The Effect of Speaking Anxiety on EFL Saudi Learners' Performance

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Abstracts: Anxiety plays a significant role in students' oral performance and achievement in EFL speaking classes. This study applied a mixed-method approach using a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews in order to investigate tertiary level students' English language anxiety at Najran University. It also examines its main causes. In addition, it explores the effects of anxiety on students' performance in EFL classrooms and the role of gender differences on the level anxiety. The study reveals that the main factors that contribute to EFL speaking anxiety among Saudi EFL students are fear of negative evaluation, fear of interaction, fear of perception of others and lack of confidence, respectively. The study also found that female students were more anxious compared to male students in EFL speaking classrooms. In addition, it showed a negative connection between FLA and students' performance in speaking classes in that high-level anxiety students experience poor speaking performance. The study implicates the role of speaking teachers in reducing the anxiety among students.

Keywords: Anxiety, EFL, Speaking Classes, Saudi Learners.

1. INTRODUCTION

Numerous efforts have been put in by the Saudi government to address the requirements of English instruction as a foreign language. Although new curricula and training for English language teachers have been provided, majority of students have poor English proficiency and difficulties in most English language skills. As a result, several studies have been conducted to explore one of the primary challenges in acquiring a new language which is anxiety. It can be said that language anxiety is a negative emotional condition that might negatively affect learning a foreign language [1]. Speaking is considered as a challenging task for Saudi students in that they feel reluctant to speak up during discussions and oral activities in English language classes [2].

The majority of studies on anxiety concentrated on foreign language anxiety (e.g.,[3]–[6]) in which they show that anxiety can impede the use and the production of foreign languages. They confirmed that FLA has an impact on students' attitudes and success in language acquisition in that it negatively affects achievement in second language learning. Furthermore, one-half of students have experienced language anxiety while learning a second or foreign language [7]. Some studies emphasized on the relation between anxiety and language proficiency (e.g. [8], [9]). Others have explored language anxiety and its relationship to some variables like gender, age and academic level (e.g. [10]–[12]).

On the other hand, anxiety plays a significant role in students' oral performance and achievement in EFL classes [13]. Therefore, focus should be given to study the effects of students' anxiety on their language performance. In that one of the pedagogical goals is to raise learners' motivation to communicate in order to facilitate language learning [14]. So, this study will contribute to the existing body of research on anxiety in EFL classrooms especially in the Saudi context in that it will deeply investigate tertiary level students' English language anxiety at Najran University and to examine its causes. Additionally, it examines the impact of anxiety on students' academic performance within EFL educational settings. It is hoped that the results of this study help students to overcome their anxiety about speaking in a foreign language in order to improve their language learning performance.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Definition of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA)

Foreign Language Anxiety is a common problem in learning foreign languages which has been researched by academics for decades. [15] defined FLA as, "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to language learning arising from the uniqueness of the (foreign) language learning process" (p. 128). They argued that FLA manifests in two ways: the first is a result of the circumstances in which the students use and acquire the language, and the second is a result of the nature of the language itself. They have also established three different anxiety types: communication apprehension (which is associated with the learner's feelings of stress, anxiety, and shyness when conversing with others or using the target language), fear of negative evaluation (which is fear of other people's opinions and the expectation of other's negative evaluation) and test anxiety (which is the conscious or unconscious learner's feel of failing in academic tests, exams or assignments used to evaluate their performance.

Regarding anxiety effect on language learning, [16] described anxiety in foreign language classes and observed that it can impede language acquisition and result in negative attitudes about the target language and community. Furthermore, other researchers have categorized additional factors which contribute to FLA. For example, [6] highlighted the importance of social and cultural factors in FLA development. He described it as people's concern when they perform in a foreign language environment. While others described FLA as a complicated concept which is influenced by many individual and environmental factors such as: cultural background, teaching techniques or personality traits [4]. Although there is an ambiguity surrounding anxiety's concept and measurement, [17] recommends that researchers should examine the variations in anxiety levels among different groups of students and highlights the importance of creating positive and supportive environments for students.

