

Please cite this paper as follows:

Mobini, F., Ghanavi Chakani, S., & Aliasin, S. H. (2024). Iranian EFL learners' foreign language speaking anxiety and their speaking performance at remote learning. *Journal of Interdisciplinary Research in English Language Communication*, 1(1), 57-69. <https://doi.org/10.30470/irelc.2024.2043893.1010>



University of Zanjan



Research Paper

Iranian EFL Learners' Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety and Their Speaking Performance at Remote Learning

Fariba Mobini¹, Sina Ghanavi Chakani², & Seyed Hesamuddin Aliasin³

¹ Corresponding author, English Language Department, Faculty of Humanities, University of Zanjan, Zanjan, Iran; fa.mobini@gmail.com

² English Language Department, Faculty of Humanities, University of Zanjan, Zanjan, Iran; sinaaaie@gmail.com

³ English Language Department, Faculty of Humanities, University of Zanjan, Zanjan, Iran; hesamaliasin@znu.ac.ir

Received: 20/10/2024

Accepted: 05/12/2024

Abstract

The present study drawing on mixed-methods design aimed to investigate the effect of facilitative strategies such as virtual feedback, positive self-talk and relaxation techniques on speaking performance and anxiety among EFL learners at a remote learning situation. Meanwhile, learners' attitudes towards their speaking abilities, anxiety and using facilitative strategies as well as the effectiveness of such strategies in improving their speaking performance and reducing anxiety were gathered by a semi-structured interview. Ninety-three undergraduate students from the University of Zanjan, Iran participated in the study, and were assigned as the experimental group because of the quasi-experimental pre-test post-test design. The instruments consisted of Oxford Placement Test (OPT), a pre- and post- Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) questionnaire, a pre- and post- speaking performance rubric, as well as semi-structured interviews. During a six-week intervention period, virtual collaboration activities, instruction in cognitive restructuring and relaxation practices were implemented. Quantitative pre-post analyses measured pedagogic outcome, while interviews captured attitudes. Data were analyzed through descriptive and inferential statistics including paired-samples t-tests and thematic analysis (TA). The results indicated that interventions such as virtual collaboration, positive self-talk, and relaxation techniques had a positive effect on EFL learners' speaking performance and anxiety during remote learning. The analysis of the results of the interviews implied that participants held positive attitudes towards their own speaking abilities and anxiety levels during remote learning. They also approved adopting facilitative strategies to manage their target language anxiety, as they largely believed such strategies could effectively enhance their speaking skills.

Keywords: L2 Speaking Performance; L2 Speaking Anxiety; EFL Virtual Class

1. Introduction

Speaking is an essential skill for effective communication, nevertheless it remains one of the most challenging L2 targets for many EFL learners either at classic pedagogical settings or in the context of newly developed remote learning situations. Despite studying English for considerable periods of time, many EFL students struggle to speak fluently and accurately when required to give oral presentations, participate in conversations, or manage speaking tasks in the classroom. Their ability to convey ideas, discuss topics critically, and engage in authentic-like dialogues is noticeably deficient due to impairments in various facets of speaking skill, viz. productive grammar, active vocabulary, social norms and pragmatic command to name only a number of aspects. This deficiency partly stems from a specific type of anxiety particularly related to L2 performance

Communicative oral production is occasionally considered as the most challenging skill to master for many EFL learners due to the complex pronunciation and intonation patterns (Zhang, 2009). Various studies indicate that EFL students tend to exhibit significantly high levels of anxiety while speaking in English as compared to other skills (Yaikhong & Usaha, 2012). The emphasis on rote vocabulary learning and memorizing grammatical structures instead of

actual practice in EFL classrooms contributes to underdeveloped oral skills and pronunciation issues that lead to anxiety (Rababah, 2002). Speaking is often viewed as the most anxiety-provoking language skill in foreign language education contexts (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1991; Horwitz, 2001; Tsiplakides & Keramida, 2009). Anxiety is believed to increase along with advancements at proficiency levels and displays itself more remarkably in the realm of productive skills (Sila, 2010). Consequently, anxiety is a common problem among EFL learners, thereby finding ways to manage it counts as being indispensable for improving oral proficiency.

Rapid growth of remote learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted EFL education. With classes held online, new concerns have emerged regarding foreign language anxiety and developing productive skills in digital environments. Videoconferencing platforms such as Zoom introduced a technological mediation possibility that could potentially remove specific anxieties of EFL learners when speaking English (Shriberg, 2009). Lack of in-person contact and increased focus on audio and video presentations in synchronous online classes might aggravate the existing speaking-related difficulties. Meanwhile, research on foreign language anxiety and oral proficiency in remote learning contexts is very scarce. Tackling such issues is an urgent EFL research topic as blended and/or fully online language classes has become more widespread throughout the world.

Anxiety is a key affective factor that might negatively affect learners' oral performance, including fluency, accuracy, and coherence of speech. The rise of the pandemic entailed inevitable shift to remote instruction for EFL learners, and led to unexpected challenges to the development of their speaking skills. The seemingly probable effect of anxiety on speaking performance in online classes was the core problem that motivated conducting this investigation. The expectations were to propose effective strategies or interventions that can enhance EFL learners' speaking competencies in remote learning settings as the outcome of the study. By addressing this problem, this study will contribute to the existing literature on speaking anxiety.

1.2. Research Questions

1. Does using interventions such as virtual feedback, positive self-talk and relaxation techniques affect EFL learners' speaking anxiety and speaking performance during remote learning?
2. What are participants' attitudes toward their speaking abilities and their anxiety during remote learning?
3. What are participants' attitudes toward using strategies such as virtual collaboration, positive self-talk, relaxation techniques, and the effectiveness of these strategies in improving their speaking performance and reducing anxiety?

