THE COGNITIVE COMPONENTS OF ANXIETY DURING SPEAKING TESTS AMONG OMANI LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

To find out the components and levels of cognitive anxiety among Omani learners, 110 participants were selected in three proficiency levels: elementary, pre-intermediate, and intermediate. To collect the data, a questionnaire adapted from Thomas et al. (2017) Cognitive Test Anxiety Scale (CTAS-2) was used and some statistical analysis was run to measure other variables including gender and English proficiency levels on the amount of cognitive anxiety that students experience during speaking examinations. The results of the study revealed that lack of confidence and sleep, fear of failure, and immediate feedback were the primary sources of anxiety at either average or high levels during the speaking examination sessions. In addition, the study could not find any effect of gender on anxiety. The elementary English proficiency level students suffer more during the speaking examination. The results suggest that teachers provide a comfortable examination environment by fostering some jokes and laughter. Punctuality of examiners, and giving one or two minutes extra to exceptional cases assist in stress reduction during speaking examinations. In addition, the findings suggest that institutions and curriculum developers prepare semi-authentic speaking examination situations to reduce the cognitive elements of test anxiety by designing game-based speaking tasks.

Keywords: cognitive components of anxiety; speaking test; academic performance; Omani EFL context

Introduction

Several factors influence foreign language anxiety among second language learners, which are different and generally used within the classroom contexts (Andujar et al., 2020). Horwitz et al. (1986) developed a Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) to help examine these influencing factors within classrooms by considering factors such as test anxiety and apprehension of test failure. Many studies, such as the recent one by Behforouz et al. (2022), have employed the scale in examining the concept of language anxiety in foreign language classrooms.

Çağatay (2015) employed the FLCAS to investigate the level of anxiety among foreign language students to determine the reason behind their anxiety levels. The result showed that the female students exhibited moderate anxiety levels. The findings also revealed that moderate anxiety was not found among learners at an advanced level, which indicates a significant relationship between proficiency levels and degree of anxiety in speaking or other aspects of language use. In another study, Mohtasham and Farnia (2017) employed the same FLCAS triangulated with an interview to investigate Iranian students' level of anxiety in a foreign language speaking course. Female students were found to have higher anxiety levels in speaking compared to male students who were also asked to carry out the same tasks. The same researchers in a different reported that the Chinese students used around 32 strategies while speaking to alleviate their foreign language speaking anxiety levels. These strategies are encouraged to be heeded by foreign language teachers to reduce their learners' anxiety levels while speaking (Mohtasham & Farnia, 2017).

These reviewed studies using Horwitz's (1986) FLCAS are done within the confines of classroom settings. Therefore, there is a gap in the literature concerning studies that address foreign language anxiety in English oral examinations. Therefore, it could not cover aspects of test purpose, importance, and other aspects of extra-linguistic factors responsible for anxiety in speaking tests. In this respect, a statistical study was carried out by Hewitt and Stephenson (2012) to investigate the relationship between students' achievements and their foreign language anxiety. The researchers categorised anxiety into low, medium, and high, where more anxious subjects were conditioned for interviews to triangulate the rationalisation regarding their anxiety levels. Hewitt and Stephenson (2012) found a strong relationship between poor performance and high anxiety levels in the foreign language learning process. Therefore, based on the previous studies conducted in this area, it can be concluded that there is a strong relationship between anxiety levels and performance levels, as low performance usually is triggered by high anxiety concerning the degree of quantity or quality of the candidates' output (Hewitt & Stephenson, 2012).

The study examined the components and levels of cognitive anxiety among Omani learners. The research questions are:

1) What cognitive components of anxiety hinder better performance of Omani English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students during the speaking test session?
2) Does gender affect Omani students' cognitive anxiety levels in speaking tests?

3) Does English language proficiency affect the level of anxiety that Omani EFL learners experience during the speaking test?

Literature Review

Anxiety

Pintrich and Schunk (2002) defined anxiety as a physiological or behavioural phenomenon that results from a failure in an assessment or evaluation, after an examination. Zheng and Cheng (2018) categorised test anxiety into state anxiety, trait anxiety, and situational anxiety, depending on the test taker's stability and the anxiety's emergence. Horwitz (2001) posits that L2 acquisition anxiety differs from another context-driven type of anxiety. Studies (Day & Gu, 2013; Horwitz, 2001; Kayaoglu & Saglamel, 2013; Siyli & Kafes, 2015) have been carried out to understand the causes of speaking anxiety, revealing many factors such as physiological, psychological, linguistic, and cultural factors, which have spurred speaking anxiety levels among learners who may have their performance affected due to restrictive or performance reasons (Rajitha & Alamelu, 2020). Learners can undoubtedly be affected in their course of L1 and L2 learning situations by comprehension apprehension (CA) as it has a strong relationship with language use (Horwitz, 2001). Both internal factors which are strongly students' related and external factors are found to be responsible for high language anxiety among learners. These external factors include the nonchalant attitude of the learners, lack of scaffolding on the teachers' part, and the problem of attention (Day & Gu, 2013; Siyli & Kafes, 2015).

