

Disambiguating the Relationship between Language Learning Anxiety (LLA) and Oral Performance: A Reconceptualization of Facilitative vs. Debilitative Anxieties

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Abstract

Numerous attempts have recently been made to disambiguate the relationship between Language Learning Anxiety (LLA) and Oral Performance (OP). Nevertheless, these attempts have largely been hampered by the lump of factors associated with the anxiety phenomenon on the one hand and the lack of comprehensive scales capturing the whole gamut of anxiety on the other. Utilizing two valid, reliable and practical instruments, i.e. the Anxiety Questionnaire and FLOSEM, the present paper draws upon the data to arrive at the OLS equation of best fit for the associated data thus quantifying the long-needed elucidation of the relationship between LLA and OP. Further pedagogical implications of the study are also discussed.

Keywords: Language Learning Anxiety (LLA); Anxiety Questionnaire (AQ); Oral Performance

Introduction

Anxiety has proved to be one of the most promising areas of research in English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Considerable research has shown that performance in a second language is related to measures of anxiety (Scovel, Phillips, Derakshan & Eysenck). In the foreign language classroom, high levels of anxiety are most likely to create a variety of negative effects. It is a popular belief that anxious students fail to manage classroom activities properly [1-3]. One of the many challenges in foreign language teaching is to provide such students with a low-anxiety classroom where they can possibly convey their ideas and feelings much better. As a result, a low-anxiety classroom would possibly promote learners' performance. In fact, there is research (e.g. Liu) submitting that large proportions of language students think of the foreign language class as anxiety-provoking suffering from alarming levels of debilitating anxiety. Most students find it very hard to stand before their peers presenting what they potentially know but fail to perform dynamically. Some even get deeply concerned when they feel they are being evaluated [4].

Although researchers think of anxiety as one of the main obstacles in foreign language oral performance, they are uncertain as to how to choose from among the various anxiety-removal strategies whereby a low-anxiety environment is created. More than that, there is no clear-cut relationship between anxiety and the Freudian Id, the Groddeck's it, and the unconscious in the associated literature [5]. This psychosomatic relationship between language learning and language production is clearly contemplated by Young who maintains that to study the language learning process is "to study how the body, mind, and emotions fuse to create self-expression". Elsewhere, Jahangiri,

Rajab and Khosravi draw attention to the psychiatry of the hidden anxiety some university students experience and the role of teachers' experiential knowledge in harnessing the potentially devastating debilitating anxiety and transforming this vast amount of detrimental energy to facilitating anxiety which promotes student performance.

Does language learning anxiety always exert a debilitating effect on oral performance? Alpert and Haber were among the first to suggest that this is not the case paving the way for a relativistic, as opposed to a unidimensionally-absolutistic, consideration of the term in future studies (Jahangiri et al.). [6,7]. Alpert and Haber subscribe to the view that anxiety may just as likely act as a facilitative factor. Therefore, it may be inferred that not all anxious individuals respond to a stressor in a similar way. In fact, some may think of a stressful situation as a challenge. Contrary to public opinion, anxiety might exert a positive effect on oral performance motivating the speaker for further or optimal practice, preparedness and performance in a highly-competitive environment such as the classroom. Thus, considering the predominantly-negative connotations associated with the term and the commonly-held views about the detrimental role of anxiety in oral performance, a heuristic data-driven reconsideration of the anxiety-performance relationship with no previous assumptions about the trends might be in order. Young examined the effect of anxiety on oral performance among prospective language teachers. The author was, before the completion of the study, of the opinion that anxiety would reduce scores on Oral Proficiency Interview. She, however, arrived at non significant correlations between the anxiety scores and those of the proficiency interview. She argues that ability is the main factor governing oral proficiency and that, after the acquisition of this ability, anxiety is of little effect. The above-mentioned comments reflect the widespread ambiguity in the literature, to say nothing of the more conflicting ones.

