

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background

Most universities around the world require students to take language courses. For some learners, it can be an easy process but for others it can be tedious. There are many factors, such as social and affective ones, that may impact the language learning process. Among the social factors affecting language learning are age, gender, and economic class whereas the affective factors include motivation, attitudes, and anxiety. The latter, anxiety, has been shown to affect students' language competence, including communicative competence (Licet-Kiami, 2012).

Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), state that anxiety in the foreign language situation causes a negative effect on the students' self-concept as competent communicators. Negative consequences include distrust, self-consciousness, fear or even panic. When it comes to speaking in the language classroom, highly anxious students can manifest these symptoms causing them to freeze, not being able to get a word out or simply going blank. This becomes particularly problematic when it is time to take an exam, especially an oral exam. Horwitz et al. (1986), write that oral tests have the potential to provoke anxiety in vulnerable students. Thus, if students are anxious of speaking in the language class and this anxiety rises when it is time to take a test, the worst combination for these students is an oral exam.

1.2 Problem

Oral exams are used to measure students' speaking abilities. Students are often required to take these tests in order to fulfill course requirements. The results of these speaking tests are usually trusted and are taken as they are, meaning that if a student

receives a low grade because he/she was not able to speak, neither the grade they are given nor the test itself are questioned. Instructors usually do not doubt the results of the test and the students' language test scores are taken as reliable. However, sometimes, these test scores may not represent the students' actual language competence because foreign language anxiety (FLA) may affect the score a student receives on an oral test. If students suffer from FLA, they may not be able to perform adequately making the teacher or the evaluator believe that they are incompetent. Therefore, I claim that oral test scores from students with FLA may be unreliable. That is, if a student is known to suffer from FLA, knowing that FLA is associated to test scores, the score on their oral test does not represent their actual language abilities, making the oral test score unreliable.

1.3 Justification

It is important to demonstrate that there are students who suffer from FLA and that this type of anxiety is correlated to test scores because it can have negative consequences for the students. These include failing the test or even failing the course and not being able to graduate as a consequence of not passing. Hence, evaluation in a language course can be high-stakes.

It is also important to add to the discussion of the relationship between FLA and testing because only three studies have been carried out to date (Phillips, 1992; Wilson, 2006; Hewitt and Stephenson, 2012) and I believe this is not enough. Since there is some evidence that FLA does affect test performance and therefore test scores, the impact of FLA on test scores may have far reaching consequences for the students. Hence, more evidence is needed to show that there is indeed a relationship between FLA and test scores and once conclusive evidence has been provided, we need to accept that this condition

needs to be taken seriously by instructors, find ways to alleviate anxiety in students who suffer from FLA, and explore alternative ways of testing these students.

1.4 Hypothesis and research questions

The hypothesis of this study is that students with low levels of anxiety perform better on an oral test than students with high anxiety levels. In other words, FLA does affect oral exam scores. It is therefore expected that the null hypothesis, FLA does not affect oral test scores, has to be rejected.

The research questions addressed in this study are the following:

1. Is FLA correlated with oral test scores? If so, how strong is the correlation?
2. Is there a difference between the students' anxiety levels (high, moderate, low) and their oral exam scores?
3. How do students feel when taking an oral exam? Why do they feel that way?

The first research question aims to determine whether there is a relationship between FLA and oral test scores. It investigates whether there is a correlation between the two variables and if so, whether this correlation is significant. The second research question seeks information about the students' anxiety levels and their oral exam scores to see whether there is a difference between the three anxiety levels and their resulting oral test scores. The last research question concerns students' feelings while taking the exam.

1.5 Structure of the thesis

The next chapter, Literature Review, is divided into two main parts. The first part discusses anxiety and the second part addresses testing. The following chapter, the Methodology, describes in detail the steps that were taken to gather the data, the participants, and the data analysis procedures. Chapter 4, Results and Discussion, provides the results of the study. The last chapter, the Conclusions, begins with a brief summary of the study, then answers to the research questions are provided and finally discusses its implications for the testing of highly anxious students.