bell & McCallum, 2012). With regard to the controversial findings on the effect of language anxiety between genders, the present study aims to examine how speaking anxiety affects Iranian male and female university English language students.

2.1 Empirical Studies

Many researchers have conducted various studies on Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety (FLSA) based on foreign language anxiety concept offered by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986). For example, Öztürk (2009) investigated the influential factors of foreign language speaking anxiety and language learners' perceptions of it in a Turkish EFL context. 383 language learners participated in the study. The data were collected through a questionnaire, and then volunteer participants (N=19) were interviewed to collect in-depth data on the speaking anxiety. The results of the quantitative data showed that pronunciation, immediate questions, fear of making mistakes, and negative evaluation were causes of the EFL speaking anxiety. The interview suggested that most of language learners perceive speaking skill as the major cause of anxiety.

Alsowat (2016) investigated foreign language anxiety level and the factors affecting the anxiety among Saudi English language learners at Taif University in the Saudi context. Two questionnaires, a modified version of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (hence after, FLCAS) (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986) and Inventory of Foreign Language Anxiety Factor (IFLAF), were administered to 373 English language learners (205 males and 168 female). The results revealed that learners had a moderate level of anxiety. The most important causes of language learners' anxiety were worrying about consequences of failing, forgetting things they knew, and feeling uneasy during language tests.

Debreli and Demirkan (2016) analyzed the level of EFL learners' speaking anxiety and sources that make them anxious. Data were gathered from 196 Turkish and Turkish Cypriot language learners through FLCAS questionnaires and through semi-structured interviews with 10 language learners who participated in the questionnaires. The findings indicated that the language learners generally had a low level of speaking anxiety and factors such as difficulty in pronunciations, being asked immediate questions by the teacher, and not understanding the question asked by the teacher resulted in anxiety.

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Choi (2016) investigated the perceptions of university language learners on English speaking anxiety in a Hong Kong classroom. The data were collected from a FLCAS survey questionnaire and 80 participants took part in that study. The quantitative findings indicated that spontaneous speaking activities appeared to be more anxiety-provoking and having more practice and preparation could help to reduce language learners' negative feeling about the speaking course. In addition, results showed that pedagogical and personal factors lead to language learners' negative and positive feeling towards speaking activities and finally, the behavior and attitudes of the teacher were important aspects that might help to reduce apprehension feelings.

Gerencheal (2016) mainly investigated differences of foreign language anxiety between female and male language learners. The foreign language classroom anxiety scale developed by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) was distributed among 28 female and 50 male English major students at Mizan-Tepi University to measure the level of language learners' anxiety. Results showed that Iranian female EFL learners had a higher mean score in all anxiety categories than male learners.

Nahavandi and Mukundan (2013) conducted a study to recognize the level of Iranian EFL learners' anxiety towards foreign language learning using FLCAS. Data were collected from 548 respondents and were analyzed based on the correlation between three variables: first language, proficiency level, and gender. Results showed that the communication anxiety was the primary component among English language major students.

Bashosh, Abbas Nejad, Rastegar, and Marzban (2013) examined the relationship between foreign language classroom anxiety and gender. Sixty language learners (40 females and 20 males) majoring in English translation were selected. The foreign language classroom anxiety scale was used to measure foreign language classroom anxiety. The analysis of results showed that there was no significant relationship between foreign language anxiety and gender.

In light of what is discussed and with regard to the importance of knowledge on language learners' speaking anxiety, this study is intended to find out Iranian EFL university students' anxiety about in-class activities during speaking classes (e.g. Oral Reproduction class, a course in university, and Conversation classes) and to seek their perceptions of anxiety during speaking courses. Moreover, this study aims to find out possible strategies to reduce the language learners' foreign language speaking anxiety during speaking courses. Furthermore, this study attempts to investigate the speaking anxiety of Iranian EFL university students with regard to their gender. The following research questions are thus formulated:

1. What are the causes for anxiety of Iranian EFL university students about in-class activities of the speaking courses?
2. What are the reactions of Iranian EFL university students to speaking courses and the possible causes of their reactions?
3. How can Iranian EFL university students' fear about speaking courses be reduced?
4. Do EFL university students' gender differences affect their perceived foreign language speaking anxiety?

3. Methodology

This section describes the design of the study, the participants' characteristics, the instruments, and procedure. Finally, the data analysis is explained.