Stephenson examined the relationships between foreign language anxiety and global proficiency in English and between foreign language anxiety and performance on an oral test. The author (Stephenson) reports to have obtained a statistically significant negative relationship between language anxiety and oral test grades, and between language anxiety and two oral performance criteria and to have added new dimensions to the research on anxiety stating that foreign language anxiety is likely to “exert a deleterious influence” on both proficiency and oral performance while facilitating anxiety may improve oral performance “in moderately-anxious students. It is not difficult to imagine why public speaking, let alone speaking publicly in a foreign language, poses so many anxietal problems in ordinary people and students alike. Daly, cited in von Worde maintains that for some individuals fear of giving a public speech “exceeded such phobias as fear of snakes, elevators, and heights”. Horwitz et al. [3] consider “speaking anxiety” as “the most threatening” facet in FLL. Likewise, Price also subscribes to this view asserting that FL oral presentations were the most anxiety-provoking ordeal facing her research subjects. Young also found that the research subjects felt less anxious while speaking in small groups as opposed to the entire class.

To sum up and to apply these categorizations to our study, the present research intends to study the effect of language learning speaking anxiety on oral performance in the course of interviews. Thus, situational anxiety or situation-specific anxiety and output anxiety are mainly concerned here as language learning anxiety is generally categorized as a situation-specific anxiety and output anxiety is experienced during foreign language speaking which is the case in the present study.

Method

The scope of coverage of the present research is Language Learning Anxiety (LLA) as falling into two major categories Facilitative Anxiety and Debilitative Anxiety, henceforth referred to as FA and DA, respectively. The present study was performed at Azad University, Iran and the research subjects were selected from among EFL students enrolling in courses designed specifically to cater for their English communicative needs. The oral performance of the students was assessed with respect to their anxietal levels and types towards the end of the semester during which they received the intended treatments. The research topic is addressed with specific reference to two instruments: the Anxiety Questionnaire or the AQ, designed to investigate the severity and types of anxiety and the Stanford Foreign Language Oral Skills Evaluation Matrix acronymed FLOSEM (Padilla, Sung & Aninao, 1995) which measures oral performance [8].

Two groups of EFL students of the Azad University were subjected to two different treatments: Facilitative Anxiety and Debilitative Anxiety. This was undertaken to ensure that the subjects receive the diagonally-opposed ends of the continuum of the anxiety phenomenon to make it possible for the OLS to better represent the construct as opposed to a unidimensionally-negative view of anxiety which might bias the entire heuristic research process. Therefore, it was planned that the results from both treatments be merged for the purposes of this study, i.e. a general Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression line of best fit representative of the wide spectrum of the phenomenon. The students had enrolled in a course designed to teach English Speaking at a high level. The strategies for inducing the former are outlined in Jahangiri & Rajab [6]. Each group (n=50) was randomly selected from among students whose university language entry scores fitted the same category for which the English course was

assigned. Subsequent to the treatments and towards the end of the term the researchers administered the AQ and the FLOSEM to gauge the gains/loss in oral proficiency marks in term of the widely different treatments the subjects received. The instruments were administered while students attended interviews. However, nothing was done to suggest the subjects of anything related to a research project. Nevertheless, consent was obtained about the fact that they were going to take part in a research project investigating foreign language learning. Maximal efforts were made to control for gender allowing almost an equal share of females and males in the same group. The university entrance exam had previously placed students in two groups of beginners (obtaining less than the 50 percent cutoff mark and the above-50-percent who may enroll for the highly communicative subject which was the focus of the study. All the subjects of this study fell into the category of intermediate and higher intermediate and advanced level students [9].

Results

This part is devoted to the representation of the results obtained from the two interviews. As was stated earlier, the two groups of subjects, the FA and the DA group were interviewed to assess their respective anxiety and oral performance levels and the relation there of Table 1 and 2 depict the descriptive statistics obtained for the variables studied for the two groups, together and in isolation, respectively.

