

The Sociolinguistic Parameters of L2 Speaking Anxiety

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Abstract Much of the research into language anxiety has concentrated on the detrimental effects of speaking anxiety on academic achievement. However, less attention has been paid to the components of oral classroom anxiety that are an impediment to the development of L2 speaking fluency. Clearly, understanding the nature of speaking anxiety will help towards finding ways to alleviate it. This chapter reports on the non-linguistic, socio-psychological constraints of speaking-in-class anxiety. The researcher adopted a sequential explanatory design. Data were generated through a survey and qualitative interviews, and analyzed employing factor analysis and qualitative coding respectively. The findings revealed a dynamic interplay between oral classroom anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and low self-perceptions of speaking ability. The paper concludes by urging language educators to reevaluate the social contexts of the foreign language classroom with a view to adjusting their L2 speaking practices to learners' affective state in class.

1 Introduction

“How is it that some people can learn a second or foreign language so easily and so well while others, given what seem to be the same opportunities to learn, find it almost impossible?” (Gardner and Lambert 1972, p. 131). This question, asked by the two Canadian social psychologists in their seminal research on learners' motivation and attitudes towards the target language, has triggered much research in individual learner differences and affectivity in language learning. While many people are keen on learning a new language, they consider it a challenging task

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and report uncomfortable experiences with relation to it. Therefore, researchers have shifted the focus on learners' emotional responses to language learning and their impact on classroom performance and success.

Affective variables typically include language anxiety (LA) which has been widely investigated in the last three decades (cf. Horwitz 2010). The bulk of the research, however, has been correlational and factor analytic in nature, and is limited by the recognition that learner traits, learner beliefs, and teaching attitudes in instructed language learning contexts impede oral communication in the second/foreign language (L2). A sentiment of worry that others would evaluate oneself negatively during speaking activities in the classroom seems to be the common ground between these obstacles to the development of L2 speaking fluency.

The present chapter is an attempt to investigate the effects of fear of negative evaluation and self-perceived oral performance on English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) students' classroom speaking anxiety and general LA. The researcher implemented a mixed methods sequential explanatory design to address the needs of the current study. On the basis of the emic perspective presented and analyzed, implications on the role of teachers in creating friendly and secure classroom environments will be discussed.

2 The Construct of L2 Anxiety

The basic conceptualization of LA as a by-product of "the uniqueness of the language learning process" (Horwitz et al. 1986, p. 128) paved the ground for flourishing research into one of the most important affective reactions to language learning. Horwitz and Young (1991) stated that it is possible to view LA either as a transfer of anxiety from other domains (i.e. stage fright), or as a situation-specific anxiety. In contrast to state anxiety (moment-to-moment experience) or trait anxiety (stable predisposition), LA manifests itself in foreign language learning settings where students may experience "the worry and negative emotional reaction aroused when learning or using a second language" (MacIntyre 1999, p. 27). These students may be resilient in most other contexts but rather nervous in the language classroom.

Horwitz et al. (1986) suggested that LA is related to three performance anxieties: *communication apprehension*, *fear of negative evaluation*, and *test anxiety*. In the foreign language context, communication apprehension results from the self-consciousness students experience during their L2 attempts to communicate. Fear of negative evaluation manifests itself in learners' worry over the opinions of others and a higher level of concern over errors. In particular, Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) claimed that students' fear of negative evaluation is due to the nature of the L2 classroom, where their performance is constantly evaluated by the only fluent member of the class, the teacher. They further argued that "students may also be

acutely sensitive to the evaluations—real or imagined—of their peers” (Horwitz et al. 1986, p. 128). The last one, test anxiety, appears in evaluative situations and prevents learners from performing successfully in a test or an exam.