3.1 Design of the Study

This study employed a mix methods approach, which consists of quantitative and qualitative approaches. To validate the findings, a triangulation technique was used to compare the findings obtained from the questionnaires with those of the post semi-structured interview.

3.2 Participants

The participants in the study were 175 Iranian EFL learners, including 125 females (71.4%) and 50 males (28.6%), majoring in English translation, English language teaching and literature. The ages of participants ranged from 20 to 35. The participants were drawn from the department of English, faculty of languages, in six universities in Isfahan (Payam-e-Noor University of Najafabad, Payam-e-Noor University of Mobarakeh, Azad University of Khorasgan, Sheikhbahaee University of Baharestan, Shahid Ashrafi Esfahani University of Sepahanshahr, and Amin University of Fooladshahr) during the 2016-2017 academic year. For a deeper examination of the learners' foreign language

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speaking anxiety, interviews were conducted with 20 males and 20 females who volunteered to participate in the interview. All the participants had Persian as their native language.

3.3 Instruments

The data were collected through FLCAS questionnaire in the form of a 5-point Likert adopted from Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) to evaluate the level of participants' anxiety. FLCAS has been used broadly in many studies, in the original, translated or adapted form, and has had consistent results since it first appeared.

The theoretical framework contains three components: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. The scale consists of 43 items scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." According to Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), this scale had been shown to have an internal reliability of .93 with all items and test-retest reliability over 8 weeks of r=.83, p= .001. Many researchers have used the FLCAS in its original form (Bashosh, Abbas Nejad, Rastegar & Marzban, 2013; Grencheal, 2016), translated into participants' first language (Çağatay, 2015; Debreli & Demirkan, 2016; *Fariadian***,** Azizifar, & Gowhary, 2014), and an adapted form to suit different needs (Choi, 2016; Wu, 2016).

For this study, FLCAS was translated to Persian and its validity was checked by two experts in this field. The reliability of scale was calculated using Cronbach's Alpha and was found to be .815.

FLCAS consisted of 43 items in two sections: the first section contained 13 items whose purpose is to collect respondents' feeling towards in-class speaking activities and their level of communication anxiety. The second section consisted of 30 related items to collect data on respondents' reactions to the speaking courses. The questionnaire given to participants, however, consisted of two more sections: a biodata section which elicited participants' age, gender, language proficiency self-assessment, and major, etc. and the final section consisted of 9 items which elicited data about the strategies to reduce English speaking class anxiety.

To validate and triangulate the results picked up through self-report, questionnaires and interviews were administered with 40 volunteers from both male (n=20) and female (n=20). During the interviews, audio-recording was used. All interviews were performed in Persian so that the interviewees would feel comfortable when speaking and expressing themselves without attention to their skill in foreign language speaking.

3.4 Data Analysis

After collecting data, SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Science) version 22 was used to analyze the quantitative data. First, descriptive statistics was employed to calculate the frequencies, percentages, mean, and standard deviation of FLCAS questionnaire to identify (1) the feelings of respondents' anxiety towards in class activities of speaking courses entitled "Oral Reproduction of Stories" and "Conversation" and also (2) finding the respondents' reaction to the speaking course. Secondly, inferential statistics was also employed to examine differences between females' and males' scores in the foreign language speaking anxiety levels, Mann Whitney U test and to found out the differences between females and males mean scores, Independence T-Test was applied using SPSS version 22. To analyze the data obtained from the interview, following Miles and Huberman (1994), the audio recorded data were transcribed and codes were given to the data chunks. After that, the determined codes were checked for similarities between them. Similar codes went together under one category.

4. Results

This section is organized in two sections: the first section presents the analyses of questionnaires and the second section presents findings obtained from the interviews.

4.1 Results of Questionnaire Analyses

What follows presents the results of questionnaire analyses.

4.1.1 Levels of Anxiety during In-Class Activities

The first research question of the study investigated the effect of language learners' anxiety during in-class activities in speaking courses. To determine the level of speaking anxiety of Iranian EFL university language learners, 13 related items were asked in questionnaires. The mean score and standard deviation of each item were calculated and the results showed that among male participants, items "answering questions after the impromptu speech" (mean= 2.8; SD: 1.2), "presenting an impromptu speech in front of the teacher" (mean= 2.6; SD: 1.2), and "presenting an impromptu speech

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in front of the class" (mean= 2.6; SD: 1.3) provoked the highest level of anxiety. Moreover, activities like reading aloud in pronunciation sessions, discussion activities, and repeating chorally provoked the least levels of anxiety for male language learners.