2.2 Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety

The authors in [15] argued that speaking, among all other language skills, is the most anxiety provoking factor. Students fear that their pronunciation is not good enough because they think that only proper English should be spoken and compare their abilities to those of native speakers of the target language. According to [18], it was claimed that speaking skill is frequently the first thing that students compare to that of their peers, teachers, and native speakers.

Although anxiety is a significant barrier to learning a foreign language in general and speaking in particular, it can be reduced. Understanding the nature and causes of speaking anxiety in a foreign language will help researchers find more effective solutions. Teachers can support and motivate anxious students to participate actively in classes where foreign languages are spoken, as well as create a calm, low-anxiety setting for the development of their speaking skills.

Despite the role of anxiety in facilitating or debilitating language learning, few studies have looked at the effects of anxiety among Arab students' speaking performance who are studying English as a foreign language (EFL) in Saudi Arabia. According to [19], the high anxiety level of Saudi students is one of the reasons behind their low performance in English classes. He also stated that the majority of college students feels reluctant to in answering questions or in joining class discussions during speaking classes. In another study, [20] used students' test results before and after the training course an indicator of their level of anxiety and he discovered that teachers' anxiety-reduction techniques helped students feel less anxious in speaking courses.

Furthermore, a study conducted by [21] suggested some practical solutions on how to reduce Saudi EFL students' speaking anxiety. Using a qualitative methodology, the study focused on the perceptions of female students enrolled at King Abdulaziz University. The findings indicated that Saudi female students often experience anxiety when speaking in a foreign language. Nevertheless, they exhibited a positive mindset and a desire to enhance their English speaking skills by engaging in activities such as watching English-language movies, browsing English-language websites, traveling abroad, and conversing with native speakers.

Regarding Saudi students' achievement in EFL classrooms and the effect of anxiety on them, [22] has examined Community College and Faculty of Education students at Shaqra University. He used a questionnaire and found that Saudi students were particularly anxious about studying English as a foreign language. Their social, environmental, cultural, and religious beliefs, as well as the role of teachers and assessments have influenced and raised their anxiety level. The findings indicated a correlation between high levels of anxiety and lower EFL achievement. Whereas, the author highlighted the positive impact of motivation on language learning outcomes.

In addition, [23] have conducted a study in the Northern part of Saudi Arabia to examine the effect of foreign language speaking anxiety on Saudi learners. They used a questionnaire and speaking achievement tests over 100 Preparatory Year students and revealed that EFL students with low levels of language anxiety perform well on the speaking test, while those with high levels of language anxiety perform poorly. They also described some FLA types such as: language testing anxiety, classroom procedures anxiety, learner beliefs, personal and interpersonal anxiety. However, the existing literature on students' FLA in EFL speaking classrooms has been very limited in the Arab World and in particular in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, to the researcher's best knowledge. Also, very minimal studies focused on students' anxiety level and its effect on their performance. In addition, almost minimal studies have correlated students' gender with their anxiety level. Therefore, this study is significant as it investigates the effect of students' anxiety on their performance. This study addressed the following research questions:

Q.1. What is the nature of the anxiety experienced by EFL students enrolled at PYP at Najran University when speaking in the EFL oral classes?

Q.2. What are the main factors that contribute to EFL speaking anxiety among Saudi EFL students?

Q.3. Do gender-related factors have a notable impact on students' anxiety levels when it comes to foreign language learning?

Q.4. What is the influence of speaking anxiety on students' performance in EFL classrooms in front of the teacher and the students?

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

A mixed-method design was used in this study to offer a variety of viewpoints and a deeper understanding of the research questions under examine. The current study attempted to adopt a mix-method design since different insights to the research questions provided a better conception, in contrast to the previous Saudi-based research on speaking anxiety, in which researchers employed just one method [19]. The use of a mixed-method research design also ensured that the data were collected without any gaps, increasing the validity of the results.