2. Literature Review

Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) tackled the dual nature of emotions, anxiety, and enjoyment, in the foreign language classroom. The authors argued that while anxiety is a well-known and explored emotion in the language learning context, enjoyment has received comparatively less attention. The study used a quantitative approach, including self-report measures of anxiety and enjoyment, with 213 university students learning French and German as foreign languages in the UK. The findings suggest that enjoyment and anxiety are separate but related emotions, and that both emotions can have an impact on language learning outcomes. The study found that enjoyment was positively correlated with learners' motivation, self-efficacy, and willingness to communicate, while anxiety was negatively correlated with these factors. The authors argue that understanding the role of enjoyment in language learning can lead to more effective teaching strategies and better outcomes for learners. The study also highlights the need for further research on the relationship between emotions, motivation, and language learning outcomes.

Tsiplakides and Keramida (2009) addressed foreign language speaking anxiety in the English language classroom and provided theoretical insights as well as practical recommendations to help students overcome this anxiety. The authors explore the sources of speaking anxiety and propose strategies to create a supportive and anxiety-reducing learning environment. The study emphasizes that foreign language speaking anxiety can stem from various factors, including fear of negative evaluation, lack of self-confidence, and apprehension about making mistakes. These anxieties can hinder students' speaking performance and limit their participation in classroom activities. The authors suggest implementing a range of strategies. They highlight the importance of creating a safe and supportive classroom atmosphere that encourages risk-taking and promotes a positive attitude towards mistakes. Building students' self-confidence through gradual exposure to speaking tasks and providing constructive feedback are also recommended.

Wang and Derakhshan (2021) explored the relationship between EFL learners' anxiety and their engagement in asynchronous online discussions. The researchers delved into the factors influencing learners' anxiety levels and explored the impact of anxiety on students' engagement in online discussions. They utilized a case study approach, and examined EFL learners' experiences in an asynchronous online discussion forum. They analyzed the participants' anxiety and engagement levels by considering various factors, including message length, frequency of participation, and the quality of contributions. The study was indicative that EFL learners' anxiety levels significantly impact their engagement in online discussions. High levels of anxiety tend to hinder active participation and meaningful interaction. Learners with higher anxiety levels tend to produce shorter messages, participate less frequently, and contribute to classroom activities with lower-quality responses. This study concludes that managing second language anxiety is a key factor for improving L2 speaking skill.

The study conducted by Yin and Zhang (2021) explored the use of task-based language teaching (TBLT) as a means to reduce foreign language speaking anxiety and enhance speaking performance of EFL learners in remote learning. The quasi-experimental design employed pre-and post-test measures of speaking anxiety and performance with 60 university students in China who were learning English as a foreign language. The results indicate that TBLT had a positive impact on the speaking performance of the learners, as evidenced by higher scores on the speaking test, and a negative impact on their anxiety, as measured by a self-report anxiety scale. Yin and Zhang further contended that TBLT should be geared towards specific situations and special needs of the learners. The authors argue that TBLT can provide a supportive and task-oriented environment for learners to practice and improve their speaking skills, which can in turn reduce anxiety and improve performance. The findings highlight the potential benefits of integrating TBLT into EFL language teaching, particularly in remote learning settings. Overall, the article provides valuable insights into the effectiveness of TBLT for reducing anxiety and enhancing speaking performance in EFL language learning and teaching.

Wang and Zhang (2021) study outlined the influence of online learning on EFL learners' speaking anxiety and performance. The research employed a mixed-methods approach, including self-report measures of anxiety and motivation, and observations of speaking performance with 70 university students in China who were learning English as a foreign language. The findings suggest that online learning had a negative impact on the learners' speaking performance, but the impact on their anxiety was mixed. The study revealed that learners reported feeling more anxious when speaking in online classes compared to in-person classes, but some learners also reported feeling less anxious due to the reduced pressure of face-to-face communication. Additionally, the study found that motivation was positively associated with speaking performance and negatively associated with anxiety. The authors argue that the shift to online learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic has introduced new challenges for language teaching and learning, and that teachers need to be mindful of the potential effects of online learning on learners' anxiety and performance. The study highlights the importance of further research on the impact of online learning on language learning outcomes and strategies for reducing anxiety in remote language learning; the article provides valuable insights into the intricate relationship between online learning, speaking anxiety, and performance in EFL language learning. The overall contention of their work is that second language on line courses have potential benefits for learners of varying psychological states.

The above literature review elucidated the profound influence of speaking anxiety on EFL learners and highlighted the need for targeted interventions. While contextual factors uniquely shape anxiety in diverse contexts, certain principles consistently emerged. Fostering supportive relationships, creating a psychologically safe environment, scaffolding speaking tasks, and directly addressing perfectionism empower EFL learners to overcome anxiety barriers. As language instruction increasingly relies on technology, further research exploring anxiety experiences and effective strategies specific to virtual settings remains imperative. All in all, conceptualizing anxiety as multi-dimensional, contextualized and bidirectional in its relationship to performance is capable of yielding operationalized pedagogical solutions. With informed understanding and implementation of evidence-backed principles, educators can help anxious EFL learners realize their speaking potential as well as respective drawbacks.

3. Methodology

This part presents research design and the relevant methodology to investigate the relationship between EFL learners' speaking anxiety and their speaking performance during remote learning. Meanwhile, it provides an account of the strategies treated to reduce participants' anxiety and improve their speaking performance. Detailed descriptions of the participants, the instruments and the procedure for collecting data are discussed, and finally the method applied for data analysis is briefly introduced.