Table 1 displayed that items "presenting an impromptu speech in front of the teacher"(mean= 3.7; SD:1.0), "presenting an impromptu speech in front of the class" (mean= 3.5; SD:1.1) and "answering questions after the impromptu speech" (mean= 3.3; SD:1.1) aroused high levels of anxiety and reading aloud in pronunciation session (mean= 1.8; SD:0.9), repeating chorally (mean= 1.8; SD:0.9), and repeating after teacher (mean= 1.5; SD:0.8) brought about low levels of anxiety for females. In order to explore differences between male and female language learners in terms of their scores in anxiety questions, Mann Whitney U Test was conducted. The results are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Mann Whitney U Test of genders' differences in terms of speaking anxiety scores

	Male		Female		p-value
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Q1	2.6	1.3	3.5	1.1	<.001
Q2	2.8	1.2	3.3	1.1	.014
Q3	2.6	1.2	3.7	1.0	<.001
Q4	2.1	1.2	2.8	1.2	<.001
Q5	2.4	.9	3.1	1.1	<.001
Q6	2.2	1.1	3.0	1.2	<.001
Q7	1.7	.9	2.0	.9	.043
Q8	1.9	1.1	2.4	1.1	.003
Q9	1.8	1.0	1.8	.9	.695
Q10	2.0	1.0	2.3	1.0	.104
Q11	1.8	1.1	2.1	.9	.046
Q12	1.8	1.1	1.8	.9	.583
Q13	1.5	.9	1.5	.8	.633

Note: Q: Question

Table 1 shows that the mean scores of items 9, 10, 12, and 13 were1, 8, 2.0, 1.8, and 1.5 for male language learners and 1.8; 2.3, 1.8, and 1.5 for female language learners respectively. Because the levels of significance for these items were 0.695, 0.104, 0.583, and 0.633 at $p>0.05$, the differences are considered to be statistically insignificant. Apart from these items, differences between male and female language learners in another 9 items in terms of their mean scores were statistically significant ($p<0.05$), implying that female language learners at Isfahan universities (Iran) experienced more anxiety in in-class activities of speaking courses.

In order to determine the level of language learners' (male and female) anxiety towards in-class activities of the speaking courses, the total scores of language learners from the first 13 questions were computed. The results revealed that the male language learners experienced a low level of speaking apprehension, whereas female language learners experienced a moderate level of speaking apprehension. The results of T-Test showed that there are statistically significant differences between genders in speaking anxiety mean scores. Female language learners might experience greater amount of anxiety related to in-class speaking activities.

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4.1.2 Reactions to In-Class Activities and the Possible Causes

The second research question explored the language learners' (male and female) reactions to speaking courses. The results showed that the statements "I am more willing to participate in class when the speaking topics we discuss are interesting" and "I would feel more confident about speaking in class if I practice more" had the highest mean scores of 4.5 and 4.3. Therefore," discussing interesting topics" and "practicing before class" had the highest reactions for male language learners. It was also found that the statements "preparing before class", "discussing interesting topics" and "practicing more" with mean scores of 4.2, 4.2, and 4.2 and standard deviations of 0.7, 0.8, and 0.8 constituted the highest in class speaking reactions for female language learners.

For exploring the differences of male and female language learners in terms of their reactions to speaking courses, Mann Whitney U Test was run. The results are displayed in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 2. Mann Whitney U Test of genders' differences in terms of reactions to the English speaking courses

	Male		Female		p-value
	F	P	F	P	
Q14	4.3	.9	4.2	.8	0.516
Q15	2.9	1.1	3.3	1.2	0.032*
Q16	3.3	.8	3.6	.8	0.067
Q17	4.5	.8	4.2	.8	0.011*
Q18	4.1	.8	4.0	.9	0.737
Q19	3.8	.9	3.7	.9	0.558
Q20	3.0	1.2	3.4	1.2	0.108
Q21	3.7	1.0	3.7	1.0	0.894
Q22	4.1	1.0	4.2	.7	0.495
Q23	3.7	1.1	3.9	.9	0.223
Q24	4.0	.9	4.0	.8	0.781
Q25	4.1	.9	4.0	.9	0.382
Q26	3.9	1.1	3.9	.9	0.747
Q27	3.8	1.1	3.7	1.1	0.453
Q28	3.6	1.0	3.8	.9	0.239
Q29	4.1	1.0	4.0	.9	0.414
Q30	3.4	1.0	3.4	1.0	0.971
Q31	3.3	1.2	2.9	1.2	0.074
Q32	3.8	1.0	3.5	1.1	0.314
Q33	3.3	1.2	3.2	1.1	0.711
Q34	2.0	1.1	2.3	1.1	0.06*
Q35	3.3	1.1	3.7	1.1	0.038*
Q36	2.7	.9	3.3	1.1	0.003**
Q37	2.7	1.1	3.1	1.1	0.047*
Q38	2.2	1.1	2.8	1.1	0.001**
Q39	2.5	1.1	3.1	1.1	0.001**