3 Theoretical Concepts Linked to L2 Speaking Anxiety

LA can therefore be understood as having a debilitating effect on learners’ performance. As noted earlier, communication apprehension hinders the production of language. With reference to L2 speaking, and given that students are expected to communicate orally through the use of unfamiliar sounds or forms, it seems logical that communication apprehension directly affects levels of an individual’s *willingness to communicate* (WTC; McCroskey 1970; McCroskey and Richmond 1987, 1991; MacIntyre and Charos 1996). Parallel to language anxiety, WTC correlates with certain personality variables, such as self-confidence, self-efficacy, and introversion/extroversion. Mejjas et al. (1991, p. 88) have stated that the level of communication apprehension is critical in language learning, for “if a student is apprehensive about communicating in a particular language (...) he or she will have negative affective feelings toward oral communication and will likely avoid it”.

The notion of social anxiety in cognitive psychology could also serve as a means of delineating the complex nature of L2 speaking anxiety. Schlenker and Leary (1982, p. 645) mentioned that social anxiety “arises whenever people are motivated to make a desired impression on others, but are not certain that they will do so”. This definition suggests a positive correlation between social anxiety on the one hand, and motivation and level of doubt on the other: as both the desire to be approved by others and the uncertainty of such an event to occur increase, the amount of social anxiety increases as well.

It could be argued that the theory of social anxiety shares some commonalities with the terror management theory proposed by Greenberg and his colleagues (Greenberg et al. 1992, p. 913), who speculated that “people are motivated to maintain a positive self-image because self-esteem protects them from anxiety”. Horwitz et al. (1986) claimed that foreign language learning poses a threat to self-esteem because it is axiomatic that students will make mistakes when communicating by means of a language they have not yet fully acquired or mastered. These threats to learners’ self-esteem provoke anxiety and could be managed by increasing their degree of self-worth.

4 Empirical Evidence on L2 Speaking Anxiety

Most research has shown that LA is linked with L2 oral performance, thus causing L2 oral achievement to suffer (Horwitz et al. 1986; MacIntyre et al. 1997; Horwitz 2000, 2001; Kitano 2001; Gregersen and Horwitz 2002; Liu 2006; Woodrow 2006).

Arguably, speaking is the skill in which the students' language ego is most vulnerable due to a higher level of self-exposure that it imposes on them. Horwitz et al. (1986, p. 127) argued that the foreign language classroom may "represent serious impediments to the development of second language fluency as well as to performance". This may be due to the "severely restricted language code" learners are expected to perform with in class, which further renders language classrooms "inherently face threatening environments" (Dörnyei 2001, p. 91). Given that learners have to communicate through the medium of a new language, it is highly likely that they will make mistakes. However, the majority of students fear making mistakes in classroom oral tasks, and view it as a manifestation of weakness and incompetence. At the same time, several students believe that speaking is the most important skill they need to learn in order to master a foreign language (Phillips 1991; Kitano 2001). Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that low self-perceptions of L2 speaking ability and fear of negative evaluation induce LA.

4.1 Low Self-Perceptions of L2 Speaking Ability

Learners' self-perception of their ability is thought to be a distinguishable aspect of L2 oral performance. MacIntyre et al. (1997) explored how students' L2 actual competence and LA affect their perceived competence in the L2. The participants in their study were 37 Anglophones enrolled in a first-year philosophy course at a bilingual university, who had considerable exposure to French. They were administered a LA questionnaire consisting of items from Gardner's French use anxiety and French class anxiety scales (MacIntyre and Gardner 1989), and a modified version of the "can-do" test that assessed their self-perceived competence on 26 French tasks. The researchers reported a strong link between actual competence, perceived competence, and LA. In addition, a significant negative correlation ($r = -.60$) was found between self-rated speaking proficiency and LA.

Kitano (2001) administered a survey to 211 Japanese students at two major universities in the United States and concluded that a significant negative correlation exists between LA and self-perceived speaking ability. Thus, as students perceived of themselves as less competent than their peers, their level of LA increased. Much in the same vein, Woodrow (2006) collected quantitative data from 275 participants enrolled in English for Academic Purposes courses in Australia. The researcher developed the *Second Language Speaking Anxiety Scale* (SLSAS) for her study and made use of additional interviews. The results indicated that speaking anxiety both within and outside the language classroom was associated with L2 self-perceived performance.