3.2 Data Collection Procedure

In order to investigate speaking anxiety among EFL Saudi learners and its effect on their performance, a quantitative approach using a questionnaire and a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews were adopted for this study. A quantitative method was prepared to investigate the students' anxiety level. While semi-structured interviews allow in-depth information to be collected from the respondents. Therefore, the first approach used an online Likert-scale questionnaire which was adopted to determine the primary factors contributing to the Saudi EFL students' speaking anxiety. The second approach was to conduct semi-structured interviews with 10 students attended the Preparatory Year Program at Najran University.

3.2.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

To obtain an in-depth understanding of students' EFL speaking anxiety and its effect on their performance in EFL classes, semi-structured interviews were carried out. In this study, 20 male and female students have been

interviewed. Those 20 students were chosen from within those who responded to the questionnaire. All the students are enrolled in the Preparatory Year Program, Najran University. In order to overcome the language barrier that could have a negative effect on the validity and reliability of the data, interviews were first done in Arabic and then translated into English. So, these semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions helped the researcher to gain a better understanding of the research problem. Each interview lasted fifteen minutes on average. The interviews were recorded using an audio-taped recording, translated into English and then transcribed.

3.2.2 Questionnaire

A foreign language speaking anxiety questionnaire was created in this article by choosing twenty-three questionnaire items from the 33 items of FLCAS developed by [15]. To develop the questionnaire, the researcher used a Google form service. It consisted of 23 question items and was divided into two parts. The first part collected the demographic information about the participants' age, gender, origin and high school type. The second part had items which discussed speaking anxiety factors associated with the educational environment and related to the EFL teacher. These factors are: fear of English Language, fear of interaction, fear of perceptions of others, lack of confidence, and fear of negative evaluation

The researcher translated the questionnaire into Arabic and utilized a descriptive-inferential research design to distribute it. The questionnaire employed a five-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1), to measure responses.

3.3 Participants

The study included a total of 270 male and female students who were enrolled in the Preparatory Year Program at Najran University during the first semester of the academic year 2023/2024. All of the study's participants were Saudi students between the ages of 18 and 25 who are native Arabic speakers. Before agreeing to participate in the study, they were all told about the research topic and its goals. A stratified sampling was employed to select male and female students. The questionnaire was online using Google Forms and shared with the target group (the study population), and after a week, the received responses were (270), representing (13.5%). Table (1) presents the breakdown of the study sample based on the variable of gender.

Table 1. Demographic distribution of the participants

Variable	Category	Number	Frequency%
Gender	Male	150	55.6
	Female	120	44.4
	Total	270	100.0

3.4 Validity and Reliability

The questionnaire was validated using face validity and internal consistency. Face validity was verified through a number of experienced and specialized faculty members, including (10) members. The first draft of the questionnaire was created by the researchers based on the body of current research, and it was sent, along with the study's objectives, to specialists for evaluation of its content, language, and format. Their remarks indicate that they were satisfied with the questionnaire's capacity to measure the variables for which it was designed in light of the study's goals. Additionally, the questionnaire was modified in response to their feedback. In order to improve the language and clarity, several items were changed. Several additional things were rearranged. The questionnaire was finally created in its final form, which contained 23 items.

As for the internal consistency, the researchers used Pearson correlation coefficient between items. Table 2 shows the results of Pearson correlation coefficient between items and the overall scores.