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Q40	2.2	1.3	2.5	1.1	0.054
Q41	2.4	1.1	3.2	1.3	0.001**
Q42	1.8	1.0	2.3	1.1	0.003**
Q43	2.3	1.3	2.6	1.2	0.152

Note: Q: Question

The results of Mann Whitney U Test indicated a statistically significant difference between male and female language learners' reactions to speaking courses, in favor of male in item 17 and in favor of females in items 15, 34-39, 41-42. As can be seen, only the males' score of item 17 was higher than females' score (p<o. 05). As a result, females had higher reactions to speaking courses. To measure the genders' reactions to speaking courses, 30 related items were used in the second section of the questionnaire (item 14-43). The findings showed that 90% of males and 76% of females experienced a moderate level of speaking reactions. It was also seen that 10% of males and 24% of females experienced it at a high level. The result of the Independence T-Test showed that there were statistically significant differences between genders' speaking reactions mean scores. It can be concluded that female EFL learners are significantly higher in their reactions to speaking courses compared to their male counterparts.

4.1.3 Possible Strategies of Reducing Learners' Anxiety

In the last section of the questionnaire, learners were asked to declare their agreement or disagreement with the statements that were about strategies to reduce their classroom speaking anxiety. The results are presented in Table 3 for the males' learners and Table 4 for females' learners. It should be noted that learners had the option to select more than one answer and most of them nearly select all the items in this section. Therefore, it may seem that all items are significant for the learners.

Table 3. Possible strategies of reducing learners' anxiety towards English speaking courses (male learners)

Statement	No. of elicited answers	%
Teacher is helpful	45	100%
Teachers' manner of correction is pleasant	45	100%
Teacher can make language learners feel comfortable	45	100%
Teacher does not make you feel stupid when you make a mistake	39	86.66%
Language learners can work in groups or pairs	39	86.66%
All language learners are called on equally	33	73.33%
Language learners get sufficient time for practice before speaking	24	53.33
Language learners can volunteer answers and are not called on to provide responses	21	46.66%
Teacher does not over-react to mistakes	12	26.66%

According to Table 3, the most rated strategies were "having a helpful teacher" (100%), followed by "teachers' manner of correction is pleasant"(100%) and "teacher can make language learners feel comfortable" (100%). The statements like "teacher does not make you feel stupid when you make a mistake" and "language learners can work in groups or pairs" were selected by the same number of participants (86.66%). 73.33% of participants agreed with the statement "all language learners are called on equally." They also agreed that it may be helpful to reduce their anxiety when "language learners get sufficient time for practice before speaking"(53.33%). "Language learners can volunteer

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answers and are not called on to provide responses" was chosen by 46.66% of the language learners. Only 26.66% of language learners agreed with the statement "teacher dose not over-react to mistakes."

Table 4. Possible strategies of reducing learners' anxiety towards English speaking courses (female learners)

Statement	No. of elicited answers	%
Teacher is helpful	119	100%
Teachers' manner of correction is pleasant	119	100%
Teacher can make language learners feel comfortable	112	94.11%
Teacher does not make you feel stupid when you make a mistake	119	100%
Language learners get sufficient time for practice before speaking	98	82.35%
Language learners can volunteer answers and are not called on to provide responses	91	76.47%
Teacher does not over-react to mistakes	77	64.70%
All language learners are called on equally	77	64.70%
Language learners can work in groups or pairs	63	52.94%

As displayed in Table 4, a majority of females' participants agreed that "helpful teacher" (100%) and "teachers' manner of correction" (100%) can reduce their speaking anxiety. 94.11% of females' participants agreed with the statement "teacher can make language learners feel comfortable." Statement "teacher does not make you feel stupid when you make a mistake" was selected by 100% of participants. Around 82.35% of participants agreed with the statement "language learners get sufficient time for practice before speaking" and 76.47% of them wanted to "volunteer the answer and do not called on by teacher." Statements like "teacher does not over-react to mistakes" and "all language learners are called on equally" were selected by 64.70% of participants. It is interesting that 52.94% of females thought of group work as useful strategy for reducing speaking anxiety.