Price (1991) conducted a number of interviews with highly anxious students. The participants believed that their pronunciation was not accurate and that they were not pronouncing words as native speakers would do. In yet another study,

Bailey (1983) examined the relationship between competitiveness and anxiety of adult second language learners through diaries. The researcher concluded that “anxiety can be caused and/or aggravated by the learner’s competitiveness when he sees himself as less proficient than the object of comparison” (1983, p. 27).

4.2 *Fear of Negative Evaluation*

L2 learners have also been found to share feelings of fear of negative evaluation as part of the speaking classes they attend. Gregersen and Horwitz (2002) measured reactions to oral performance among eight second-year English language students in Chile. They used videotaped conversations with the participants in order to obtain a sample of their speaking ability in English, and then conducted interviews to elicit the informants’ beliefs on their feelings of anxiety and perfectionism. The findings revealed that the highly anxious participants were influenced by others’ evaluations and the subsequent possibility of looking foolish, and consistently linked their mistakes in speaking activities to that possibility. The students who compared their pronunciation with that of native speakers in Price’s (1991) study also feared being looked down on. Additionally, Kitano (2001) concluded that a positive correlation ($r = .31$) exists between LA and fear of negative evaluation.

Liu (2006) investigated 547 Chinese undergraduate non-English majors at three different proficiency levels through the use of an adapted *Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale* (FLCAS; Horwitz et al. 1986), as well as observations, reflective journals, and interviews. The researcher found that the students felt the most anxious when answering questions set by the teacher or when asked to speak English in class. Further, Young (1990) found that many Spanish learners would be willing to take part in oral classroom tasks if they were not afraid of saying the wrong thing.

The emergence of fear of negative evaluation as an important component of classroom speaking anxiety has also been well documented through factor analytic studies. In a study of 96 second-year Japanese students at the University of Texas at Austin, Aida (1994, p. 159) found that “speech anxiety and fear of negative evaluation may not be totally independent concepts, but rather are probably different labels describing one phenomenon in a language learning situation”. Cheng, Horwitz, and Schallert (1999) investigated the links between second language classroom anxiety and second language writing anxiety among 433 Taiwanese English majors. The principal components analysis of the FLCAS pointed at low self-confidence in speaking English as being the most prominent factor of classroom anxiety. Furthermore, Mak (2011) examined the sources of speaking-in-class anxiety of 313 Chinese English first-year university students in Hong Kong. Speech anxiety and fear of negative evaluation again constituted the first factor of the L2 oral anxiety sources taxonomy. In particular, speaking in front of the class without being prepared in advance and being corrected when speaking were the two most frequently mentioned causes of speaking anxiety.

5 Rationale of the Present Study

The research goal of the current attempt was to explore the nature of speaking anxiety, as well as its conceptual links with students' self-perceptions of their oral competence and social comparison in class. The study was situated in the Greek EFL learning context. In order to gain insights into students' emotions, the study posed the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: Does LA relate to speaking anxiety and fear of negative evaluation?

RQ2: How do Greek EFL learners conceptualize their fear of negative evaluation?

RQ3: Do their self-perceptions of EFL speaking performance influence their LA?

6 Methodology

6.1 The Research Paradigm: Pragmatism and Mixed Methods Research

The 1980s was the era of a fierce 'paradigm war' between the two major research camps of *constructivism* (i.e. qualitative research) and *postpositivism* (i.e. quantitative research) in terms of the epistemology and logic each one was embracing. Mixed methods research has risen as a result of the rejection of a forced choice of either quantitative or qualitative inquiry in the social sciences. Quantitative and qualitative methods were seen as adhering to the principles of pragmatism, which by and large rejected "the either/or of the incompatibility thesis" noted above (Teddlie and Tashakkori 2003, p. 21), and favored both points of view (Rossman and Wilson 1984; Howe 1988; Larsen-Freeman and Long 1990; Greene and Caracelli 2003; Dörnyei 2007). Hence, mixed methods research was defined as "the type of research in which a researcher or team of researchers combines elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches (e.g. use of qualitative and quantitative viewpoints, data collection, analysis, inference techniques) for the broad purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration" (Creswell and Plano Clark 2011, p. 123).