3.1. Research Design

The current study employed a convergent parallel mixed methods design which comprised a quasi-experimental pre-test post-test format alongside qualitative interviews. For the quantitative phase, a one-group pre-test post-test quasi-experimental design was utilized: general English university classes were selected and the students received the treatment which involved teaching speaking English applying facilitating strategies between the pre-test and post-test assessments of speaking performance and anxiety. The qualitative phase included semi-structured interviews of the students to gain an in-depth understanding of their perceptions and feelings regarding the effects of receiving the treatment, i.e. the speaking strategies. The convergent parallel mixed methods design enabled comparison of statistically analyzed assessment data with the qualitative measurement to provide a comprehensive understanding of the participants' pedagogic gains (Creswell, 2014).

The one-group pre-test post-test structure is appropriate for eliciting naturalistic changes over time within authentic classroom groups (Kervin, 2012). Integrating quantitative and qualitative sources allowed triangulation, strengthening validity through convergence and corroboration of results (Guetterman et al., 2015).

3.2. Participants

The study involved 93 upper-intermediate and advanced EFL students who were selected non-randomly based on convenience sampling. The sample comprised both genders. The study focused on EFL learners who were enrolled in an English language remote course at the University of Zanjan in Iran. The participants were undergraduate students at the University of Zanjan in Iran who were enrolled in general English courses during the academic year of 2021-2022, conducted entirely through remote learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling based on their enrollment in the course and their willingness to participate in the study. The sample included a total of 93 students comprising 53 female and 40 male participants. The age range of participants was between 18 and 25 years, with the mean age of 21.5. Participants' educational background included completion of high school and enrollment in undergraduate studies at the university. All participants provided informed consent prior to participation, and the treatment was part of their educational semester.

3.3. Instruments

A set of four instruments were used to collect data: Oxford Placement Test (OPT), a pre- and post- Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) questionnaire, a pre- and post- speaking performance rubric, and Semi-structured interviews. The following section provides detailed explanations to each of the tests.

3.3.1 *The Oxford Placement Test (OPT)*

The selection of appropriate instruments is a critical component of research design, as it allows for the valid and reliable measurement of the constructs under investigation (Creswell, 2014). This study utilized the Oxford Placement Test (OPT) as the primary instrument for assessing participants' English proficiency and homogenizing the sample according to their L2 knowledge. OPT is a standardized, norm-referenced test designed by language testing experts at Oxford University Press that evaluates grammar, vocabulary, and listening skills (Oxford University Press, 2021). It uses computer-adaptive testing technology, which selects each question based on the test taker's response to the previous question. This adaptive format provides efficient and precise measurement compared to traditional language tests (Luoma, 2004).

3.3.2 *Pre/Post Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) and Questionnaire*

The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz et al. (1986) was used to measure participants' levels of speaking anxiety in the remote learning environment. The FLCAS is a 33-item questionnaire assessed on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." It is considered the most widely used instrument for assessing foreign language anxiety (Horwitz, 2010).

3.3.3. *Speaking Performance Rubric*

This study employed an analytic rubric to assess participants' speaking performance during remote tasks. The rubric evaluated fluency, accuracy, and complexity, key dimensions in speaking assessment guidelines (Isaacs & Trofimovich, 2012; Iwashita, 2010). Fluency measured smooth speech delivery. Accuracy evaluated grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation use. Complexity assessed sophisticated language production (Isaacs & Trofimovich, 2012; Iwashita, 2010). The rubric employed a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent) (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010). Two trained raters scored each task to control subjectivity (Kim, 2018). Inter-rater reliability was established through intraclass correlation coefficients, i.e., split halves method (Hallgren, 2012). Raters underwent training including practice scoring and discussion. Ongoing monitoring of inter-rater reliability occurred through Pearson correlations (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010). Assessing speaking performance often utilizes rating scales or rubrics to evaluate key dimensions of oral proficiency in a standardized manner (Luoma, 2004). This study employed an analytic rubric to assess participants' speaking performance during remote oral presentations, featuring elements such as fluency, pronunciation, grammaticality and appropriateness.

3.3.4. *Semi-Structured interviews*

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in this study to gain qualitative insights into participants' experiences and perspectives related to speaking anxiety during remote learning. Semi-structured interviews involve prepared questions to guide the discussion, but also allow flexibility to probe interesting responses (Kallio et al., 2016). This method can elicit in-depth, first-hand accounts of participants' attitudes, emotions, and behaviors (Adams, 2015). The interview protocol included open-ended questions exploring participants' perceptions of their speaking abilities, factors affecting their anxiety levels, impacts on engagement, and techniques to mitigate anxiety. Eleven semi-structured interviews were conducted using an interview guide (Appendix B). The items addressed students' perceptions of their speaking abilities, anxiety experiences and strategy impacts. Discussions followed topical directions and clarified responses rather than rigidly adhering to the guide order.

3.3.5. *Validity of Tests and Questionnaires*

The tests and questionnaires used in the recent study were validated by the experts (faculty members of English department at University of Zanjan) to investigate EFL Learners' Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety and Their Speaking Performance at Remote Learning. Using the experts' feedbacks regarding the content, wording, format and characteristics of the items of the tests and questionnaire, the final version was prepared and used for the study.

3.3.6. *Reliability of Tests and Questionnaires*

The reliability indices of the tests were calculated using Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.856 was reached for pre-interventions speaking anxiety and a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.886 was gained for post-interventions speaking anxiety items on the FLCA Scale. This indicated a high level of internal consistency reliability, suggesting that the items were consistent with each other and measured the intended construct, i.e. speaking anxiety.