4.1.4 The Effect of Gender on Language Learners' Perception of Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety

The fourth research question examined the effect of EFL university students' gender differences on their perception of foreign language speaking anxiety. For this purpose, first, we determined genders' level of speaking anxiety in a way that their total scores of 43 items in the questionnaire (entire items) were calculated. Table 5 illustrates the distribution of genders in terms of their speaking anxiety levels. Second, we ran the Independent Sample T-Test to determine differences between genders in terms of their total mean scores in the questionnaire (43 items). Its results are displayed in Table 5.

Table 5. Distribution of genders in terms of their speaking anxiety levels

	Male		Female		Total	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Low	1	2.0	1	.8	2	1.1
Moderate	47	94.0	117	93.6	164	93.7
High	2	4.0	7	5.6	9	5.1
Total	50	100.0	125	100.0	175	100.0

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Based on Table 5, speaking anxiety level for 94% of males and 93.6% of females were moderate. Around 2% of the male and 0.8% of the female language learners demonstrated a low level of speaking anxiety and finally, 4.0% of males and 5.6% of females experienced high level of speaking anxiety.

Table 6. Independent Sample T-Test of differences in genders' speaking anxiety mean scores

Sex	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Male	50	91.00	176.00	126.32	15.77	-4.425	173	<.001
Female	125	97.00	169.00	137.12	14.09			

According to Table 6, the total anxiety scores of males (from total questionnaires' items) ranged from 91-176 with the mean and standard deviations of 126.32; 15.77 and total anxiety scores of females ranged from 97-169 with the mean and standard deviations of 137.12 and14.09. The results of the Independent Sample T-Test showed statistically significant differences between male and females' anxiety mean scores ($p<0.05$) and anxiety mean scores in females were significantly higher compared to those of male language learners. Therefore, female language learners were more anxious in speaking courses.

4.2 Findings of the Interview

This section presents the findings related to the data from interviews.

4.2.1 Times that Participants Felt Anxious in the Speaking Language Classes

When the participants were asked about when they feel anxious in class activities of the speaking courses, the following results were obtained from males and females.

The highest males' anxiety provoking time in speaking class were "speaking in front of their classmates and teacher", "having no information or opinion about the current topics", "unfamiliarity with environment", "being asked immediate question or having impromptu presentation", "difficulty of remembering appropriate vocabulary", "afraid of language learners' laughing as they speak" and "the instructors' behavior."

The highest females' anxiety provoking time in speaking class were "being asked immediate questions or having impromptu presentation", "speaking in front of their classmates and teacher", "inability to answer teachers' question appropriately", "do not remember appropriate vocabulary", "instructors' method of teaching", "having no information about the current topics" and "calling on English language speaking class."

4.2.2 Possible Causes of Participants' Anxiety

When the interviewees were asked about the reasons making them anxious in the speaking language courses, the following factors emerged. According to the analyses, "being unprepared", "fear of making grammatical mistakes", "lack of practicing speaking language", "being graded for speaking activities", "worrying about pronunciation mistakes", "perfectionism", "coeducational courses", "do not understanding teachers' words", "discussing interesting topics" and "do not give enough time to prepare for speaking" were the most causes of male language learners' speaking anxiety.

It was also found that "self-doubt", "feeling that other language learners speak better than they do", "negative reaction from teacher and classmates", "not understanding teachers' words", "worrying about grammatical mistakes", "fear of making pronunciation mistakes", "presence of teacher", "being unprepared in advance", "being graded in speaking class", "not giving enough time by teachers to prepare for speaking", "discussing boring topics in speaking courses", "feeling embarrassed", "not learning speaking skills before university", "coeducational courses" and "teachers' age" were among the highest anxiety provoking causes of female language learners' speaking anxiety.

4.2.3 Suggested Strategies to Reduce Feeling Anxious in a Speaking Class

The strategies suggested by males and females interviewees to reduce the feeling of anxiety are summarized below.