The key assumption about mixed methods research refers to its capacity to offset the weaknesses of one method through the strengths of another method (Jick 1979; Howe 1988; Tashakkori and Teddlie 1998; Dörnyei 2007; Creswell 2009; Creswell and Plano Clark 2011). According to Johnson and Turner (2003, p. 299), "the fundamental principle is followed for at least three reasons: (a) to obtain convergence or corroboration of findings, (b) to eliminate or minimize key plausible alternative explanations for conclusions drawn from the research data, and (c) to elucidate the divergent aspects of a phenomenon".

The use of a mixed methods framework in research into LA is scarce. However, even in those few mixed methods studies, little emphasis is placed on the initial quantitative stage of the investigation; rather the focus lies on the interview-based follow-up, and the quantitative phase is primarily used to classify participants into meaningful clusters with relation to certain variables. Nevertheless, in the current study, the two stages are given equal priority, and quantitative and qualitative results are meticulously presented.

6.2 Research Design

The present study, which spanned five months, implemented a sequential explanatory design. First, quantitative data were collected and analyzed for the purposes of testing relations among variables with a large sample of students, and identifying a percentage of those students who received the highest scores on the numerical scale. A subsequent qualitative data collection on the extreme cases (i.e. highly anxious students) was added in order to make some decisions on the reasons why that specific group of students deviated significantly from the rest. Thus, the quantitative results, which were based on a probability sample, guided the purposive sampling of participants for the qualitative study. Patton (1990, p. 169) rationalized that “the logic and power of purposive sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth”. A further function of the quantitative results was to extract key themes that could form the basis for the interview guide of the qualitative study. Table 1 visually displays the explanatory design procedures.

Table 1 Visual diagram of explanatory design procedures (adapted from Ivankova and Creswell 2009)

Phase	Procedure	Product
Quan ^a data	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• N = 128• FLCAS• Background questionnaire	Numeric data
Quan analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Descriptive statistics• Factor analysis• Correlations• SPSS software	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Means, SDs• Factor loadings• Correlation• Coefficients
Connecting quan and qual ^b phases	Purposefully selecting 13 participants	N = 13 (highly anxious students)
Qual data	Individual interviews	Text data (interview transcripts)
Qual analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Thematic analysis• Coding form	Codes and categories
Mixing of the quan and qual results	Explanation of the quan results based on qual findings	Conclusion

a Quantitative
b Qualitative

6.3 Participants

128 EFL students enrolled in general English classes in two private language schools in Greece participated in the quantitative phase of this project. All informants were adults; the average age was 24.12. There were 44 male and 84 female students. All of them gave their consent to participating. The minimum length of exposure to English was two years with a maximum length of eight years. The participating students' proficiency level ranged from B1 to C2 (in CEFR¹ standards, from lower intermediate to upper advanced). As far as the qualitative phase is concerned, 13 students were interviewed.

6.4 Instruments

6.4.1 The Questionnaire

LA was operationalized by an adapted FLCAS, which contained 29 items. Even though FLCAS is not in its entirety related to speaking anxiety, previous research has shown that, given its strong association with second language speaking achievement, it measures "anxiety primarily related to speaking situations" (Aida 1994, p. 163). Using the FLCAS in their study of the speaking and writing components of classroom LA, Cheng et al. (1999) also concluded that the FLCAS is an instrument focusing particularly on speaking anxiety.

In the present study, test anxiety items included in the original questionnaire were eliminated due to lack of consistency with the research purpose; the focal point of the study was to measure the effects of peer pressure on LA during EFL lessons. Moreover, items related to interaction with native speakers were also excluded, because they refer to hypothetical situations that do not occur in the participating English language classrooms. In this study, the term 'foreign language' used in the original FLCAS was replaced by 'English language'. For instance, the original FLCAS item "I feel confident when I speak in my foreign language class" was modified to "I feel confident when I speak in my English language class".