For assessing the reliability of Pre/Post Interventions Speaking Performance Rubric, the inter-rater reliability was calculated using the intra-class correlation coefficient (ICC), which measures the level of agreement between two or more raters. The ICC for the scores assigned by the two raters in this study was 0.93 for pre-interventions and 0.91 for post-interventions, indicating a high level of agreement. Using multiple raters helped control for subjectivity and minimized halo effects in scoring (Mackey & Gass, 2016). The use of two independent raters ensured reliable evaluations and minimized potential biases.

The speaking task used in the study was a short presentation on a given topic. During the online sessions, participants were given a topic and asked to elaborate on it. The task aimed to assess participants' speaking performance in terms of fluency, accuracy, and complexity. Each participant's performance was recorded and scored by two independent raters using a rubric that evaluated the aforementioned aspects of speaking performance.

3.3.7. *Interventions*

A number of treatments, in the form of strategic enhancements were applied to facilitate students' acquisition of L2 speaking skill. They included the following items: virtual collaboration, positive self-talk and relaxation techniques.

The effectiveness of these strategies was evaluated through the post-intervention speaking anxiety questionnaire and speaking performance assessment. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with selected participants to gain deeper insights into their experiences with these strategies.

3.4. Procedure

The experimental group participated in a six-week intervention consisting of 6 one-hour online training sessions, with one session held per week. This served as a short-term course focusing on strategies of virtual collaboration, positive self-talk, and relaxation techniques to help manage foreign language speaking anxiety.

At the initial meeting, the instructor outlined the course objectives and introduced virtual collaboration as a first strategy. Students were placed in small online breakout groups to practice conversational speaking activities together after class. In the second week, the focus was on cognitive restructuring techniques. Based on self-affirmation theory suggesting positive self-talk can mitigate evaluative threat (Cohen and Garcia, 2008), participants learned to cognitively reframe negative thoughts by making internal statements affirming their speaking abilities. Session three covered diaphragmatic breathing, a relaxation method shown effective for foreign language anxiety (Trang et al., 2012).

Through multimedia instruction and guided practice, students learned to inhale while expanding their lower ribs. The final session reviewed all content using reflection prompts to reinforce strategies and emphasize continued application. Students reflected on their growth in regulating anxiety and speaking skills. The intermittent training allowed for integration of strategies between sessions through real speaking practice and assignments. By the end, students had an anxiety management toolkit to apply in future contexts. Thus, virtual collaboration was intended to help manage speaking anxiety by allowing students to engage in more low-pressure language practice with peers. The next section details how pairs and small groups were leveraged in this study to provide collaborative speaking activities and describes the rationale behind its use as an intervention strategy. To supplement the quantitative data collected through standardized tests and rubrics, semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain a deeper understanding of participants' perceptions of speaking anxiety, engagement, participation, and the strategies utilized to control anxiety. This was believed to provide a more accurate picture of the variables and their probable relationships.

4. Results

Prior to analyzing differences between pre- and post-intervention scores, tests were conducted to ensure the data met the assumptions required for parametric tests. The Shapiro-Wilk tests assessed normality and the Levene's test evaluated homogeneity of variance. Normality indicates the data is evenly distributed around the mean, while homogeneity of variance means the variances are equal across time points.

A Shapiro-Wilk test was conducted to determine if the FLCAS scores were normally distributed before and after the intervention. Results for the normality and homogeneity of variance tests are reported in Table 1.

Table 1. *Shapiro-Wilk Test for Normality of Pre and Post Interventions FLCAS Scores*

Variable	Period	Test Statistic	P Value
Communication	Pre test	0.985	0.783
	Post test	0.981	0.641
Negative Evaluation	Pre test	0.979	0.597
	Post test	0.977	0.524
Test Anxiety	Pre test	0.988	0.892
	Post test	0.986	0.762

4.1. Addressing the First Research Question

The pre-intervention FLCAS was administered to a total of 51 upper-intermediate participants were selected, of which 19 were male and 32 were female to establish a baseline measurement of their speaking anxiety levels before the intervention. The mean age of the selected participants was 21.8 years old ($SD = 5.2$). The FLCAS consists of 33 items that are grouped into three sub scales: communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. The participants rated each item on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The paired

samples t-test revealed a statistically significant difference between participants' mean overall speaking scores before ($M = 2.83$, $SD = 0.89$) and after ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 0.69$) the intervention, $t(50) = 12.555$, $p < 0.001$. Specifically, the mean post-intervention speaking score was 1.13 points higher than the mean pre-intervention score. This increase of over one point on the 5-point speaking rubric represents a sizable gain in oral proficiency.

Comparing the pre-test and post-test results of the experimental group and referring to paired-samples t-tests, it can be concluded that the first null hypothesis (i.e., that using interventions such as virtual collaboration, positive self-talk, and relaxation techniques does not have any effect on EFL learners' speaking anxiety and performance during remote learning) was rejected. The mean scores of the experimental group improved after receiving the treatment in the post-test. Therefore, it can be inferred that using interventions such as virtual collaboration, positive self-talk, and relaxation techniques had a positive effect on EFL learners' speaking anxiety and speaking performance during remote learning. Additionally, the higher post-intervention mean provides evidence that students' speaking abilities improved significantly over the course of the intervention period. This finding aligns with Hypothesis 4, suggesting that the incorporation of collaborative learning, positive self-talk, and relaxation techniques effectively enhanced students' speaking skills during remote instruction.

In short, the significant gains in students' speaking scores from pre- to post-intervention provide quantitative evidence that the strategies implemented were successful both at developing oral proficiency and managing speaking anxiety within the remote learning context. Positive self-talk, and relaxation techniques effectively enhanced students' speaking skills during remote instruction.