Suggested strategies by male language learners were as follows:

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"Teachers' behavior and manner" is the most important factor, "group works are helpful", "teachers do not overreact to language learners' mistakes." "Pedagogical practices", "discussing interesting topics in speaking courses" and "do not emphasize on grade" were the other strategies that males believed may be helpful. It was also found that female interviewees believed that "instructors' behavior" is a significant factor for decreasing speaking anxiety, "teacher should make language learners to speak", "group works and pedagogical practices are helpful", "instructors' method of teaching may be reducing speaking anxiety", "language learners can be volunteer for answering and do not called on by teacher", "language learners should be nice to each other, "no one laughs at others' mistakes", "discussing topics should be interesting" and "emphasis should not be on grade in speaking class" and finally, "teachers' emphasis should not be on grammatical mistakes."

5. Discussion

In this section, the findings of the questionnaire survey will be further discussed with the data from the semi-structured interviews.

5.1 Research Question One

In response to the first research question, "What are the causes for anxiety of Iranian EFL university students about in-class activities of the speaking courses?" the findings showed that female and male language learners found impromptu speaking activities as the most anxiety provoking activities.

According to interviewees, these factors result in anxiety (original wording):

"When I speak in front of my classmates and teacher, I get nervous."

"When I have an impromptu speech, I feel uncomfortable."

The results are in line with the findings of Awan, Azher, Nadeem, and Naz's (2010) study who found that the main cause of anxiety was "speaking in front of others." Studies carried out by Öztürk (2009) and Debreli and Demirkan (2016) also showed that immediate questions after the presentations were the most common in-class activities in which language learners get apprehension. It can be due to fear of grammatical or pronunciation mistakes, limited background knowledge, fear of losing their face in front of their classmates, not having linguistic certainty in front of the teacher, limited understanding of correct word usage or having narrow knowledge of English vocabulary. As well as, language learners may not have a sufficient level of language proficiency and it is necessary to think what to say before speaking in order to avoid of making mistakes.

5.2 Research Question Two

In response to the second research question, "What are the reactions of Iranian EFL university students to the speaking courses and the possible causes for their reactions?" the findings revealed that "discussing interesting topics in the speaking courses" and "having more practice in class" constituted the highest reactions to the English speaking courses for males and "coming to class prepared", "discussing interesting topics" and "having more practice in class" created the highest reactions to the speaking courses for females.

The following interviewees' answer to the question on the causes of classroom speaking anxiety reinforced the analysis:

"*When the topics we discuss are not interesting, I do not like to participate in speaking activities."*

"*Because we have less practice in language speaking class, we do not have enough self-confidence in speaking classroom."*

These findings are consistent with the study of Choi (2016) who found that pedagogical (including, practice more and discussing interesting topics) and individual aspects (including come to class prepared) result in reactions to the English speaking courses. It can be interpreted that language learners are afraid that their classmates find out they do not know how to state their ideas in English so they may pretend they do not speak because discussing topics are not interesting or they may be anxious about teachers' evaluation and this performance anxiety can result in anxiety.

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5.3 Research Question Three

In response to the third research question, "How can Iranian EFL university students' fear about speaking courses be reduced?" the findings showed that "having a helpful teacher", "pleasant teachers' correction attitude and behavior" were the most selected strategies by males and females in the questionnaire.

This is echoed by some of interviewees (original words):

"*When I speak in language class and teacher look at me humbly, I do not want to continue speaking."*

"Instructor is better to be comfortable with language learners, to be joyful and fun, this makes language learners less anxious in speaking classroom."

This is in line with the study of Brown (2007) who claimed that teachers' factors, apart from learners' and learning factors caused various problems in language learning. The instructors' wrong behavior may prevent language learners from expressing their ideas competently and make them anxious during speaking class. Teachers should pay attention to language learners' remarks, questions, and anxiety and must be respectful to them.

Teachers' method of teaching was also important for language learners (male and female). Using updated teaching methods and getting away from old teaching methods, which do not fulfill language learners' needs, seem to be necessary in language teaching. This is also reflected by some of the interviewees:

"I think teacher should not focus on the lessons' materials, they should hold free discussion in speaking courses and also should use update methods."

This finding is in accordance with Mahmoodzadeh's (2013) study which revealed that instructors' lack of teaching experience results in language learners' speaking anxiety. Teachers' experience included abilities such as formulating lessons, analyzing the consequences of language learners' learning, and using effective strategies and techniques that suit language learners' needs.