Kayaoglu and Saglamel (2013) investigated the aspect of language anxiety among some groups of participants using the interview. The interview results revealed that the learners' deficiencies in grammar, pronunciation and lexis are behind their high levels of language anxiety. Zia and Sulan (2015) found that students' anxiety levels rise due to lack of interest in learning, lack of cooperation, poor instruction content, mismanagement of time, and poor teaching skills, among others.

According to McCroskey (2015), there is a relationship between low self-esteem in one's communication skills and hesitations while communicating due to the fear of being evaluated by others. Shyness is also an essential factor in language-speaking anxiety. For example, it was postulated by Crozier and Hostettler (2003) that low performance is more evident among shy children due to how strongly they react to a test administration. According to Liu and Jackson (2008), classroom behavioural issues of self-assessment, fear of being evaluated by peer groups, and pessimism of negativity assessment are all found to cause speaking anxiety among Chinese participants. Despite these factors, scholars have been unanimous in their findings that learners with self-confidence and high motivation have higher performance than learners with low self-confidence and low motivation (Krashen, 1981; Viswat & Jackson, 1993).

It seems essential to measure external or extra-linguistic factors such as the examination hall, the examiner, and the closeness of the examiner and the test takers during examinations. These factors and others such as differences in cultural

backgrounds, pressure from parents on children's performance, and washback effects have real impacts on the learners' performance (Bodas & Ollendick, 2005; Chalhoub-Deville, 2003; Cheng et al., 2014).

The extent of language anxiety in certain language skills can be viewed from different perspectives. These differences could be based on the classroom levels of the test takers. The highest degree of anxiety has been recorded in line with speaking skill-related tasks among the learners (Çağatay, 2015; Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2013; Tanveer, 2007). Zheng and Cheng (2018) found that high anxiety levels are most likely to occur when learners deal directly with native speakers in speaking interactions of a foreign language. Also, the anxiety levels of the learners depend on their language proficiency.

Cognitive Test Anxiety

Cognitive test anxiety is defined as an individual's cognitive reactions to evaluation (Cassady & Johnson, 2002). Cassady and Johnson (2002) identified parts of cognitive test anxiety before, after, and during academic performance. Usually, these reactions are experienced by students when their confidence levels are down during an evaluation when their performances are compared against that of others, and when they are worried much on what they will go through if they fail (Cassady & Johnson 2002; Cheng et al., 2014; In'nami, 2006).

High-stake tests may be underrepresented and have their constructs not relevant due to the reactions against the test takers (Andujar et al., 2020). This effect on test performance has been studied by many researchers in the field of language learning (Chastain, 1975; Cheng et al., 2014; Horwitz, 1986; MacIntyre et al., 1997; Zheng & Cheng, 2018). On the other levels of education outside of the language learning domain, studies (Chastain, 1975; Cheng et al., 2014; Horwitz, 1986; MacIntyre et al., 1997; Zheng & Cheng, 2018) have similarly found that language test performance is affected by high anxiety levels.

Cheng et al. (2014), in their cross-cultural study using participants across different cultures in the context of three varied high-stake speaking tests, highlighted several factors of cognitive test anxiety that affected speaking test performance. Some factors, such as test importance and purpose, have been found to affect cognitive test anxiety. Zheng and Cheng's (2018) study on Chinese students studying in a public university showed that cognitive anxiety is a negative impediment to test achievement. The findings further revealed that students in a foreign language speaking test were more likely to have higher anxiety levels. Parents' expectations, test importance, or test purpose, among others, are factors that may influence cognitive test anxiety (Bodas & Ollendick, 2005; Cheng et al., 2014) as cognitive test anxiety revolves around specific parameters apart from contextual factors that may play a significant role in test takers' anxiety (Andujar et al., 2020).

Gender Differences in English-Speaking Test Anxiety

The issues of gender and language anxiety have recently become the focal

point of many studies because gender difference affects anxiety levels among students (Batiha et al., 2016; Gulmez, 2012; Hwa et al., 2017; Kitano, 2001; Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2013).

