

EFL Learners' Levels of Classroom Performance Anxieties and Their causes in Classroom Speaking Activities in Afghanistan

Ziaurahman Zia¹

Centre for Modern Languages and Human Sciences, University Malaysia Pahang (UMP),
Lebuhraya Tun Razak, 26300, Gambang, Kuantan, Pahang, Malaysia

Norrihan Sulan² PhD

Centre for Modern Languages and Human Sciences, University Malaysia Pahang (UMP),
Lebuhraya Tun Razak, 26300, Gambang, Kuantan, Pahang, Malaysia

Abstract: *Studies conducted on language anxiety have found that foreign language anxiety (FLA) is an affecting variable in language learning. There is a negative correlation between foreign language anxiety and learners achievements (Aida, 1994; Horwitz, 2001; MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991). Besides, in foreign language learning situations, speaking is one of the most anxiety-provoking skill among other language learning skills which affects EFL learners' language learning achievements the most (Chang, Horwitz & Shallert,1999). This study aims to examine English as foreign language learners' speaking anxiety in language classrooms by measuring learners' levels of classroom performance anxieties (Communication Apprehension, Test Anxiety and Fear of Negative Evaluation). It also determines the reasons which cause foreign language speaking anxiety in language learners inside language classroom. The participants of the study are 115 first year EFL undergraduates from one university in Afghanistan. The adapted version of (Horwitz, et al., 1986) Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) is used for data collection in the study. The results suggested that learners' suffer from high level of all three types of performance anxieties. Fear of negative evaluation was the highest one which causes speaking anxiety in learners. Other sources that cause classroom speaking anxiety in learners are also discussed.*

Keywords: *foreign language learning, foreign language classroom, speaking anxiety, FLCAS*

1. Introduction

In today's world the importance of English language is undeniable in all fields of life. The massive use and understanding of English language among people has made it the most important language for learners internationally. Also, with such worldwide expansion of English

language, the demand to acquire good communication skills has increased all around the globe (Masoud, 2011). For learners of English as a foreign language, the main goal of learning English language is to master good communication skills in the language (Mai, 2011).

Although, English language is taught as an English as foreign language (EFL) or English as second language (ESL) in many countries like Malaysia, Afghanistan, India, China, Japan, Thailand, Hong Kong, Saudi Arabia, Arab countries and many other countries around the world. However, its learners experience foreign language anxiety FLA when communicating using this language. According to the Second Language Acquisition (SLA) researches and theorists, Foreign Language Anxiety is accepted as an affective variable in foreign language learning and is generally discussed beside other individual learner differences (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1992, 1993). Foreign language researchers suggest that, in foreign language learning classroom, speaking is the most anxiety-provoking aspect of language learning (Koch & Terrell, 1991; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994; Price, 1991). Teachers as well as learners know that this anxiety is a major obstacle for EFL/ESL learners to overcome when they have to learn and speak another language. Learning a language itself is “a profoundly unsettling psychological proposition” for its learners because it directly threatens an individual’s ‘self-concept’ and world-view (Guiora, 1983 cited in Horwitz et al., 1986). Moreover, to language learners as well as teachers the intrinsic nature of language anxiety poses an additional challenge.

It is a clear fact that many Afghan EFL learners can easily read and write English but when they have to communicate orally, they cannot speak correctly and fluently. Being a language teacher for several years, I have noticed that speaking English is difficult for many of these learners which make them quite passive participants in speaking activities inside language classroom. Various factors can affect learners’ participation which may be related to teacher, learners, classroom and contents of activities (Mai, 2011). It is a general issue which affects not only Afghan students but many other EFL/ESL learners as well. This study attempts to examine EFL learners’ speaking anxiety by measuring their levels of performance anxieties they suffer from in the language classroom speaking activities and to determine the reasons which cause these anxieties at Nangrahar University in Afghanistan.