Table 2. Pearson correlation coefficient between items and overall scores

No.	Items	Pearson Correlation	P –value
1	While I'm speaking in the oral class, I never feel confident in myself	.770**	.000
2	I'm concerned that I won't do well in the oral class	.840**	.000
3	When I know I'll be speaking in the oral class, I panic	.612**	.004
4	When I cannot understand the teacher during an oral lesson, it confuses me	.840**	.000
5	I wouldn't mind taking additional oral English classes each week	.807**	.000
6	I frequently notice myself thinking about unrelated topics in English class	.815**	.000
7	I don't feel any sort of stress to be well-prepared for the oral presentation	.561*	.010
8	I usually feel comfortable in the oral classroom	.843**	.000
9	When I have to speak in front of my class without beiing prepared, I become scared	.687**	.001
10	I sometimes become so nervous in oral classes that I forget the things I know	.612**	.004
11	I find it embarrassing to ask for assistance during the oral class	.830**	.000
12	Speaking English with native speakers is unlikely to be awkward	.887**	.000
13	I frequently want to skip the oral class	.682**	.001
14	When I peak in the oral class, I feel confident	.887**	.000
15	I worry that my English teacher will immediately point out any errors I make when I speak	.855**	.000
16	My heart beats quickly knowing that I will be called for in the oral class	.848**	.000
17	I think that other students speak English more fluently than I do	.611**	.004
18	When I speak in English in front of other students, I feel really nervous.	.682**	.001
19	Compared to other classes, I feel more uncomfortable and anxious in the oral class	.739**	.000
20	When I speak in English in my oral class, I get scared and confused	.490*	.028
21	Attending the oral class makes me feel confident and relaxed	.477*	.034
22	When I talk in English, I worry that other students will laugh at me	.840**	.000
23	I get anxious when the English teacher asks me questions during the oral class	.612**	.004

** The correlation is statistically significant at the 0.01 level. *, the correlation is statistically significant at the 0.05 level.

Table 2 shows that the correlation coefficients of the items with the domain to which they belong were statistically significant at (0.01) or (0.05). Pearson correlation coefficients ranged between the items and the overall scores between (0.477* - 0.878**). These results indicate that the internal consistency has been achieved.

To check the reliability of the questionnaire, the researchers used Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient on the

domains and the total score as depicted in Table 3.

Table 3. Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient on domains and the total score

No.		Cronbach's Alpha	Split half reliability Guttman
	Total stability	0.95	0.93

Table 3 shows that the reliability coefficient on the instrument as a whole was (0.95), and the split half reliability Guttman was (0.93). Those coefficients are high and suitable for the purposes of the study.

3.5 Statistical Processing

The study explored students' anxiety level and its effect on their performance. It also correlated their responses with their gender and anxiety level. Accordingly, a number of analyses using SPSS were used to find answers for the research questions. The Pearson correlation coefficient was employed to assess the reliability and consistency. In addition, Cronbach's alpha was used to verify the stability of the study tool. In addition, the data was analyzed using descriptive statistics to extract means, standard deviation, ranks, and percentages to answer the first question and the second question. Finally, the following grading was adopted for the degree of fulfillment of the items to figure out the level of approval based on the range equation:

Table 4. Criteria for interpreting the values of arithmetic averages according to the range equation

Approval's degree	Very low	Low	Medium	High	Very High
Arithmetic mean	From 1 to 1.80	More than 1,80 to 2,60	More than 2,60 to 3,40	More than 3,40 to 4,20	More than 4,20 to 5,00

4. RESULTS

The nature of the anxiety experienced by EFL students enrolled at PYP at Najran University when speaking in the EFL oral classes.

Means, standard deviations and ranks of the nature of anxiety experienced by EFL students enrolled at PYP at Najran University when speaking in the EFL oral classes have been extracted. Table 5 displays the results.

Table 5. Descriptive statistics of the nature of anxiety experienced by EFL students enrolled at PYP inside EFL speaking classes

No	Item	Mean	Std. Deviation	Rank	Level
1	Compared to other classes, I feel more uncomfortable and anxious in the oral class	2.52	1.321	2	Medium
2	When I speak in English in my oral class, I get scared and confused	2.77	1.377	1	Medium
	Total	2.64	1.248		Medium

As shown in Table 5, the nature of anxiety experienced by students of English as a foreign language studying at the Deanship of the Preparatory Year/Najran while speaking in English speaking lectures came to a medium degree (M= 2.64, SD=1.248). Also, the Item " When I speak in English in my oral class, I get scared and confused " ranked first with (M=2.77, SD=1.377) with a medium degree. However, the item " Compared to other classes, I feel more uncomfortable and anxious in the oral class " came in second place with (M=2.52, SD=1.321) with a medium degree.