No gender differences were found in the anxiety levels of EFL learners at a Polish university (Marzec-Stawiarska, 2014) and among learners in an EFL Jordanian context (Batiha et al., 2016). Other studies have shown differences between the two genders in anxiety levels. For example, Hwa and Peck (2017) found that males and females have moderate level of speaking anxiety, with the anxiety levels in female learners are moderately higher than that of their male counterparts. In another study by Bozavli and Gulmez (2012), Turkish female students exhibited higher anxiety levels in their speaking lessons than males. In two other studies (Hannon, 2012; Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2014), female participants showed higher levels of anxiety in the speaking sessions compared to their male peers.

English Proficiency and Speaking Test Anxiety

Based on the relationship between anxiety levels and English proficiency, many studies (Abrar et al., 2016; Tianjin, 2010; Zhang & Liu, 2013) have found that the more proficient subjects or learners have superficial anxiety levels when learning and speaking English compared to the less proficient participants. This level of difference tends to vary (Çağatay, 2015; Liu, 2006; Tercan & Dikilitas, 2015; Tianjian, 2010; Zhao & Whitchurch, 2011). In a study by Tianjin (2010), the proficiency and speaking anxiety levels of Chinese participants were investigated based on three levels of proficiency. The results revealed that learners with high proficiency levels experience low anxiety while speaking.

Contrary to the findings of Tianjian (2010), Debreli and Demirkan (2015) found that the pre-intermediate learners tend to have more anxiety compared to the elementary learners, who are even more proficient. This might be because of the tasks given to the learners which tend to be more difficult (tasking and demanding) as their proficiency levels increase. Also, at that level, learners may be worried about the expectations of their teachers regarding their performances and hence, their high anxiety levels (Debreli & Demirkan, 2015).

Zhang and Liu (2013) investigated the effect of Chinese university students' oral test anxiety and speaking strategies on the learners' oral performance. The results indicated that more proficient students exhibited lower anxiety levels in their oral performances while taking the oral test. Anxiety and proficiency levels have also been investigated by Abrar et al. (2016), who found that more proficient students have less anxiety in speaking sessions. Liu (2007) examined the anxiety levels during English oral tests among Chinese undergraduate students by developing an oral English Test Anxiety Scale comprising 34 items and figured out three different dimensions concerning oral English tests, which are: the test preparations, test feeling, and test concerns. The findings suggest that most students feel anxious when taking oral tests, while the students with high proficiency levels experience less anxiety.

Method

Participants

The participants of this study included 110 Omani EFL learners from the General Foundation Programme (GFP) at one of the higher education institutions in Oman. This institution provides English language learning classes for three proficiency levels (elementary, pre-intermediate, and intermediate). The students are placed in these levels based on the university's placement test or passing score in the final examination of the previous level or semester. Speaking examination is one of the components of the final examination which is applicable to all levels. Thus, to gain a better and more comprehensive view of speaking examination concerns, and problems, and to find solutions for these issues, students of different proficiency levels were studied. The number of participants at the elementary level was divided into 18 females and 17 males; for pre-intermediate, 19 females and 18 males; and at the intermediate level, 19 females and 19 males.

The students were in their third semester of 2022-2023 academic session at the university. The first language of all the participants was Arabic, with ages ranging between 18 and 19. As mandated by the university, every student has to study the one-year foundation programme before fully commencing their studies in their areas of specialty in higher education. During the required foundation year, students are encouraged to learn English and subjects such as mathematics and IT skills based on the university's curriculum, vision, mission, objectives, learning outcomes, and graduate attributes.

Instruments

To investigate the cognitive test anxiety levels of the participants, the researchers adapted Thomas et al.'s (2017) Cognitive Test Anxiety Scale (CTAS-2). The test consisted of 24 items accompanied by the translation of each statement in Arabic to enhance the students' comprehension of each item. The coding for the questionnaire is based on a four-Likert scale ranging from "Not at all typical of me, Somewhat typical of me, Quite typical of me," to "Very typical of me." The reason for the scale selection is its internal consistency and concurrent validity measured at (α = 0.96). Furthermore, newer studies (Pate et al., 2021; Teribury, 2021; Zheng & Cheng, 2018) have employed the scale in their course of analysing cognitive test anxiety. The scale has also been subjected to numerous translations, such as Spanish (Andujar & Cruz-Martinez, 2020).

To measure the reliability of the test, a pilot test using 30 Omani EFL learners was done. Based on the results obtained from the reliability test, the Cronbach's Alpha was found to be .855, which means that the questionnaire had internal consistency. The Arabic translation of the questionnaire was given to a PhD holder of Applied Linguistics with reputable working experience to maintain the same language standards, form, and style in the Arabic translation. The questionnaire was then taken for external moderation of the questions and cultural and academic ethics to ensure a more reliable instrument.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

At the beginning of the research, instructions were also given to the research participants to read before the data collection procedures. All participants agreed to join the research voluntarily after being categorically informed that all the information they gave would be handled with confidentiality.