2. Literature Review

The term “anxiety” refers to the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the automatic nervous system (Spielberger, 1983; cited in Horwitz, 1986). Anxiety interferes with many kinds of learning but when it is related with learning a foreign language it is called as ‘foreign language anxiety’. Generally, for the description of language anxiety there are two approaches. In the broader concept of anxiety; (1) language anxiety is a basic human emotion that may be brought on by numerous combinations of situational factors (McIntyre, 1995). For instance, if a teacher asks a shy student to give a short talk in front of the whole class he may feel anxious; (2) Language anxiety as a combination of

other anxieties that create a separate form of anxiety intrinsic to language learning (Horwitz et al., 1986: 128). According to the later approach which believes that there is something unique to the language learning experience that makes some people nervous. When this tenseness or anxiety is limited to the language learning situations, it falls into the type of specific anxiety. Psychologists use the word specific anxiety reaction to distinguish people who are commonly anxious in a variety of situations from those who are anxious only in specific situations (1986: 125). The following subsection further discusses FLA and its reasons.

2.1 Foreign Language Anxiety

Several researchers have defined foreign language anxiety. Clement (1980, cited in Tran, 2012) defined FLA as a complex construct which deals with students' psychology regarding their feelings, self confidence and self-esteem. Young (1991) argued that foreign language anxiety is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon. She emphasizes the unique feature of foreign language anxiety and defines it as a complex psychological observable fact peculiar to language learning (Young, 1992). Horwitz and Cope (1986) described FLA as "a distinct complex construct of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of language learning process" (p. 128). They further explained that it is "a phenomenon related to but distinguishable from other specific anxieties" (p. 129).

Three categories of foreign language anxiety in the language classroom have been identified by (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986) as; (a) communication apprehension, (b) fear of negative evaluation and (c) test anxiety. Those learners who show communication apprehension do not feel relaxed while communicating in front of others in the target language in their language classroom because of their inadequate knowledge of that language, specifically in speaking and listening (Keramida, 2009). On the other hand, learners who are unable to consider language mistakes as a normal part of the learning process but see it as a threat to their image, suffer from fear of negative evaluation both from either their teacher or their classmates. Consequently, they remain silent, mostly withdrawn and do not like to participate in classroom activities (Iakovos, 2009). Those who suffer from test anxiety judge the foreign language process and, mainly oral production, as a test condition rather than a chance for communication and skills development. MacIntyre (1989) explained that learners' foreign language classroom anxiety stems from negative expectation in foreign language learning. In contrast, Price (1991) identified that classroom related factors play a role in the development of FLA in learners. Some possible reasons of FLA are discussed.

2.2 Reasons of FLA

In their well famous study, Horwitz et al. (1986) mentioned three reasons of learners' FL anxiety; 1) adult foreign language learners are mature in ideas and thought but immature in FL

linguistic system, 2) these learners worry about negative evaluation because of their uncertainty over what they need to say in FL, 3) the unavoidable assessment in language classroom, since their proficiency of the language, they still learn, will be tested. Moreover, other scholar also mentioned some other reasons as language anxiety can be because of competitive pressure from other learners (Bailey, 1983), or it can be due to the threat of speaking in public (Young, 1990). Another reason that causes anxiety in learners is instructors' aggressive way of teaching (Young, 1991). Also, the false belief of learners that others are better language learners than them (Price, 1991), and instructors' inappropriate or harsh methods of error correction (Koch & Terrell, 1991) can also cause anxiety in learners.

Young (1991) in her study on the sources of learners' FL anxiety identified six potential sources of language anxiety; 1) personal and interpersonal anxieties, 2) learner beliefs about language learning, 3) instructor beliefs about language teaching, 4) instructor-learner interactions, 5) classroom procedures, and 6) language testing. In another study in the interviews with foreign language experts, Young (1992) reported some other factors which may also cause foreign language anxiety in learners. These factors include; students' own coping skills, motivation, attention, self-concept, the specific teaching methodology learner experiences and cultural factors.