It was expected that the language learners in this study would agree with the item "language learners can volunteer answers and are not called on to provide responses", but the male language learners' answers showed that they disagreed with this item. This study is in line with Choi's (2016) study in which 60% of participants disagreed with this item. Some reasons may be as follows. Male language learners may not feel confident enough to volunteer in class because they fear to make mistakes and be evaluated negatively, or male language learners may know that they would never volunteer in class if not called on by the teacher because when some active language learners volunteer, the teacher would not make other language learners speak and as a result anxious language learners hide easily and feel relaxed.

Contrary to males, female language learners agreed with the statement "volunteering an answer instead of calling on by teacher." This is echoed by some interviewees:

"*The language learners' level should be considered and based on their levels, teachers ask them questions and ask hard question voluntarily."*

The result behind it is the fact that when they are called on, they become anxious and their mistakes might be revealed. They claimed that they would volunteer only when their pronunciation or grammar would be correct. It can be also interpreted that females are less self-confident and this problem must be noticed by the teacher for reducing their speaking anxiety.

Error correction is an important factor which causes language learners' anxiety. Male language learners in this study disagreed with the statement "teachers do not overreact to mistakes." They wanted the teacher to give feedback on their mistakes and claimed that when they do not know whether or not their language use is correct, they become anxious. They also believed that when they are corrected, they can improve their pronunciation or grammar and without error correction, they will continue the use of incorrect pronunciation or grammar. Female language learners (conversely) agreed with this item and claimed that teachers' overreactions to their mistakes make them anxious and diminish their self-confidence. This finding (related to females) is consistent with Choi's (2016) findings in which language learners agreed that teachers do not overreact to their mistakes. It also is in line with interview findings of this study (as seen in below statement):

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"The teacher dose not react more to the language learners' mistakes, because their self- confidence diminish, of course error correction in the normal way will help language learners to do not repeat their mistakes."

5.4 Research Question Four

In response to the fourth research question, "Do EFL university students' gender differences influence their perceived foreign language speaking anxiety?" the results showed statistically significant differences between males and females' anxiety and the females' anxiety were higher than that of male language learners. Then, female language learners were more anxious in speaking courses.

The findings are in line with Gerencheal (2016) who investigated differences of foreign language anxiety between male and female language learners and found that Iranian female EFL learners had a higher mean score in all anxiety categories than male learners. Conversely, the findings contradict the findings of Nahavandi and Mukundan (2013) and Bashosh, Abbas Nejad, Rastegar and Marzban (2013) who investigated foreign language classroom anxiety and gender relationships and found that foreign language anxiety did not differ significantly across genders.

6. Conclusion

This study investigated the effect of genders on Iranian EFL university students' perceptions of English speaking anxiety (in Isfahan province). The study's main objectives were to explore the levels of Iranian EFL university students' anxiety in class activities of speaking courses and also their reactions to speaking activities and possible causes. It also intended to find the possible strategies to reduce the language learners' foreign language speaking anxiety and finally to explore differences between genders in terms of speaking anxiety.

Regarding the investigation of the language learners' anxiety towards in-class activities of speaking courses, the results of the quantitative study showed that impromptu speaking activities were regarded contributing to speaking anxiety for male and female language learners. In addition, it was found that female language learners at Isfahan universities experienced a moderate level of speaking apprehension. Regarding the language learners' reactions to the speaking courses and their causes, the findings of this study revealed that "discussing interesting topics" and "practicing before class" had highest speaking reactions for male language learners. "Coming to class prepared", "discussing interesting topics" and "more practicing" created high classroom speaking reactions for female language learners. In terms of the level of genders' reactions to English speaking courses, it was revealed that male language learners experience it at a moderate level and females experienced it at a higher level.

The findings of this study may be helpful for EFL teachers and curriculum designers. The first implication of this study is that the findings could raise foreign language teachers' awareness of speaking anxiety and motivate them to recognize anxious language learners and assist them to reduce their speaking anxiety in English classes. Second, based on the findings of this study, which indicate that immediate classroom speaking is one of factors that causes anxiety, curriculum designers can make language learners more accustomed to such an occurrence. Finally, in the last section of this study, teachers are provided with some strategies to deal with this kind of anxiety according to language learners' opinions.

Some suggestions for further research are recommended: important variables such as teachers' methods of teaching and practices inside classroom, teachers' manner and surrounded environment may contribute to differences in Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety (FLSA). These issues, however, are not specifically addressed in this study; therefore, further research is suggested to provide a better understanding of these effective variables.

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