4.2. Addressing the Second and Third Research Questions

The data on EFL learners' attitudes toward their speaking abilities and their anxiety levels and strategies were gathered through a semi-structured interview. The results of the analysis are concisely presented below. The following section presents the results of the analysis of semi-structured interviews based on thematic analysis which sought to gain insights into foreign language learners' experiences with an anxiety reduction intervention based on their qualitative feedback. The initial codes aimed to break down the bulk qualitative data into more analyzable pieces representing salient features, without interpretative analysis at this early phase. The next steps targeted sorting related codes to form overarching themes, reflecting on themes, and interpreting the broader patterns and implications supported by evidence from the data. The researcher began systematically coding the data to capture meaningful points, experiences, and ideas explicitly stated or implicitly inferred. This was supposed to lead to enquiring the genuine type of possible association across variables of the study.

Table 2. *Potential Overarching Themes*

Potential Themes	Codes
Effective Intervention Strategies	Relaxation techniques, deep breathing, positive self-talk, self-encouragement, impact of lowered anxiety
Improvements in Speaking Ability	Increased fluency, accuracy, complexity, boosted skills, practice improved skills, holistic benefits
Reduced anxiety	reduced worry, relaxation eased physical anxiety
Engagement and Participation	Participation/engagement, increased confidence, impact on mindset
Peer Collaboration Approaches	Peer collaboration, virtual collaboration, prepared with peers, teamwork benefits
Classroom Factors and Recommendations	Group activities, instructor recommendations, feedback, normalization of errors
Perceived Benefits of Impact of different strategies	Impact of Different Strategies, effectiveness compared
Skill Development Over Time	Gradual improvements, Gains with Experience

At this stage, these proposed themes encapsulate how the codes group together around common ideas/patterns emerging from the data in relation to the research questions. The next step would involve reviewing and refining these themes before defining and naming them for the final analysis

The thematic analysis also provides compelling evidence that participants held overwhelmingly positive attitudes regarding the strategies leveraged in the intervention, including virtual peer collaboration, positive self-talk, and relaxation techniques, as well as their effectiveness in improving speaking skills and minimizing anxiety in the remote context.

Within the 'Role of Different Approaches' theme, participant responses conveyed favorable views on the combined merits beliefs, and collaborative preparation with peers online.

5. Discussion

The field of education has undergone a significant transformation with the rapid advancement of technology and the global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Remote learning platforms have become widespread, revolutionizing various academic disciplines, including English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction. While remote learning offers benefits such as flexibility and accessibility, it also presents unique challenges for EFL learners, particularly in the development of their speaking skills. A critical aspect that frequently emerges in this context is foreign language speaking anxiety, which can have a profound impact on learners' speaking performance and overall language acquisition.

This study investigated the impacts of an intervention incorporating collaborative learning activities, self-guided techniques, and anxiety-reducing strategies on EFL learners' speaking skills and foreign language anxiety during remote instruction. Specifically, it aimed to examine the effect of anxiety on speaking performance, changes in anxiety levels, as well as factors influencing engagement and beneficial approaches based on quantitative and qualitative data.

The first research question examined whether using interventions involving virtual collaboration, positive self-talk, and relaxation techniques affected EFL learners' speaking anxiety and performance during remote learning. The quantitative results revealed that the intervention strategies significantly decreased speaking anxiety based on reduced FLCAS scores from pre- to post-intervention. This aligns with the first hypothesis predicting these techniques would positively impact anxiety levels. The result of the first research question of this study is similar to the results of the study conducted by Cucusutarsyah (2017) that provides empirical evidence that higher speaking anxiety negatively influences students' oral proficiency. This research finding also supports Irzawati and Hasibuan (2020) study that enabled beneficial practice while assuaging anxiety. This theme points to affirmative outlooks on the value of varied complementary techniques.

Moreover, the 'Impact on Speaking Ability' and 'Reduced Anxiety' themes clearly capture participants' confident attitudes in the strategies' dual effectiveness for enhancing oral proficiency and managing nerves. Their accounts directly correlated practices like deep breathing, positive self-talk, and virtual collaboration to increased fluency, accuracy, complexity, confidence, and lower tension. The data assemble robust evidence of perceived benefits.

Additionally, the 'Ongoing Application' theme exhibits participants' intended long-term adoption of useful anxiety-reducing strategies in future educational and professional settings. Their commitments further validate faith in the techniques' lasting utility. Proposed expansions also showcase attitudes these approaches could be made even more effective if further propagated. Considering the analysis of students' responses to the interview questions and main themes, it can be concluded that the attitudes of participants toward their speaking abilities and their anxiety during remote leaning were positive. As a result, the second hypothesis was confirmed of independent relaxation practices, self-affirming. Meanwhile, participants' attitudes toward using strategies such as virtual collaboration, positive self-talk, relaxation techniques were positive and the strategies were effective in improving their speaking performance and reducing anxiety. As a result, the third hypothesis also was confirmed concluded fear and nervousness produced by speaking anxiety would affect oral language performance.

Furthermore, participants reported meaningfully lower overall anxiety and notably higher speaking scores post-intervention. This reduction in anxiety concurs with studies demonstrating collaborative learning decreases worry through mutual encouragement and practice (Kang, 2005; Shabani, 2016). The performance gains align with theories proposing lowered stress facilitates competence development (Ellis, 2008; Horwitz et al., 1986).