The main factors that contribute to EFL speaking anxiety among Saudi EFL students

Means, standard deviations and ranks of the main factors that contribute to EFL speaking anxiety among Saudi EFL students have been extracted. Table 6 displays the results.

Table 6. Descriptive statistics of the main factors that contribute to EFL speaking anxiety among Saudi EFL students

No.	Items	Mean	Std. Deviation	Rank	Level
	Fear of interaction	**3.00**	**.727**	**2**	**Medium**
3	When I know I'll be speaking in the oral class, I panic	2.61	1.383	9	Medium
5	I wouldn't mind taking additional oral English classes each week	3.73	1.155	1	High
6	I frequently notice myself thinking about unrelated topics in English class	3.01	1.348	5	Medium
7	I don't feel any sort of stress to be well-prepared for the oral presentation	3.02	1.066	4	Medium
8	I usually feel comfortable in the oral classroom	3.19	1.117	2	Medium
9	When I have to speak in front of my class without beiing prepared, I become scared	3.17	1.338	3	Medium
10	I sometimes become so nervous in oral classes that I forget the things I know	2.93	1.423	6	Medium
13	I frequently want to skip the oral class	2.66	1.465	8	Medium
16	My heart beats quickly knowing that I will be called for in the oral class	2.69	1.349	7	Medium
	Fear of perception of others	2.88	1.257	**3**	Medium
17	I think that other students speak English more fluently than I do	3.16	1.352	1	Medium
18	When I speak in English in front of other students, I feel really nervous.	2.82	1.421	2	Medium
22	When I talk in English, I worry that other students will laugh at me	2.67	1.440	3	Medium
	Lack of confidence	**2.81**	**.640**	**4**	Medium
1	While I'm speaking in the oral class, I never feel confident in myself	2.70	1.254	5	Medium
11	I find it embarrassing to ask for assistance during the oral class	2.63	1.372	6	Medium
12	Speaking English with native speakers is unlikely to be awkward	3.04	1.392	2	Medium
14	When I peak in the oral class, I feel confident	3.24	1.169	1	Medium
19	Compared to other classes, I feel more uncomfortable and anxious in the oral class	2.52	1.321	7	Low
20	When I speak in English in my oral class, I get scared and confused	2.77	1.377	4	Medium
21	Attending the oral class makes me feel confident and relaxed	3.01	1.113	3	Medium

	Fear of negative evaluation	**3.05**	**1.179**	**1**	Medium
2	I'm concerned that I won't do well in the oral class	3.03	1.482	3	Medium
4	When I cannot understand the teacher during an oral lesson, it confuses me	3.19	1.424	1	Medium
15	I worry that my English teacher will immediately point out any errors I make when I speak	2.89	1.245	4	Medium
23	I get anxious when the English teacher asks me questions during the oral class	3.10	1.385	2	Medium
	Total	**2.95**	**.798**		High

Table 6 shows that the total score for the reasons affecting English speaking anxiety in speaking lectures was medium with (M=2.95, SD=0.798). Regarding the factor of fear of negative evaluation, it came in the first place with (M=3.05, SD=1.179), with a medium degree. The factor of fear of interaction came in second place with (M=3.00, SD=0.727), with a medium degree. The factor of fear of perception of others came in third place (M=2.88, SD=1.257) with a medium degree. The last factor was lack of confidence (M=2.81, SD= 0.640) with a medium degree.

The gender-related aspects of students' foreign language anxiety and the factors influencing their anxiety levels.

The researcher utilized the t-test to demonstrate the significance of the disparities between the mean values of the study sample's responses based on the gender variable. Table 7 shows the results:

Table 7: The t-test to indicate the statistical significance of the variances between the mean values of the study sample's responses in relation to the gender variable.