2.3. FL Speaking anxiety

Foreign language anxiety can be seen in language classroom in general, especially many students are highly anxious when they participate in speaking activities. Indeed it is often recommended that speaking is the most "anxiety-provoking aspect in a foreign/second language learning situation" (Cheng, Horwitz, & Schallert, 1999). Speaking anxiety towards a certain language can affect learners' performance, (Horwitz, 1991). Iakovos (2009) stated that learners speaking anxiety stems from their negative evaluation from their classmates and perception of low ability. Mihri (2010) in his study identified that EFL students' speaking anxiety was due to the fear of failure as a result of poor performance. Khunnawut (2011) found that students' language anxiety affected their speaking to the highest degree because they were afraid of making mistakes and producing ungrammatical sentences. Hashim and Isa (2012) in their study on the factor of learners' FLCA found that learners were suffering from high level of fear of negative evaluation and communication apprehension respectively and test anxiety was the least among the three factors. Raya and Cabe (2012) found that psychological factors such as fear of making mistake, shyness, anxiety, lack of confidence and lack of motivation hinder students from speaking in FL class. Mak (2011) finds in his study that, learners' speaking anxiety was because of speech anxiety and negative evaluation, negative attitude towards English class, negative self-evaluation, fear of failing the class or consequences of personal failure, speaking in front of class without preparation, inadequate wait-time and not being allowed to use the first language in EFL/ESL class. In another study, Alrabai (2014) found that learners' experienced high level of

FLCS anxiety due to fear of English language classroom, speaking without preparation in the class and answering teacher's question when not prepared.

The reviewed literature above suggest that there are different reasons that causes FL classroom speaking anxiety in learners' which have been found in different studies but, (Horwitz et al. 1986) study is the most influential in this field. They have identified three factors of FLCA namely communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. They have also developed a Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) which has been widely used in many studies. This study is also examines the theory of (Horwitz et al. 1986). As all the above studies are conducted in different countries and settings and are still insufficient to resolve this issue of EFL learners' classroom speaking anxiety, besides, there is no such an empirical study on the issue of foreign language speaking anxiety in Afghanistan. The current study is significantly important to explore Afghan EFL learners' foreign language classroom speaking anxiety and the reasons that cause this anxiety in learners when they speak in classroom speaking activities.

3. Methodology

The subjects who participated in the study were all $N = 115$ EFL first year undergraduates. They are all enrolled in their four years program of BA (Bachelor of Arts) degree year (2013/2014). Only thirty $N = 30$ participants of the total number are females and eighty five $N = 85$ of them are males. Their ages range from (17-24) years. They were all studying in four sections of the same first year, learning English as foreign language in ELD (English Language Department), at Nangarhar University in Afghanistan. All the participants of this study are English major EFL learners only. All the participants share the same native language "Pashto".

This study needs to:

1. Examine EFL learners' speaking anxiety by measuring their levels of classroom performance anxieties.
2. Determine the reasons of learners' speaking anxiety in English language classrooms' speaking activities.

3.1 Research instrument and data analysis

The instrument used for data collection in the study is a questionnaire "Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) adopted from (Horwitz et al., 1986)". It is a five-point Likert scale developed by (Horwitz et al., 1986) which ranges from "strongly disagree", "disagree", "neither agree nor disagree", "agree" and "strongly agree". FLCAS is a 33-items self-report instrument. From the 33 items in the questionnaire (11) (1,4,9,14,15,18,24,27,29,30,32) items represent communication apprehension, (15) of them (3, 5, 6, 8, 10, 11, 12, 16, 17, 20, 21, 22, 25, 26, 28) are related to test anxiety and seven of them (2, 7, 13, 19, 23, 31, 33) are associated

with fear of negative evaluation. In the questionnaire the students respond to statements regarding their reactions to foreign/second language classes. Possible score on FLCAS scale ranges from (33) to (165) where higher score represents higher level of anxiety. The data obtained from the questionnaire is presented in the form of descriptive statistics which was analyzed through SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) version (20).