Based on the findings the second question regarding participants' attitudes toward their speaking abilities and their anxiety during remote leaning were positive. The qualitative findings pertaining to the second research question align with prior work exploring language learners' affective experiences. Several studies have documented enhancing confidence as a key benefit of lowered anxiety (Horwitz, 2001; Kitano, 2001). Reduced worry has been shown to enable risk-taking crucial for proficiency development (MacIntyre& Gardner, 1994; Trang et al., 2012). Recent investigations similarly report diminished anxiety correlating with richer engagement, involvement, and enjoyment of educational activities (Liu & Chen, 2013; Kao & Craigie, 2020). This sense of community enhances persistence with language challenges (Wu, 2018).

Qualitative themes uncovered aligning positive attitudes with lowered anxiety, improved skills, and engagement corroborate these empirical findings regarding affective and motivational implications. The positive attitudes participants conveyed toward strategies like virtual collaboration, positive self-talk and relaxation techniques parallel previous work exploring cognitive and behavioral tools for foreign language anxiety management. These results are consistent with Hammad (2020) study which found interventions incorporating structured oral activities to be effective at both enhancing LAN states echoes socio-cognitive models emphasizing cognitive restructuring and relaxation training's benefits (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993; MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012). Emergent themes also reflected increased confidence empowering risk-taking as posited in process-oriented frameworks (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014).

Notably, Portability of techniques featured prominently, highlighting value beyond the classroom. This aligns with recommendations to emphasize lifelong applicability for sustaining impact (Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014; Mills et al., 2013). In general, findings provided support for mixed-method, multi component programs in optimally managing foreign language anxiety (Malallah, 2000; Woodrow, 2006; Zheng, 2008).

6. Conclusion

The findings of this study are consistent with the existing research indicating that interventions such as collaborative learning activities, self-guided techniques, and anxiety-reducing strategies can be effective in reducing foreign language speaking anxiety and improving speaking performance in EFL learners (Dewaele, 2020; MacIntyre & Gardner, 2019; Oxford, 2013). The current study confirmed this point by demonstrating the effectiveness of these interventions in a remote learning environment.

This research yields several implications for EFL instruction. First, incorporating collaborative learning activities, self-guided techniques, and anxiety-reducing strategies into remote EFL instruction can be an effective way to reduce speaking anxiety and improve speaking performance. Second, providing EFL learners with opportunities to practice speaking in a supportive and anxiety-reducing environment can significantly promote L2 speaking performance. Third, EFL teachers should be trained in how to use these strategies effectively in their teaching.

Despite the obstacles and drawbacks, the current study provides valuable insights into the effectiveness of using collaborative learning activities, self-guided techniques, and anxiety-reducing strategies to reduce speaking anxiety and improve speaking performance in EFL learners during remote instruction. These findings have implications for EFL instruction and teacher training.

6.1. Pedagogical Implications

The findings of this study have several pedagogical implications for EFL instruction, particularly in remote learning environments. Incorporating collaborative learning activities self-guided techniques, and anxiety-reducing strategies into EFL instruction can help to reduce speaking anxiety and improve speaking performance in students. Collaborative learning activities provide students with opportunities to interact with each other and practice speaking in a supportive environment, which can help to reduce speaking anxiety and improve speaking performance.

Self-guided techniques allow students to learn at their own pace and in a way that is most comfortable for them, which can help to reduce the stress and anxiety that is often associated with speaking in a foreign language. Anxiety-reducing strategies can help to calm students down and make them feel more comfortable speaking in a foreign language, which can lead to improved speaking performance. These findings can target the development of EFL curricula and teaching materials. By incorporating collaborative learning activities, self-guided techniques, and anxiety-reducing strategies into EFL instruction, teachers can help to reduce speaking anxiety and improve speaking performance in their students.

In addition to the aforementioned implications, the findings of this study also have implications for teacher training. EFL teachers need to be trained in how to use collaborative learning activities, self-guided techniques, and anxiety-reducing strategies effectively in their teaching. This training can help teachers to create a more supportive and anxiety-reducing learning environment for their students. By making practical use of the pedagogical implications of this study, EFL teachers can help to reduce speaking anxiety and improve speaking performance in their students. This can lead to improved language learning outcomes and a more positive learning experience for students.

6.2. Theoretical Implications

Although there are multiple studies on foreign language speaking anxiety in EFL contexts, reliable theoretical insights, as well as practical recommendations to help students overcome this anxiety are still far from a sufficient basis. The current study might potentially back up researchers with relevant clues on the sources of speaking anxiety and the probable solutions as well as strategies to propose a supportive and anxiety-reducing learning environment. The study emphasizes that foreign language speaking anxiety can stem from various factors, including fear of negative evaluation, lack of self-confidence, and apprehension about making mistakes. These anxieties can hinder students' speaking performance and limit their participation in classroom activities. The study suggests that creating a safe and supportive classroom atmosphere that encourages risk-taking and promotes a positive attitude towards mistakes is both cost effective and pedagogically appropriate. Meanwhile, enhancing students' self-confidence through gradual exposure to speaking tasks and providing constructive feedback are recognized as facilitating parameters.

With regard to the influence of online learning on EFL learners' speaking anxiety and performance, self-report measures of anxiety and motivation, and observations of EFL learners' speaking performance are considered as instruments for assessing the aforementioned affects. Certain learners are assumed to experience more anxiety when speaking in online classes compared to in-person classes, while other learners are identified as feeling less anxious due to the reduced pressure of face-to-face communication. Additionally, the study highlights motivation as being positively associated with speaking performance and negatively associated with anxiety. This is partly due to fact that the shift to online learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic has introduced new challenges for language teaching and learning, and that teachers need to be mindful of the potential effects of online learning on learners' anxiety and performance.

Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Funding

Not applicable.