The questionnaire was answered on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The total classroom anxiety score was derived by summing the students' responses to respective items. Positively worded items, such as "It wouldn't bother me at all to take more English language classes" and "I feel confident when I speak in my English language class", were reversed and recoded. The instrument was proved to be highly reliable (.91). The descriptive statistics for the FLCAS are summarized in Table 2.

¹ *Common European framework of references for languages* (Council of Europe 2001).

Table 2 Descriptive statistics for the FLCAS

	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
FLCAS	33	165	69.3	16.5

6.4.2 Quantitative Data Analysis

Multivariate statistics, and in particular factor analysis, were applied to the FLCAS. Principal components analysis with varimax rotation was selected for the intraconstruct examination of the FLCAS in order to identify those components that best defined the anxiety measure. Further, correlation coefficients check was computed to examine the relationships among the overall FLCAS and its sub-components. The data were entered into and analyzed through SPSS version 16.0 for statistical analysis.

6.4.3 The Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 participants on the basis of an interview protocol. Typically, a semi-structured interview “is one where the interviewer has a clear picture of the topics that need to be covered (and perhaps even a preferred order for these) but is prepared to allow the interview to develop in unexpected directions where these open up important new areas” (Richards 2009, p. 186). The researcher knew that she would need to identify key areas and compare the students’ experiences of these. An element of structure was therefore important. On the other hand, a general picture was unlikely to reveal the undercurrents of feelings, expectations, opinions, and so on that would help her understand the reasons for what was happening. For this she decided that she needed more open questions to allow students the freedom to bring to the surface aspects of their experience that would otherwise remain hidden. For these reasons, the researcher opted for semi-structured interviews.

6.4.4 Qualitative Data Analysis

The data were analyzed combining deductive and inductive approaches (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Strauss 1987). By applying a categorical scheme suggested by the quantitative analysis of the students’ questionnaires, as well as existing frameworks from the literature (e.g. Horwitz et al. 1986; Aida 1994; MacIntyre et al. 1997; Kitano 2001; Mak 2011), a deductive approach was utilized as a means of data triangulation and of comparison of students’ views on EFL speaking anxiety against the norms established in relevant research. On the other hand, given that qualitative data analysis should be dialectical and not just an application of the theory (Lincoln and Guba 1985), an inductive approach was also adopted for the present study in order to identify additional themes that are meaningful to the

interviewees with regards to the topic under investigation. The data was coded in two stages: (a) first-level coding, where codes were created, revised, and defined, and (b) pattern (second-level) coding, which allowed the researcher to group the already identified codes into manageable sets (Miles and Huberman 1994).

7 Results

RQ1: Does LA relate to speaking anxiety and fear of negative evaluation?

To address this research question, the FLCAS was first subjected to exploratory principal components analysis with varimax rotation. Table 3 shows the item loadings on FLCAS1. The number of components to be extracted was guided by the scree plot and a three-component solution, accounting for 42.51 % of the total variance, was selected. The first component (FLCAS1) consisted of twelve items accounting for 18.5 % of the total variance. Most of these items seem to share a feeling of speaking anxiety caused by low perceived self-efficacy (e.g. “I keep thinking that the other students are better at English than I am”), and fear of negative evaluation by the peers (e.g. “I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak in English”), thereby signifying that fear of negative evaluation and the emerging anxiety about speaking in English form an integral part of LA. This factor was labeled *Speaking anxiety and fear of negative evaluation*.