4. Findings and Discussion

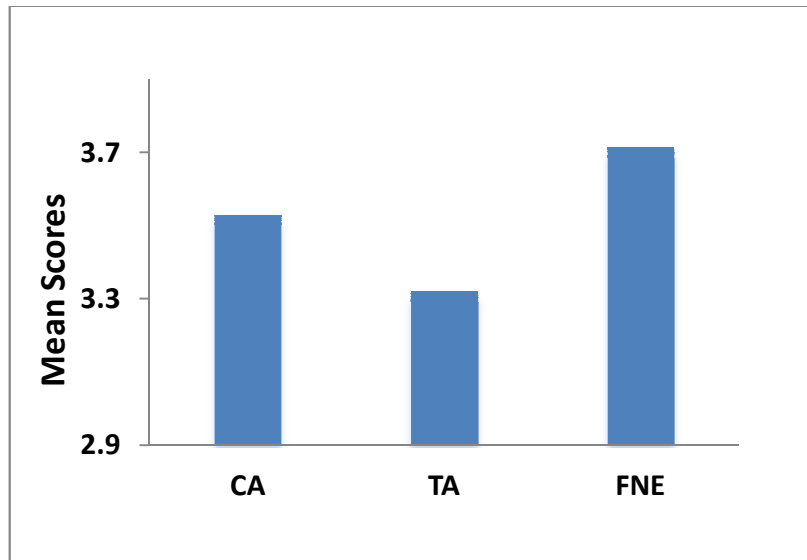
Based on the results of descriptive analysis of the FLCAS questionnaire data it was found that (27) out of (33) items scored means scores of more than $M = 3.00$. Two items, (15) "I get upset when I do not understand what the teacher is correcting" and (7) "I keep thinking that the other students are better at languages than I am", means scores were above $M = 4.00$ among these (27) items. The results suggested that majority of learners experienced high level of FLCSA on all the three factors (called performance anxieties) of the foreign language classroom anxiety namely communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. The descriptive analysis of FLCAS questionnaire showed that fear of negative evaluation was the highest among the three factors contributing to learners speaking anxiety in the language classroom. It was followed by communication apprehension and test anxiety obtained the lowest mean score and was the bottommost among them. The below table summarizes learners means scores on the three factors and overall FLCSA.

Table 1. Learners' levels of foreign language speaking anxiety

Factor/performance anxieties	Mean	Std. deviation	Percent
Communication Apprehension	3.5281	.53103	33.4065
Test Anxiety	3.3200	.54327	31.4361
Fear of Negative Evaluation	3.7130	.68812	35.1573
Over all FLCSA	3.4727	0.51648	100

The first factor communication apprehension mean score was $M = 3.5281$ with a Std. deviation of (.53103) which means that (33.4065%) of learners' speaking anxiety was due to the first factor (communication apprehension). Test anxiety, which is the second factor on the scale, scored a means score of $M = 3.3200$ with a Std. deviation of (.54327). This indicates that only (31.4361%) of the participants' overall speaking anxiety was caused by the second factor (test anxiety). The third factor called fear of negative evaluation obtained the highest means score on the FLCAS scale for this study. The mean score for fear of negative evaluation among participants was $M = 3.7130$ with a Std. deviation of (.68812). This makes a total of (35.1573%) of learners overall speaking anxiety which is the highest among the three factors on FLCAS scale. Below graph represents learners' levels of performance anxieties.

Figure: 1 Learners' foreign language performance anxieties



The first ten items of the FLCAS which scored a mean score of $M = 3.82$ or above, were considered as the main reasons that caused FLCSA in learners the most. Five from the mentioned items were related to learners' fear of negative evaluation (7, 33, 13, 23, and 31). Learners' experienced high level of FL classroom speaking anxiety due to fear of negative evaluation from (self, teacher and peers) as, item seven $M = 4.17$ "I keep thinking that the other students are better at speaking English language than I am" and item 23 $M = 3.83$ "I always feel that the other students speak the FL better than I do" indicated that learners see themselves less competent compare to their classmates in the foreign language and think that others are better learners of the foreign language than them. Similarly, answering teacher's questions was another reason of their speaking anxiety as item 33 $M = 3.93$ "I get nervous when the language teacher asks questions which I have not prepared in advance" showed that learners feared of answering teachers questions when not prepared because, learners think if they speak and replay with an answer, their answer may not be correct or they may make other vocabulary or pronunciation mistakes and that they will be looked as dumb students by their language teacher in the class. In addition to that, these learners also had a fear of negative evaluation from their classmates as well, which can be seen from their responses to item 13 $M = 3.90$ "It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my language class" and item 31 $M = 3.82$ "I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak the FL" that these learners felt embarrassed when they had to speak in order to volunteer an answer in front of the class because of their low abilities of FL skills. They feared of speaking in front of their classmates in the language classroom because of fear of making mistakes. They feared of losing face in the language classroom and thought that their classmates will laugh at their mistakes.