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.
- Alghamdi, A. M. (2020). The effects of synchronous and asynchronous online communication on EFL learners' speaking anxiety and speaking performance. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 11(6), 895–903.
- Alpert, R., & Haber, R. N. (1960). Anxiety in academic achievement situations. *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 61(2), 207–215.
- Belhiah, H., & Elghotmy, N. E. M. (2020). Investigating the impact of online instruction on EFL learners' speaking proficiency and anxiety during COVID-19 pandemic. *English Language Teaching*, 13(10), 50–65.
- Botes, D. L. C., & Rohwerder, T. (2020). Language anxiety and performance in a virtual learning environment. *Open Praxis*, 12(3), 307–321.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.
- Brown, G., & Yule, G. (2000). *Discourse analysis*. Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- Brown, H. D. (2007). *Teaching by principles: An interactive approach to language pedagogy* (3rd ed.). Pearson Education.
- Brown, J. D., & Abeywickrama, P. (2010). *Language assessment: Principles and classroom practices* (Vol. 32). Pearson Education.
- Cheng, Y., Horwitz, E. K., & Schallert, D. L. (1999). Language anxiety: Differentiating writing and speaking components. *Language Learning*, 49(3), 417–446.

- Cohen, Y., & Norst, M. J. (1999). Fear, independence, and loss of self-esteem: Affective barriers in second language learning among adults. *RELC Journal*, 20, 61–77.
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *A concise introduction to mixed methods research*. Sage Publications.
- Cronbach, L. J. (1951). Coefficient alpha and the internal structure of tests. *Psychometrika*, 16(3), 297–334.
- Cucu Sutarsyah, P. (2017). The contributions of speaking anxiety and speaking proficiency towards oral performance in classroom interaction. *English Language Teaching*, 11(2), 128–137.
- DeVellis, R. F. (2017). *Scale development: Theory and applications* (Vol. 26). Sage Publications.
- Dewaele, J.-M. (2020). On the dynamics of language anxiety in multilinguals. *Sociolinguistic Studies*, 14(1), 81–102.
- Elkhafaifi, H. (2005). Listening comprehension and anxiety in the Arabic language classroom. *The Modern Language Journal*, 89(2), 206–220.
- Ellis, R. (1994). *The study of second language acquisition*. Oxford University Press.
- Ellis, R. (2008). Principles of instructed language learning. *Asian EFL Journal*, 10(3), 209–224.
- Gardner, R. C. (1985). *Social psychology and second language learning: The role of attitudes and motivation*. Edward Arnold.
- Gardner, R. C., & MacIntyre, P. D. (1991). Methods and results in the study of anxiety and language learning: A review of the literature. *Language Learning*, 41, 85–117.
- Garrison, D. R., Anderson, T., & Archer, W. (2000). Critical inquiry in a text-based environment: Computer conferencing in higher education. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 2(2–3), 87–105.
- Gregersen, T., & Horwitz, E. K. (2002). Language learning and perfectionism: Anxious and non-anxious language learners' reactions to their own oral performance. *The Modern Language Journal*, 86(4), 562–570.
- Hallgren, K. A. (2012). Computing inter-rater reliability for observational data: An overview and tutorial. *Tutorials in Quantitative Methods for Psychology*, 8(1), 23.
- Hammad, M. A. (2020). The effectiveness of collaborative learning in developing oral communicative competence and reducing speaking anxiety for EFL learners in online classes during COVID-19. *Asian EFL Journal*, 27(4), 204–222.
- Hammer, J. (2001). *The practice of English language teaching* (3rd ed.). Longman.
- Horwitz, E. K. (2001). Language anxiety and achievement. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 21, 112–126.
- Huang, H., & Liu, M. (2019). The effects of role-play on EFL learners' oral proficiency and anxiety. *International Journal of English Linguistics*, 9(5), 104–113.
- Huang, R. (2020). Research into the application of virtual reality technology in college English oral teaching under the new media environment. *English Language Teaching*, 13(1), 97–105.
- Irzawati, I., & Hasibuan, A. (2020). Speaking anxiety and students' oral performance. *Journal of English Language Teaching*, 9(2), 1–13.
- Kallio, H., Pietilä, A. M., Johnson, M., & Kangasniemi, M. (2016). Systematic methodological review: developing a framework for a qualitative semi-structured interview guide. *Journal of advanced nursing*, 72(12), 2954–2965.
- Kang, D. J. (2005). Dyadic interaction in group oral assessment tasks: How does it help students improve their oral ability? *Language Testing*, 22(3), 347–366.
- Kang, O. (2020). Exploring EFL learners' anxiety in synchronous online speaking classes during COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Educational Technology and Language Learning*, 2(2), 1–10.
- Kao, G. Y. M., & Craigie, P. (2020). Reducing second language speaking anxiety through four-stage dynamic assessment with an adaptive diagnostic tool. *Language Learning Journal*, 44(4), 481–497.