In addition, the Pearson product-moment correlation was computed between the overall FLCAS and FLCAS1. The correlation coefficient equaled $r = 0.91$ ($p < 0.05$), which indicated a significant and high positive relationship between LA and speaking anxiety. Thus, the tendency was that the higher an individual's

Table 3 Item loadings on FLCAS1 *Speaking anxiety and fear of negative evaluation*

Items	Factor loadings
I can feel my heart pounding when I'm going to be called on in my English language class	.668
I always feel that the other students speak English better than I do	.664
I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak in English	.651
I feel more tense and nervous in my English language class than in my other classes	.644
I keep thinking that the other students are better at English than I am	.639
I tremble when I know that I'm going to be called on in my English language class	.602
I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my English language class	.599
I feel confident when I speak in my English language class	.529
It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my English language class	.524
I worry about the consequences of failing my English language class	.482
I often feel like not going to my English language class	.407
I don't worry about making mistakes in my English language class	.340

Table 4 Conceptualization of fear of negative evaluation by Greek EFL learners

Fear of negative evaluation	
1. By the peers	
1.1 Fear of facing derision	
1.1.1 Mistakes	
1.1.2 Group membership	
2. By the teacher	
2.1 Mismatch between great efforts, unexpected outcomes, and teacher expectations	
2.2 Lack of lexis and structures—Low ability to communicate	
2.3 Error correction	

speaking anxiety and fear of negative evaluation, the higher his or her anxiety in the EFL classroom.

RQ2: How do Greek EFL learners conceptualize their fear of negative evaluation?

This research question was addressed by considering the students’ responses to the interview questions. Fear of negative evaluation by the peers and by the teacher was reported to occur while practicing speaking in class. Table 4 below illustrates the findings regarding the interviewees’ beliefs on the nature of their fear of negative evaluation.

As evidenced in Table 4, fear of facing derision by fellow students resulting from the possibility of making a mistake was a widely attested source of fear of negative evaluation that influences how often learners choose to communicate in English in class:

I am afraid of being laughed at. Also I don’t like being judged by my classmates. And that’s the reason why I never speak in class unless I am absolutely certain that what I am going to say is correct.

Furthermore, due to a potential fear of appearing foolish, certain participants reported that they tended to study more in order to avoid mistakes during speaking activities. The following extract is typical in illustrating this point.

I know that, if I make a mistake, they will laugh at me. So, I try to study harder to prove myself. I don’t like being laughed at.

The potential of group membership to provoke anxiety was noted by the most anxious student of this cohort. As a self-aware language learner, this student was confronted with the fact that fellow students will perceive her differently from the way they perceive themselves. Specifically, the student was perceived by others as being “too foreign” for their native group:

My teacher tells me that I am good at speaking, and that I have a good accent which sounds American. However, I feel embarrassed whenever I speak because the other students make fun of me sometimes. For example, I pronounce the word *the* as /ðə/ and not as /ði:/ and the others make fun of this, because they think it sounds too American. And it was the teacher who started all this by commenting on my pronunciation in front of the whole class.

This comment also demonstrates that the teacher may inadvertently create an atmosphere of inter-learner evaluation in the EFL classroom.

The fear of being negatively evaluated by the teacher mainly stemmed from incongruence between students' efforts to improve their competence in the language and the probability that unanticipated outcomes of the learning process would interfere with teacher expectations. Students disliked the idea that their teachers might think less of them and were overwhelmed by the fear of disappointing them. Additionally, the inability of successfully communicating personally meaningful messages to the teachers was also viewed as a factor ensuing a possible fear of negative evaluation. Some students felt that they are not being understood by their teacher when they speak in class due to lack or inaccurate use of input, and subsequently felt that their teachers will consider them poor communicators in the L2.

As far as error correction and fear of negative evaluation are concerned, this was presented with the following oxymoron: on the one hand, the interviewees stressed the importance of error correction while speaking and felt that it constitutes a constructive aspect of the language learning process. On the other hand, they believed that their teachers told them off by correcting their mistakes in the oral output. For several students, error correction was discouraging as well as indicative of lack of knowledge and of the potential to fulfill teachers' expectations.

Anxiety when speaking is my concern. When the teacher is correcting me, I feel I am not at the correct level for the class and that I can't produce exactly what my teacher wants.

The influence that fear of negative evaluation by teachers exerts on learners is clearly revealed through the interview excerpt attached below. Interestingly, one of the interviewees admitted having adopted the following tactic in order to reduce the amount of fear of negative evaluation experienced as a result of the teacher's presence in class.