The second edition of the CTAS was sent to the students to collect their responses, and they were given 30 minutes to complete the survey. To analyse the data for this study, SPSS version 16.0 was used accordingly.

Results and Discussion

Table 1 shows the item analysis of the Test Anxiety Questionnaire. The items of the questionnaire were in a Likert-scale format ranging from Not at all typical of me (1), Somewhat typical of me (2), Quite typical of me (3), to Very typical of me (4). The researchers divided the scores (1 to 4) by three: Up to 1.33 shows low anxiety. From 1.34 to 2.66 shows average anxiety. From 2.67 to 4 shows high anxiety. As Table 1 indicates, no items showed low anxiety. However, eight items showed high anxiety, and 16 items showed average anxiety. Hence, it can be claimed that the participants suffered from average to high levels of anxiety.

Table 1
Item Analysis for the Test Anxiety Questionnaire (N=110)

	Statements	Mean	Status
1	losing sleep	2.96	High
2	being worried to do well	2.35	Average
3	get distracted	2.45	Average
4	difficulty remembering	2.72	High
5	likely to fail	1.72	Average
6	not good at	2.00	Average
7	begin to think	2.14	Average
8	so nervous	2.73	High
9	feel defeated	2.87	High
10	other students are doing better	2.04	Average
11	tend to freeze up	2.31	Average
12	the consequences of failing	1.97	Average
13	make careless errors	2.51	Average
14	My mind goes blank	2.81	High
15	not be too bright	2.42	Average
16	Forgetting the facts I really know	2.30	Average
17	I do not perform well	2.00	Average
18	the feeling that I am not doing well	2.61	Average
19	being a poor test taker	1.81	Average
20	I should have done better	2.91	High
21	I am not a good student	1.73	Average

22	I often realise mistakes	2.57	Average
23	I am afraid to see the score	2.75	High
24	have less control over test scores	2.82	High

Gender and Cognitive Test Anxiety

To measure the effect of gender on cognitive test anxiety, first, the test of normality was conducted and Table 2 shows the results for the male and female participants.

Table 2

The Result of Normality Test for Males and Females

	Gender	Kolmogorov-Smirnov[a]		
		Statistic	df	Sig.
Anxiety	Female	.201	56	.000
	Male	.215	54	.000

The result of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test of normality shows that the data are not normally distributed for the two sets of scores ($p<.05$). Therefore, the Mann-Whitney U test should be used for the mean comparison. The descriptive statistics (ranks table) of the two groups are shown in Table 3.

Table 3

The Ranks Table for the Scores of Males and Females

	Gender	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Anxiety	Female	56	58.31	3265.50
	Male	54	52.58	2839.50
	Total	110		

The mean rank for the female and the male groups are 58.31 and 52.58, respectively. Table 4 shows the result of the Mann-Whitney U Test.

Table 4

The Result of the Mann-Whitney U Test for the Comparison of Males and Females

	Anxiety
Mann-Whitney U	1354.500
Z	-.966
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.334

Based on Table 4, there was no significant difference between the male and the female participants, $U = 1354.50$, $P > .05$. Hence, gender did not significantly affect the cognitive speaking test anxiety levels of Omani students.

English Proficiency and Cognitive Test Anxiety

Table 5 shows the result of the test of normality for the proficiency levels. The result of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test of normality shows that the data are not normally distributed for the elementary and intermediate levels ($p<.05$). Therefore, the Kruskal-Wallis test should be used for the mean comparison. The descriptive statistics (ranks table) of the three groups are shown in Table 6.

Table 5

The Result of Normality Test for Proficiency Levels

Language proficiency		Kolmogorov-Smirnov[a]		
		Statistic	df	Sig.
Anxiety	Elementary	.258	35	.000
	Intermediate	.538	38	.000
	Pre-intermediate	.100	37	.200*

Table 6

The Ranks Table for the Three Proficiency Levels

Language Proficiency		N	Mean Rank
Anxiety	Elementary	35	67.89
	Pre-Intermediate	37	57.81
	intermediate	38	41.84
	Total	110	

The mean ranks for the elementary, pre-intermediate, and intermediate groups are 67.89, 57.81, and 41.84, respectively. Table 7 shows the result of the inferential test.

