

## Chapter 5: Conclusions

This last chapter begins with a brief summary of the present study. Then, the three research questions are answered in detail. Finally, the chapter closes with suggestions regarding the testing of students who suffer from FLA.

The aim of this study was to investigate whether FLA affected the students' performance on an oral exam, to see whether there was a significant difference between the students' anxiety levels and their oral test scores, and to find out the students' feeling while taking the test. The obtained results suggest that FLA did affect the students' performance on the oral test with the Pearson correlation being  $r=-0.40$ ,  $p<.01$ . Also, a significant difference between oral test scores and the students' levels of FLA was found ( $F=7.12$ ).

### 5.1 Answers to the research questions

The first research question of this study was: Is FLA correlated to oral test scores? If so, how strong is the correlation? The Pearson correlation showed that there is a statistically significant negative correlation between these two variables ( $r=-0.40$ ,  $p<.01$ ) suggesting that students with high anxiety levels performed poorer on the oral exam compared to the students with low anxiety. This result supports Phillips' (1992) ( $r= -.40$ ,  $p<.01$ ), Hewitt and Stephenson' (2012) ( $r= -.49$ ,  $p<.01$ ), and Wilson' (2006) ( $r= -.49$ ,  $p<.01$ ) findings where a statistically significant negative correlation was found as well indicating that FLA does affect oral test scores.

The second research question was: Is there a difference between the students' anxiety levels (high, moderate, low) and their oral exam scores? As presented in the previous chapter, the mean score for the students with high anxiety was 7.5 (which is the lowest passing grade for the university where the study was done). The students with

moderate anxiety had a mean score of 8.3 while the mean score for the low anxiety group of students was 8.9. It is important to stress again that these students came from the same proficiency level and all of them had taken two English courses previously at the same university. Hence, all the variables were the same except for the students' levels of anxiety. The difference in test score is statistically significant for all groups. These results suggest that the difference in the test scores is correlated to the students' levels of anxiety.

The last question concerned the students' feelings while taking the oral exam. One of the reasons the students were asked how they felt while taking the oral test was to determine whether FLA played a role in the students' oral performance and to explain possible results that I was not expecting such as a low anxious student not being able to perform as expected. This actually happened with a student that had been put in the low anxiety group. She just could not correctly formulate a sentence. When asked why this had happened, she stated that she had had a bad day and was not feeling good enough to take a test indicating that learner-variables discussed above also affect test performance.

Fourteen out of the sixteen students expressed that they felt nervous while taking the oral exam. When asked why they felt that way, some of them responded that they had forgotten some words and just could not express themselves. Others answered that they felt nervous because they felt they were under pressure (even though this exam did not count towards their class grade). The students also reported that they felt apprehensive and nervous because they were afraid that their classmate whom they were taking the exam with or I would laugh at them or think that they did not know how to pronounce something correctly. There was clearly fear of negative evaluation in these students. Most students that expressed these feelings had been placed in either the moderate or high level of anxiety group.

Only two students expressed that they were calm during the exam. Interestingly, these two students received the highest scores of all on the oral exam and had been assigned to the low anxiety group. The responses of the students suggest that FLA affects students' performance on an oral exam. Students with low levels of anxiety performed on average better than their classmates with higher levels of FLA.

The results of the three questions allege that students that suffer from high levels of FLA could not be adequately measured. FLA interfered with their oral performance causing some students to forget, to not say anything, and to become nervous and/or apprehensive about having to take the oral test. Hence, the scores they received on the test may be unreliable.

Douglas (2010) states that language tests are supposed to measure adequately the students' language abilities so that inferences that are drawn from them are as accurate as possible. If oral exam scores are taken as they are and not questioned, this can have a negative impact on the students because decisions about their future are based on these tests. Students can receive a low grade in the course or even fail the class if they do not do well on the oral exam because exams usually make up a significant proportion of a class grade. In the specific case of the Nursing students, the exams make up 50% of the class grade. Oral exams make up 25% of the grade for each exam because the students are tested in the four skills: writing, listening, reading, and speaking with each skill being worth 25% of the mid semester and the final exam. If the Nursing students fail the language class twice, they lose their scholarships, which would be for many of them equivalent to having to leave the university without being able to finish their studies.