- Kervin, L. K. (2012). *Methods for language teaching*. Cambridge University Press.
- Khodadady, E., & Khajavy, G. H. (2013). Exploring the role of anxiety and motivation in foreign language achievement: A structural equation modeling approach. *Porta Linguarum Revista Interuniversitaria de Didáctica de las Lenguas Extranjeras*, 20, 269–286. <https://doi.org/10.30827/Digibug.20240>
- Kim, Y. (2018). Reliability of rating scale. *Korea University*. Retrieved April 11, 2022, from https://www.korea.ac.kr/korea/korea/contents.do?mc=CNT17_02_04_01&mi=1726&cateId=cate1450
- Kitano, K. (2001). Anxiety in the college Japanese language classroom. *The Modern Language Journal*, 85(4), 549–566.
- Kormos, J., & Dörnyei, Z. (2014). The interaction of complex variables in second language acquisition. In Z. Dörnyei, P. D. MacIntyre, & A. Henry (Eds.), *Motivational dynamics in language learning* (pp. 225–247). Multilingual Matters.
- Kormos, J., & Dörnyei, Z. (2004). The interaction of linguistic and motivational variables in second language task performance. *Zeitschrift für Interkulturellen Fremdsprachenunterricht*, 9(2), 1–18.
- Krashen, S. (1982). *Principles and practice in second language acquisition*. Pergamon.
- Le, J. (2004). Affective characteristics of American students studying Chinese in China: A study of heritage and non-heritage learners' beliefs and foreign language anxiety (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). The University of Texas, Austin.
- Liu, M. (2006). Anxiety in oral English classrooms: A case study in China. *TESL-EJ*, 9(3), 1–13.
- MacIntyre, P. D., & Gardner, R. C. (1994). The subtle effects of language anxiety on cognitive processing in the second language. *Language Learning*, 44(2), 283–305.
- MacIntyre, P. D., & Gregersen, T. (2012). Emotions that facilitate language learning: The positive-broadening power of the imagination. *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching*, 2(2), 193–213.
- MacIntyre, P. D., Baker, S. C., Clément, R., & Donovan, L. A. (2000). Sex and age effects on willingness to communicate, anxiety, perceived competence, and L2 motivation among junior high school French immersion students. *Language Learning*, 52(3), 537–564.
- Mackey, A., & Gass, S. M. (2016). *Second language research: Methodology and design*. Routledge.
- Mahmoodzadeh, M. (2012). Investigating foreign language speaking anxiety within the EFL learner's interlanguage system: The case of Iranian learners. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 3(3), 466–476.
- Nunan, D. (2003). The impact of English as a global language on educational policies and practices in the Asia-Pacific region. *TESOL Quarterly*, 37(4), 589–613.
- Phillips, E. M. (1992). The effects of language anxiety on students' oral test performance and attitudes. *The Modern Language Journal*, 76(1), 14–26.
- Phillips, E. M., & Zhao, H. (2018). Anxiety in foreign language communication: A meta-analysis of its impact on performance and ways of addressing it through task-based pedagogy. *Journal of the European Second Language Association*, 2(1), 1–14.
- Rababah, G. (2002). Communication problems facing Arab learners of English. *Journal of Language and Learning*, 3(1), 180–197.
- Radzuan, N. R. M., & Kaur, S. (2010). A survey of oral communication apprehension in English among ESP learners in an engineering course. *English for Specific Purposes World*, 10(31), 168–182.
- Salehi, M., & Marefat, F. (2014). Foreign language anxiety of Iranian EFL learners. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 98, 891–898.
- Scovel, T. (1978). The effect of foreign language learning: A review of the anxiety research. *Language Learning*, 28(1), 129–142.
- Shabani, K. (2016). The significance of Piaget's theory in second language education. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 7(5), 1008–1014.

- Sila, I. (2010). Do organisational and environmental factors moderate the effects of Internet-based inter-organizational systems on firm performance? *European Journal of Information Systems*, 19(5), 581–600.
- Skehan, P. (1998). *A cognitive approach to language learning*. Oxford University Press.
- Teimouri, Y., Goetze, J., & Plonsky, L. (2019). Second language anxiety and achievement: A meta-analysis. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 41(2), 363–387.
- Thomson, R. I., & Derakhshan, A. (2016). Motivation and language anxiety in UK EAP. *Language Learning Journal*, 44(4), 481–497.
- Trang, T. T., Baldauf, R. B., & Moni, K. (2012). Foreign language anxiety and its effects on students' performance: A review of literature. *TESOL Quarterly*, 46(2), 263–277.
- Tsiplakides, I., & Keramida, A. (2009). Helping students overcome foreign language speaking anxiety in the English classroom: Theoretical issues and practical recommendations. *International Education Studies*, 2(4), 39–44.
- Woodrow, L. (2006). Anxiety and speaking English as a second language. *RELC Journal*, 37(3), 308–328.
- Wu, W. (2018). The influence of self-esteem and language anxiety on Chinese learners' willingness to communicate in English. *System*, 74, 149–159.
- Yaikhong, K., & Usaha, S. (2012). A measure of EFL public speaking class anxiety: Scale development and preliminary validation and reliability. *English Language Teaching*, 5(12), 23–35.
- Yang, M. (2020). The impact of COVID-19 on foreign language education: Challenges and opportunities. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 11(13), 1–7.
- Yin, L., & Zhang, S. (2021). The Effects of task-based language teaching on EFL learners' speaking anxiety and performance in online learning. *International Journal of Instruction*, 14(1), 617–634.
- Young, D. J. (1991). Creating a low-anxiety classroom environment: What does language anxiety research suggest? *The Modern Language Journal*, 75(4), 426–439.
- Young, D. J. (2007). Language anxiety from the foreign language specialist's perspective: Interviews with Krashen, Omaggio Hadley, Terrell, and Rardin. *Foreign Language Annals*, 29(1), 95–114.
- Young, D. J. (2007). The relationship between anxiety and foreign language oral proficiency ratings. *Language Learning*, 57(4), 593–626.
- Zhang, R., & Zou, D. (2020). Types, purposes, and effectiveness of state-of-the-art technologies for second and foreign language learning. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 33, 1–47.
- Zhang, S. (2009). The role of input, interaction, and output in the development of oral fluency. *English Language Teaching*, 2(4), 91–100.



© 2024 by the authors. Licensee University of Zanjan, Iran. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0 license). (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>).