Communication apprehension was the second factor and four items (15, 9, 4, and 1) from the above stated items were associated with learners' communication apprehension that caused FL classroom speaking anxiety in learners. The findings revealed that item 15 $M = 4.18$ "I get upset when I do not understand what the teacher is correcting" caused FL classroom speaking anxiety in learners at the highest level. Besides, item four $M = 3.83$ "It frightens me when I do not understand what the teacher is saying in the FL" is somehow also in support of the previous one. It explained that learners suffered from high level of speaking anxiety because of their low comprehension of FL teacher's words or correction method as result of learners' own low abilities of the foreign language. Another reasons of learners' FLCSA was their fear of speaking in front of others and low self-confidence as, item nine $M = 3.93$ "I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in language class" and item one $M = 3.82$ "I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my FL class" clarified this.

In the part of test anxiety, item ten $M = 3.90$ "I worry about the consequences of failing my FL class" scored a significant mean score on participants' responses to the questionnaire. It indicated that learners' also experienced high level of FL speaking anxiety and their anxiety was particularly associated with failing the speaking tests and oral presentations. This was probably because on one side the test itself puts pressure on the learners and on the other side learners understand the importance of their speaking test' result.

The findings of the current study were similar with the findings of (Hashim & Isa 2012) which found that students suffer from high level of FL classroom speaking anxiety and that they experience fear of negative evaluation the most. The reasons for such findings (as mentioned (Hashim & Isa 2012)) can be discussed from two aspects external factors and factors related to learners themselves. In the aspect of the factors related to learners themselves, the existence of speaking anxiety in learners is basically related to their low proficiency of English language which restricted them to express their thoughts freely, communicate with others more easily and answer teacher's questions fearlessly.

5. Conclusion

As for as EFL learners' classroom speaking anxiety is concerned it should be concluded that this study found that most of the learners participated in the study experienced high level of all three types of classroom performance anxieties which resulted in learners' FLCSA. These learners suffered from significantly high level of fear of negative evaluation and that they were worried about others perception about them in various kinds of evaluative situation in the language classroom. Most of the learners were concerned that their knowledge and English language performance will be evaluated by their teacher and classmates. They were especially apprehensive about teacher's correction, speaking in front of others and volunteering to answer in the class because they were afraid of losing face and getting embarrassed for making mistakes.

Implication to language teaching

The findings of this study help provide insightful implication for EFL instructors regarding teaching English language to their students in EFL classrooms at Nangarhar University and other similar higher education institutions in Afghanistan in numerous ways. First of all, EFL instructors should realize and understand that their students experience FLCSA because of which they cannot actively participate in speaking activities in the language. Secondly, it is important that EFL instructor should understand the nature of their learners' FLCSA by determining the specific anxieties their learners experience and accordingly provide them with necessary help to cope with their anxieties. EFL instructors may be able to design lessons and learning materials according to the needs of their learners and prepare activities which are less anxiety-provoking for learners when speaking in the foreign language. They should provide some coping strategies to learners that by practicing which learners can cope with their particular language anxieties. Also, as it was found that student were anxious because of low comprehension of teachers words in the foreign language, EFL instructor should use simple and understandable way of explanation according to the level of learners they teach in English language classroom and specifically correction should be made in a very lenient and nonthreatening way. Finally, based on the findings of this study, as learners are most anxious about negative evaluation from others because of their low proficiency level of English language, it is important that EFL instructors apply alternative approaches of conducting learners language assessments which may lessen learners' FLCSA besides, they may provide general comments on learners' performance instead of referring to individuals in group evaluation. As, foreign language speaking anxiety hinder learners' effective language learning of the foreign language it is very important for EFL instructors to look at the roots of the issue of this anxiety and raise awareness and understanding about it among their learners to confront their anxieties.

6.1. Classroom Implications

For the purpose to help learners boost their confidence level and reduces their anxiety in order to speak more confidently in the language classroom speaking activities, the below suggestions can be helpful;

- 1) Friendly and relaxed classroom environment should be provided for speaking.
- 2) Students should be motivated through proper encouragement to speak confidently.
- 3) Correction should be made in an unthreatening way.
- 4) They should be encouraged to actively participate in speaking activities.
- 5) Students should be given some time to prepare their answers.
- 6) Students should be given more opportunities to practice their language.
- 7) Friendly relations between student to student and teacher to students in the class.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The study was founded by Ministry of Higher Education Afghanistan (MoHE) with the collaboration of University Malaysia Pahang. The researchers would like to thank them for the support and assistance they provided in conducting this research.