I really fear making mistakes, not because I've made a mistake and that means that I haven't studied enough, but rather because I tremble from my teacher's reaction to it. I know that my teacher calls on us in a predictable order and I know when it is my turn to speak. For example, when we are working on a gap fill exercise with twelve gaps to complete, I know I'm number ten. So I read that question again and again to make sure that I can give as accurate an answer as possible, but I ignore everything else that goes on in the classroom at that time.

RQ3: Do their self-perceptions of EFL speaking performance influence their LA?

In order to address this research question, the student interviews were again taken into consideration. The findings showed that the students' anxiety level was higher as they perceived their performance in oral tasks to be less competent than that of their peers. A summary of the aspects of self-perceptions of oral ability is found in Table 5 below.

Table 5 Aspects of self-perceived oral ability of Greek EFL learners

Self-perceptions of EFL speaking ability

1. Competitiveness
2. Peer pressure
3. Teacher high status

First, negative self-perceptions were shown to produce a spirit of competitiveness among students. Students initially appeared unwilling with reference to the pragmatic choice and use of the word ‘competitiveness’ to denote their desire to come top of the class. Nonetheless, they soon realized that their LA increased as they thought of themselves as less proficient and, thus, incapable of competing with their peers.

When I speak English in class, I have to think if I’ve used the grammar and vocabulary correctly. It’s difficult to clearly say what you want to say in English as you are used to speaking Greek most of the time. And my anxiety doubles because I am in a classroom with other students and I have to speak in front of them. I have to think of what I’ll say in front of people who might be stronger students than I am. I wouldn’t call it competitiveness, but students should be of an equal level of proficiency and should have similar abilities. Is this possible? No, no, I am competitive, because I don’t want other students to perform better than me.

Second, peer pressure as a social force exerted by strong group members was indicated as a source of LA. Students admitted trying to resemble those classmates whom they perceived as more capable learners than themselves:

The peers can be a bit of a snob and you know that they are stronger students than you actually are. So, you try to be like them, but by the time you realize that that’s not possible, your feelings of anxiety overwhelm you.

Finally, the view of the teacher as an authoritative figure and as the only fluent speaker of the target language in the classroom made students hesitant to speak EFL and lowered their self-perceived speaking ability:

I see my teacher as my boss. When I know I am seeing someone who is superior to me and I know that I will be judged by the way I’ll answer his/her questions, I get nervous. I am not self-confident and I feel that my level of English is low.

8 Discussion and Pedagogic Implications

8.1 The Relationship Between LA, Speaking Anxiety and Fear of Negative Evaluation

This study found that speaking anxiety and fear of negative evaluation were a source of LA in EFL classrooms in Greece, a result that corroborates previous research (Horwitz et al. 1986; Young 1990; Aida 1994; Cheng et al. 1999; Kitano 2001;

Gregersen and Horwitz 2002; Mak 2011). The items included in FLCAS1 indicated students' apprehension in speaking English in class, fear of facing derision owing to making errors in front of other students, and comparison among them. Horwitz et al. (1986) have suggested that LA is related to fear of negative evaluation. This study, however, reveals that there is not just a link between speaking anxiety and fear of negative evaluation, but rather that the two possibly describe one distinct student classroom reaction when learning EFL.

One possible reason for this finding could be the participating students' level of proficiency in English which ranged from lower intermediate (B1) to upper advanced (C2). MacIntyre and Gardner (1991, p. 111) posited that as "experience and proficiency increase, anxiety declines in a fairly consistent manner". However, the present study indicates the opposite. Students who have already acquired a certain amount of knowledge at the lower levels (i.e. A1 and A2) are ashamed of making a mistake on any of the simple target structures taught and learned at an earlier stage. Therefore, students with low self-esteem but high fear of negative evaluation are more vulnerable to being exposed when speaking English. At the same time, teachers' reactions to mistakes at these levels of EFL learning may also be stronger. It is likely that some teachers might not be as tolerant of mistakes as teachers at the lowest levels, but on the contrary set higher expectations for their students as the levels progress. Additionally, taking into account the curricular standards for B1 classes and above, EFL students are expected to produce more authentic-like language and not restrict themselves to the production of formulaic sentences and structures. This could also explain the rise in students' fear of negative evaluation since they are aware of the increase in the difficulty of instruction and in the performance standards set for them.