Variables	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
AQ Scores*	100	11.00	118.00	57.33	26.28
FLOSEM Scores**	100	13.00	26.00	19.79	2.84
Valid N (list wise)	100				

Table 1: Descriptive for all the participants *Out of 125, **Out of 30

As this study only aimed at the derivation of a general OLS line of best fit for the data, the data for the two groups were merged to better represent the wide spectrum of anxiety extremes and the continuum spanned by these extremes. As tables 1 and 2 suggest, the two groups, FA and DA, performed substantially differently subsequent to the treatments in terms of both the anxiety levels they experienced and the oral performance scores they obtained with the FA group obtaining a higher mean OP score and the DA group obtaining a higher mean anxiety score. To more optimally represent the extremes of the anxietal continuum, to allow consideration of the interaction effects, and to quantify the strength of the Anxiety-OP relationship Pearson correlations were obtained using the SPSS whose output is tabulated in Table 3.

	N	Minimum	maximum
FA Group Anx	50	13.00	118.00
FA Group OP	50	13.00	26.00
DA Group Anx	50	11.00	111.00
DA Group Op	50	13.00	25.00
Valid N (list wise)	50		

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics

		FA and DA Post Anx.	FA and DA Post OP
FA and DA Post Anx	Pearson Correlation	1	-0.560**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000
	N	100	100
FA and DA Post OP	Pearson Correlation	-0.560**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	
	N	100	100

Table 3: Correlations obtained between OP and Anxiety

Residuals and other relevant calculations were performed to derive a line of best fit for the data. It needs to be mentioned that a visual inspection of the scatter plot revealed a moderately curvilinear pattern which might account for the moderate Pearson coefficient obtained. This moderate coefficient may also be accounted for by the interplay and the interaction effects occurring between facilitative and debilitative anxieties.

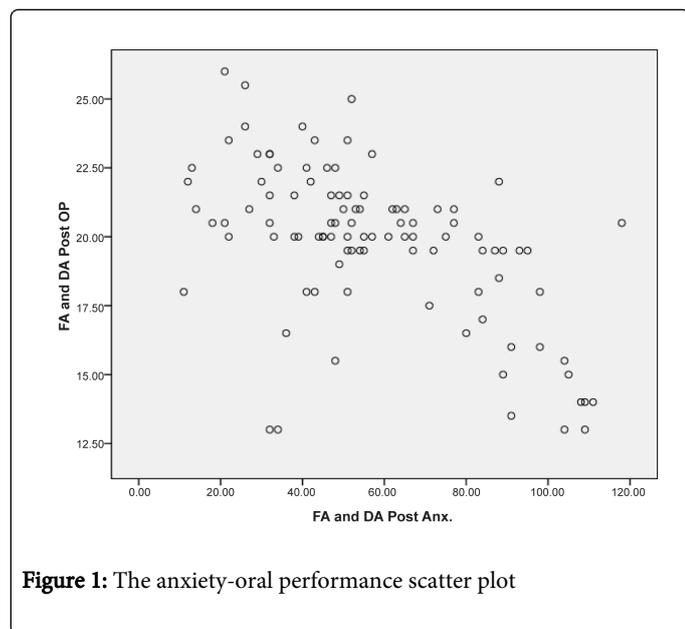


Figure 1: The anxiety-oral performance scatter plot

An eyeball inspection of the scatter plot and the moderate correlation coefficient were indicative of the likelihood of a curvilinear pattern to be the case. As a result, appropriate software was used to subject the scatter plot to curves of best fit capturing the trend and pattern of the relationship. Figures 1-4 through 4 represent attempts at the exploration of this possibility.

As a first step towards capturing the variation of performance relative to levels of anxiety, the linear relationship was gauged deriving the OLS line of best fit for the above data. Tables 4 and 5 represent SPSS output produced for the OLS capturing the association.