Domain	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Fear of English Language	Male	150	2.42	1.201	-3.367-	268	.001
	Female	120	2.93	1.253			
Fear of interaction	Male	150	2.81	.745	-4.944-	268	.000
	Female	120	3.24	.632			
Fear of perceptions of others	Male	150	2.70	1.199	-2.683-	268	.008
	Female	120	3.11	1.295			
Lack of confidence	Male	150	2.74	.702	-2.107-	268	.036
	Female	120	2.90	.542			
Fear of negative evaluation	Male	150	2.79	1.132	-4.222-	268	.000
	Female	120	3.38	1.157			
Total score for anxiety factors	Male	150	2.77	.805	-4.216-	268	.000
	Female	120	3.17	.735			

Table (7) reveals statistically significant variations, at a significance level of 0.05, in foreign language anxiety among students and the factors influencing anxiety based on the students' gender, with females exhibiting higher levels of anxiety compared to males.

The influence of speaking anxiety on students' performance in EFL classrooms in front of the teacher and the students

As for the influence of speaking anxiety on students' performance in EFL classrooms in front of the teacher and the students, semi-structured interviews were conducted. In this study, 20 male and female students have been interviewed. The interviews' questions asked are intended to provide answers concerning the challenges of students with anxiety related to learning a foreign language and how it impacts their ability to communicate in oral classes. The following questions were asked to the students:

1. How do you think speaking anxiety affects your overall language learning progress and especially in speaking classes?

2. Have you ever avoided speaking in English due to anxiety? If so, can you share an example?

3. How does the classroom environment impact your speaking anxiety?

Regarding the first questions, most of the students agree that due to their speaking anxiety, they face difficulties in English classes like, they feel nervous when answering questions, they forget certain words in English and they feel shy if the teacher asked them to speak in class. Some responses are:

"For me, when I don't prepare at home, I feel nervous when the teacher asks me a question".

" If I speak in the class, I forget what I want to say and I feel shy".

" Speaking is very hard for me and my pronunciation is very bad".

"Sometimes, I hesitate and stutter during speaking".

For the second question, most of them indicate that they refuse to answer questions or speak in front of the class due to anxiety. Some of their answers are:

"When the teacher asks me a question which I wasn't prepared to, I tell him sorry I can't answer".

" I often speak in Arabic rather than in English because I don't know the translation of some words".

" Sometimes when I want to answer a question in the speaking class, I feel embarrassed because I make a lot of grammatical and pronunciation mistakes".

The last question indicates the influence of the classroom itself on the student's speaking anxiety; the teacher and other students. Some of their answers are:

"My English teacher stops at every word to correct it, so I don't prefer speaking in his class!".

" In my speaking class, we don't usually get a chance to talk because the teacher wants to finish the specified syllabus".

"When I try to speak, my friends help me by articulating some words that I don't remember".

5. DISCUSSION

This study investigated Saudi students' speaking anxiety and its influence on their performance. On the basis of the findings obtained from the analysis, the research questions are addressed in this part. Additionally, the findings are described, evaluated, compared and contrasted with results from earlier studies.

What is the nature of the anxiety experienced by EFL students enrolled at PYP at Najran University when speaking in the EFL oral classes?

Based on the above results, it is shown that the nature of anxiety experienced by Saudi EFL students at PYP is that they feel anxious when speaking in English in the oral classes with a medium degree. This result means that students become nervous and anxious when they are requested to participate in speaking exercises. That result is consistent with the previous research which showed that students suffer from anxiety especially in speaking courses (Agulia & Harjanto, 2016; Asif, 2017; Widyasari et al., 2023).

What are the main factors that contribute to EFL speaking anxiety among Saudi EFL students?