The findings of the study also suggest that teachers should be encouraged to reduce their students' fear of negative evaluation by first identifying those learners with a disposition to LA and to a strong fear of negative evaluation. Praise and pair work or small group work could be frequently incorporated into lesson periods for the purposes of having effective language sessions with the students and creating a sense of community in the classroom. One-to-one tutorials with each student outside class would also allow anxious learners to express their negative emotions and at the same time feel that their tutors are empathetic with their needs. Tutorials could then help teachers better respond to students' EFL communication apprehension in class and think of measures to take to build a positive learning environment.

8.2 The Relationship Between LA and Self-Perceived Oral Performance

This study revealed that low self-perceptions of speaking ability in the EFL classroom caused higher levels of LA about speaking, a result that is consistent

with the extant literature (Bailey 1983; Price 1991; MacIntyre et al. 1997; Kitano 2001; Woodrow 2006). In particular, peer pressure, competitiveness among peers, and teacher status were found to be the components of self-perceived oral ability of Greek EFL learners. Instructed language learning involves performing in front of a teacher and fellow students. Therefore, it is inevitable that EFL learners evaluate their performance, achievement and success in comparison to other students. The intervention of the teacher is vital here, too. In order to reduce anxiety triggered by social comparison among students, teachers should encourage them to work together before focusing on an oral activity as a whole class. Students should feel that they know each other very well and can support each other through peer-seeking. Along with these steps taken by the teachers, language school principals should consider grouping students in accordance with their level of proficiency to avoid huge competence differences between peers in the same class. This means carefully predefining criteria for divisions among levels and groups, and accommodating new-comers appropriately.

Another possible explanation could be that anxious EFL learners who perceive themselves as poor students may not have managed to acquire the input taught and, consequently, make mistakes during the output stages of learning. Individual study plans on appropriate study methods for each student based on his/her aims and needs should be implemented in EFL classes. Diary or journal logs could also be kept and examined as a record of students' opinions on their progress in EFL and on the weaknesses or constraints encountered. By making themselves aware of their students' needs, EFL teachers can help anxious students to develop effective study skills and learning strategies.

However, a crucial point should be made here: students' self-perceived abilities do not necessarily reflect their actual abilities. This statement is valid especially for highly anxious learners with a low sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy. These students tend to underestimate their capacities and consider themselves inferior to their fellows. Instilling in students the idea that all classmates attend EFL lessons for the same purpose and undergo the same difficulties would be a first step to be taken to reduce feelings of negative self-image.

9 Conclusion

This study focused on issues pertaining to speaking anxiety in EFL learning in Greece. Speaking anxiety and fear of negative evaluation were found to highly and significantly correlate with LA. Specifically, fear of negative evaluation was caused by the peers and by the teacher. The former took the form of fear of facing derision due to mistakes and group membership. By contrast, the latter was conceptualized as a result of not meeting teachers' expectations, of poor communication skills in the L2, and of error correction. Finally, self-perceived L2 oral proficiency also interacted with LA. A strong interplay emerged between

competitiveness, peer pressure, teacher high status, and students' self-perceptions about their oral ability.

It is hoped that these findings will urge EFL teachers to identify students prone to LA over speaking and provide an encouraging classroom atmosphere for them. Some potentially fruitful directions for future research could centre on exploring the relationships between speaking anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and self-perceived speaking competence through numerical scales. The teachers' perspective on students' feelings in connection with EFL speaking could also be examined. Classroom observations of teachers' practices could help towards this, followed by qualitative interviews or stimulated recall sessions to further investigate how teachers handle classroom situations that are anxiety-provoking for their students.

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Classroom-oriented Research

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Pawlak, M.; Bielak, J.; Mystkowska-Wiertelak, A. (Eds.)

2014, XVII, 301 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-00187-6