References

- Aida, Y. (1994). Examination of Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope's construct of foreign language anxiety: The case of students of Japanese. *The modern language journal*, 78(2), 155-168.
- Alrabai, F. (2014). A Model of Foreign Language Anxiety in the Saudi EFL Context. *English language teaching*, 7(7), 82–101.
- Bailey, K. M. (1983). Competitiveness and anxiety in adult second language learning: Looking at and through the Diary Studies. In H. W. Seliger & M. H. Long (Eds.), *Classroom-oriented research in second language acquisition*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Cheng, Y.-s., Horwitz, E. K., & Schallert, D. L. (1999). Language anxiety: Differentiating writing and speaking components. *Language learning*, 49(3), 417-446.
- Gardner, R. C., & MacIntyre, E. D. (1992). A student's contributions to secondlanguage learning. Part I: Cognitive variables. *Language teaching*, 25, 211-220.
- Gardner, R. C., & MacIntyre, P. D. (1993). A student's contributions to second language learning. Part II: Affective variables. *Language teaching*, 26, 1-11.
- Hashemi, M. (2011). Language Stress And Anxiety Among The English Language Learners. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 30, 1811–1816.
- Hashim, H., & Isa, I. S. M. (2012). Students' anxiety level towards speaking in English: Malaysia polytechnic experience. In *2012 IEEE Symposium on Business, Engineering and Industrial Applications* (pp. 595–599). Ieee.
- Horwitz, E. K. (2001). Language anxiety and achievement. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 21(1), 112.
- Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M. B., & Cope, J. A. (1991). Foreign language classroom anxiety. In E. K. Horwitz & D. J. Young (Eds.), *Language anxiety: From theory and research to classroom implications* (pp. 27–36). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Horwitz, E.K., Horwitz, M.B., Cope, J.A., 1986. Foreign language classroom anxiety. *Modern language journal* 70 (2), p, 125-132

- Keramida, Areti. (2009). Helping Students Overcome Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety in the English Classroom: Theoretical Issues and Practical Recommendations. *International education studies journal*. Vol.2, No 4.
- Khunnawut, S. (2011). Engineering students' perception and relevant aspects on Foreign Language Anxiety. *2011 3rd International Congress on Engineering Education (ICEED)*, 32–36.
- Koch, A. S., y Terrell, T. D. (1991). Affective reactions of foreign language students to natural approach activities and teaching techniques. En E. K. Horwitz y D. J. Young (Eds.), *Language Anxiety: From Theory and Research to Classroom Implications* (pp. 109-126). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall
- Koçak, M. (2010). A novice teacher's action research on EFL learners' speaking anxiety. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 3, 138–143.
- MacIntyre, P. D. (1995). How does anxiety affect second language learning? A reply to Sparks and Ganschow. *The modern language journal*, 79(1), 90-99.
- MacIntyre, P. D., y Gardner, R. C. (1994a). The subtle effects of language anxiety on cognitive processing in the second language. *Language learning*, 44, 283-305.
- MacIntyre, P. D., y Gardner, R. C. (1989). Anxiety and second language learning: Toward a theoretical clarification. *Language learning*, 39, 251- 275.
- Mai, L. T. (2011). An investigation into factors that hinder the participation of univeristy students in English speaking lessons. M.A Thesis. University of Languages and International Studies.
- MacIntyre, P. D., & Gardner, R. C. (1991). Investigating language class anxiety using the focused essay technique. *The modern language journal*, 75(3), 296-313
- Price, M. L. (1991). The subjective experience of foreign language anxiety: Interviews with highly anxious students. En E. K. Horwitz, y D. J. Young (Eds.), *Language anxiety: From Theory and Research to Classroom Implications* (pp. 101-108). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Raya, C., & Cabe, P. (2012). Psychological Factors That Hinder Students from Speaking in English Class (A Case Study in a Senior High School in South. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 3(12), 100–110.