Although the present study was limited in that it is based on 16 students only, the results suggest that FLA does affect oral test scores. The students with high levels of FLA

scored significantly lower on the oral exam than students with lower anxiety levels even though all students came from the same proficiency level. As a test designer, I took all the steps necessary to make the oral test as reliable as possible, everybody followed the same procedure, all students were given time to think about what they were going to say, everyone knew what the exam was for, and I made sure that students clearly understood the instructions before they started the exam. However, it became evident that there are test-taker variables, in this case FLA, that have such an important influence on performance that they could potentially cause any carefully designed test to become unreliable if it is oral. It does not matter what the test designer does because it seems FLA cannot be diminished to a degree that it does not affect oral scores, at least for students with high levels of anxiety. Therefore, language teachers and test designers need to take FLA seriously because it is a condition that affects oral performance.

FLA is a condition that may impede students from demonstrating their actual language abilities which, in turn, may result in teachers wrongly assessing what the students are capable of doing in the target language. And because the oral performance of these students cannot be measured reliably with traditional tests, neither the students nor the teachers will know with certainty what these students can or cannot do leading to wrong interpretations of the test results.

## **5.2 Testing options for highly anxious students**

A final question remains to be answered: What can be done about these students with high levels of FLA? I believe that we have three options: keep ignoring that FLA is a serious condition and keep testing highly anxious students the way they have been tested, not test students orally, or evaluate students through dynamic testing.

The first option is to keep ignoring this problem and continue testing students in a traditional way. That is, students continue to be tested orally even though FLA can affect their performance on the exam. The main disadvantage of this option is that highly anxious students would continue to be measured inadequately rendering any test unreliable and any results invalid for students that suffer from high levels of FLA. On the other hand, this option is practical in the way that the instructor does not need to change his or her testing procedures. However, even though this option exists, it is not the one that we as language teachers should prefer because it does not solve the problem.

The second option is that we simply do not test students orally. Students with high levels of FLA would not be affected because they would not be tested. They would not be asked to perform on an oral exam that has been shown to be negatively affected by high levels of FLA. They would not be afraid of a test and of communicating with others knowing that they are being judged based on how they perform. The problem would be, however, how to assign a grade to these students for their oral abilities. How could they demonstrate what they are capable or not of doing? Could class participation alone be an option?

The third and last option is to do something different: to test students in a non-traditional way. Dynamic testing could be an option. Dynamic testing is a type of assessment that aims to identify students' skills and their learning potential. There are two ways of assessing students. The first one is through the 'sandwich' approach (Bouchillon, 2015). This approach consists of giving a pretest in order for the teacher to identify the students' skills and/or to find out in what aspects they are having difficulties and then, based on those results, the teacher prepares the class materials. Then there is a posttest to determine whether the students acquired the skills taught. The second approach is known as the 'cake'

approach. The main difference is that the teacher mediates the student's performance by providing more or less explicit hints during the test. Both types of dynamic testing do not only assess what the student is capable of doing on his or her own but also what he or she can do with help in order to evaluate how much more the student can learn.

The downside of dynamic testing is that it is more time consuming than traditional testing because teachers work individually with students in order to monitor their language process. This approach could therefore be quite impractical for classes that consist of 50 or more students.

However, dynamic assessment could be a good option because it evaluates the process rather than the product of learning (Liz and Gindis, 2005, as cited in Nazari and Mansouri, 2014) focusing on the students' ability to acquire further knowledge and skills. Another advantage of dynamic testing is that the pre-test/post-test or mediation during the test design help the teacher identify specific gaps in knowledge or language-related problems that can be targeted in a precise way thus guiding the teacher's instruction to meet the learners' needs. I recommend replicating this study using dynamic testing as the assessment method in order to investigate whether this alternative evaluation procedure leads to more reliable and valid oral performance results in students with high foreign language anxiety.