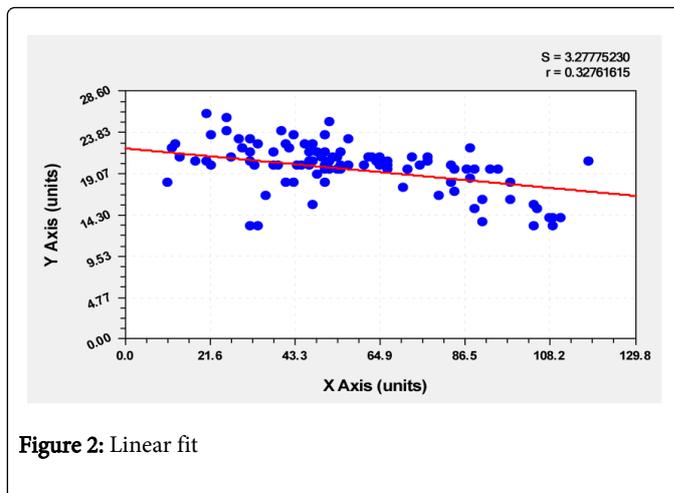


Figure 2: Linear fit

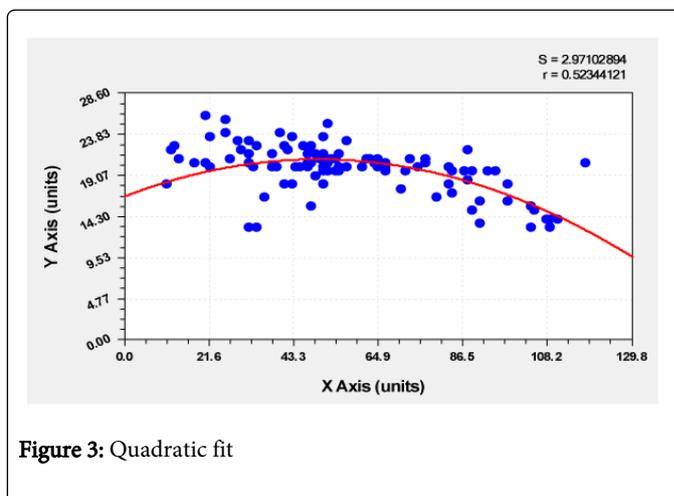


Figure 3: Quadratic fit

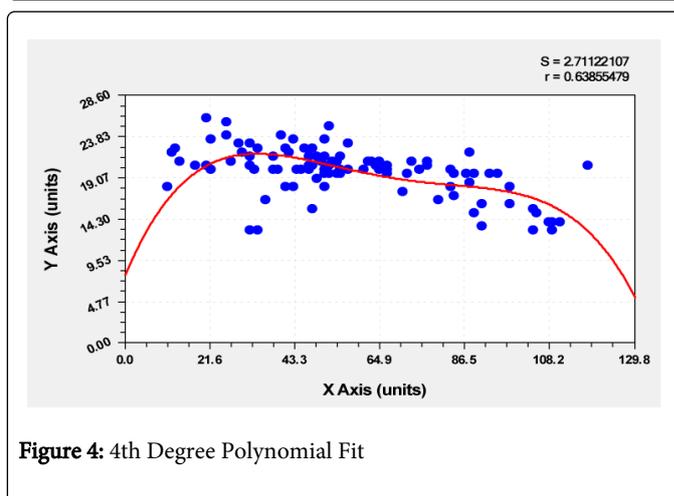


Figure 4: 4th Degree Polynomial Fit

Discussion

The tricky business of interpreting correlation coefficients may cause a lot of trouble and mistaken beliefs. In the first place, the coefficient indicates only the strength of a linear relationship. Second, correlation coefficients do not suggest causation. Pearson's correlation coefficient is widely used today in various fields including second

language research. It ranges from -1.00 to + 1.00. When a positive correlation is obtained between two variables high quantities in one variable are connected with high quantities in another. In the case of a negative correlation, however, the increase in one variable is related to the decrease in another. More than that, a zero correlation implies that no relationship exists between the two variables. In simple words, the correlation coefficient, *r*, indicates the way in which two variables covary.

	Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	251.859	1	251.859	44.739	0.000a
	Residual	551.688	98	5.629		
	Total	803.548	99			

Table 4: ANOVA, a. Predictors: (Constant), FA and DA Post Anx, b. Dependent Variable: FA and DA Post OP Which runs as follows $OP=23.27-0.061A$ Where OP represents Oral Performance as measured by FLOSEM and A represents anxiety (whether debilitating or facilitative).

Consider the LLA-OP correlation obtained for the two groups merged, $r=-0.56$. SPSS produces the R Square value of 0.313 which can be employed to obtain the proportion of the variation of the Oral Performance (OP) due to its association with Language Learning Anxiety (LLA). In other words, 31 per cent of the variation of the oral production marks can be connected to (and not caused by) LLA [10-12].

Following the moderate correlation obtained and the somewhat curvilinear pattern revealed through a scatter plot of the data we come to the conclusion that the question of anxiety should not be discussed on absolute terms. In fact, the present paper might have indicated that what common people believe is unwarranted. In other words, increasing levels of anxiety might also be associated with improvements in oral performance. Despite some recent attempts at delineating facilitating anxiety and debilitating anxiety in the context of classrooms Jahangiri, Rajab, and Khosravi, the literature is yet to provide the readership with a clear-cut dividing line between the two constructs whose task might prove to be daunting for a number of reasons: Firstly, the two constructs coexist, collaborate and “transform” to each other, and the boundaries are blurred. Secondly, individuals might experience both, none, or some of one and some of the other at the same time and they might “work in tandem”. In fact, part of the reason why the researchers of the present study were not tempted to consider the separation (and hence the separate analyses) of the two FA and DA groups can be that the adoption of such a theoretical perspective, where FA and DA coexist, collaborate, interact, and transform into each other renders it impossible for them the two inalienable constructs. In other words, the adoption of this theoretical perspective signifies that any research undertaking that does not capture facilitating anxiety on a par with its debilitating counterpart cannot be taken seriously as it is limited in view of the lens it uses to observe a social phenomenon of such grandeur. Although correlation studies are not capable of implying causality, they can open the way for other avenues of research to proceed [13]. More than that, the present research is delimited by the statistical procedures themselves as these statistical inferences might not be conveniently transferred into pedagogical and practical inferences and policy making. In other words, statistical inferences might only suggest the directions along which educational policy making might proceed and what might be

deemed by statisticians as statistically significant might not necessarily be considered by practitioners of the field and decision makers as reason to act on the basis of research findings. Put another way, statistical procedures should be viewed in conjunction with the realities governing the decision making process and the paraphernalia surrounding the issue in question. Taking all of these determining factors into consideration the authors are of the opinion that a substantial subdivision of the conflicting literature on anxiety can be summed up and disambiguated with specific reference to the following [14].

Although anxiety has most often been assumed to be following a linear pattern it is equally likely for anxiety to be a nonlinear phenomenon. This might explain why most of the related literature has led to conflicting and self-contradictory results [15,16].

The dividing line between debilitating and facilitating anxiety has not been clearly defined and the bulk of the literature mainly deals with debilitating anxiety following the popularly-held, simplistic and unsophisticated connotations implied by the word. Perhaps teachers should identify the anxiety groups prior to teaching and act accordingly, never trying to treat all the students the same way. That is, and they might reduce anxiety in some and produce anxiety among others.

While the researchers certainly admit the fact that the results emanating from the present study cannot be extended too far and that they are not claiming more for the relativistic consideration of the anxiety-performance relationship than it deserves they hope to have created an alternative vision of anxiety which might signal the directions along which future research on such a complex and intricate personality characteristic might proceed.

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