According to the results obtained from students' responses, the main factors which contribute to speaking anxiety are those related to fear of negative evaluation. In the second place comes the factor of fear of interaction. Then comes fear of perception of others. The last factor is lack of confidence. Students' fear of negative evaluation from their teacher prevents them from participating in oral classes without preparation. This finding is in support with findings by Öztürk & Gürbüz (2014) and Rafada & Madini (2017a) who confirmed that the EFL teacher plays a significant role in increasing or reducing anxiety among students. Teachers sometimes are uncooperative and unsupportive with students which lead them to feel embarrassed if they were asked a question during oral classes.

In addition, students have anxiety of interaction during speaking classes. They feel shy if they answer or present something during classes. As a result, they become unable to produce or recall the things they wanted to say. This result agrees with that of Aguila & Harjanto (2016), Al-Otaibi (2016) and Asif (2017) in that they all reported that fear of performance among others is considered an important factor that lead to speaking anxiety among EFL students.

Are there any significant differences between students' anxiety of foreign language and factors affecting their anxiety related to gender?

The analysis showed that there were statistically significant differences for foreign language anxiety among students and the factors affecting anxiety according to the gender of the students and in favor of females. It means that females are more anxious than males in EFL classrooms. However, this result agrees with that of Öztürk & Gürbüz (2013); Shahnaz & Bhatti (2014); Hwa & Peck (2017) which revealed that anxiety of females tends to be higher than that of males in speaking a foreign language. The results of the current study, which showed that females had higher levels of anxiety when speaking in English as a foreign language, could be explained by the fact that women are more sensitive to anxiety than men are and that men are likely to show reluctance to express anxiety's emotions. The cultural background of the Saudi society, in which women were less able to express themselves confidently in social situations than men, may be the cause of the females' reluctance to speak or the manifestation of higher anxiety levels in FL speaking.

What is the influence of speaking anxiety on students' performance in EFL classrooms in front of the teacher and the students?

Based on the results of the semi-structured interviews, the major finding of the present study is that Saudi students' anxiety and their performance in EFL speaking classes are negatively correlated to each other. This finding is in line with prior studies that demonstrated that students with higher levels of English anxiety performed better than less worried students (; Azher et al., 2010; Horwitz, 2001; Na, 2007). Because of this, students with anxiety tend to perform poorly, which makes them even more anxious about speaking or practicing a foreign language. Anxiety has a negative effect on Students' speaking competency which badly affects their interactive and communicative skills. Some students stated that because of anxiety, they found it difficult to participate in EFL classes. They feel shy to speak with incorrect grammar and pronunciation. This finding is consistent with Aguila & Harjanto, 2016; Azher et al., 2010; Azizifar, et al., 2014; Widysarai, 2023. They highlight the significant impact of foreign language anxiety (FLA) on students' language achievement. The reason for this result is that students feel shy and worried about making mistakes in front of others and that disables them to speak correctly and comprehensively.

CONCLUSIONS

English language anxiety is one of the major obstacles students face these days. According to the research findings, Saudi students at Najran University experience anxiety during English speaking classes. This study also reveals the main factors that contribute to EFL speaking anxiety among Saudi EFL students. In the first place comes the factors that are related to fear of negative evaluation. In the second place comes the factor of fear of interaction. Then comes fear of perception of others. The last factor is lack of confidence. Furthermore, regarding the disparities in foreign language anxiety and the factors influencing anxiety based on gender, it is observed that female students exhibit higher levels of anxiety compared to their male counterparts in EFL classrooms. The study also found a

negative connection between FLA and students' performance in speaking classes. It shows that high-level anxiety students experience poor speaking performance. The majority of students find it difficult to speak in English for a variety of reasons; including limited vocabulary, lack of grammar knowledge, lack of confidence, etc. However, these difficulties can be overcome with consistent practice and exposure to the target language. Speaking teachers also play a significant role in reducing students' anxiety by being tolerant to create a comfortable environment for speaking classes and support and guide their students to practice speaking more often. For future research, it is suggested that researchers explore the influence of different variables on the relation between FLA and students' speaking performance such as age and social classes. It is also recommended to investigate the main factors that contribute to FLA in other English skills, such as reading or writing.

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