Table 7

The Result of the Kruskal-Wallis Test for the Comparison of Levels

	Anxiety
KW Test	13.090
df	2
Asymp. Sig.	.001

Table 7 shows a significant difference among the levels, X^2 (2) = 13.09, $P < .05$. To find out which group is statistically different from the others, an inferential test was performed for each set. Table 8 shows the descriptive statistics of the three levels.

Table 8
The Descriptive Statistics of the Three Levels

Language Proficiency	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Elementary	59.1143	14.46857	35
Intermediate	54.8421	.97333	38
Pre-intermediate	58.6486	11.08857	37
Total	57.4818	10.48698	110

As can be seen in Table 8, the mean scores of the elementary, intermediate, and pre-intermediate levels are 59.11, 54.84, and 58.64 respectively.

Table 9
The Result of the Mann-Whitney U Test for the Comparison of Elementary and Intermediate Levels

	Anxiety
Mann-Whitney U	360.500
Wilcoxon W	1101.500
Z	-3.634
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000

Based on Table 9, there was a significant difference between the elementary and intermediate levels, $U = 360.50$, $P < .05$.

Table 10
The Result of the Mann-Whitney U Test for the Comparison of Elementary and Pre-Intermediate Levels

	Anxiety
Mann-Whitney U	518.500
Wilcoxon W	1221.500
Z	-1.458
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.145

As can be seen in Table 10, there was not any significant difference between the elementary and pre-intermediate levels, $U = 518.50$, $P > .05$.

Table 11
The Result of the Mann-Whitney U Test for the Comparison of Intermediate and Pre-Intermediate Levels

	Anxiety
Mann-Whitney U	488.500
Wilcoxon W	1229.500

Z	-2.453
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.014

As Table 11 shows, there was a significant difference between the intermediate and pre-intermediate levels, $U = 488.50$, $P < .05$.

Discussion

Anxiety is a feeling due to the surrounding ideas or factors (Koba et al., 2000; Ohata, 2005). This definition states that anxiety can bring psychological and biological barriers that are not controllable and non-predictable (Behforouz et al., 2022). This study investigated the cognitive elements of anxiety experienced by Omani EFL students of various proficiency levels while participating in speaking examination sessions.

The first research question investigated cognitive components of anxiety that negatively affect Omani EFL learners' speaking performance during the test. The questionnaire results showed that Omani EFL students had some amount of anxiety ranging from average (Mean: 1.72, likely to fail) to high levels (Mean: 2.96, losing sleep). There is no item found to be in lower levels of anxiety. Among the options, lack of sleep (M=2.96) and nervousness after the performance in the speaking examination (M=20.91) topped the list. Bashori et al. (2022) also revealed that their participants showed a moderate-to-serious level of anxiety in speaking sessions. However, the results are different from Yaniafari and Rihardini (2021), who found that students in online speaking classes had less anxiety. Lack of adequate practice time, lack of self-confidence, lack of real-life situation communication, fear of failure, receiving immediate feedback, and lack of speaking skills were considered the most important reasons for the anxiety in speaking sessions. Based on Debreli and Demirkan's (2016) study, the reasons for the EFL students in Cyprus to have high anxiety in the language learning process are fear of failure and making mistakes, and being called by language teachers in the class. Also, Jones (2004, as cited in Debreli & Demirkan, 2016) noticed that fear of making mistakes plays a vital role in foreign language learning in causing anxiety.

The second research question aimed at finding male and female Omani EFL students' performance differences in speaking examination sessions. The results revealed that anxiety did not have any relation with gender ($U = 1354.50$, $P > .05$). There were also no significant gender differences in other studies (Behforouz et al., 2022; Karadeniz, 2011; Kurniasih et al., 2021). In contrast, some studies showed gender differences. Siahpoosh et al. (2022) reported that female bilinguals are significantly more anxious compared to their male counterparts in an online session. Öztürk and Gürbüz (2013) also found that females have more anxiety levels while communicating in English. In two other studies, however, Fariadian et al. (2014) and Jebreil et al. (2015) stated that after measuring the anxiety level of their students within the Iranian EFL context, male students have higher anxiety than female students.

As for the third research question, there was a significant difference in the anxiety levels of students with different proficiency levels. The elementary students

had the highest anxiety level (M=59.1143) and intermediate students had the lowest (M=54.8421). In this regard, studies found different results. For example, Gardner et al. (1977, as cited in Marcos-Llinas & Garau, 2009) stated that when students' proficiency levels increased, their anxiety levels decreased accordingly. They revealed that elementary students carry more anxiety than advanced students, which is in line with the findings of the present study. In two other qualitative studies, Ewald (2007) and Kitano (2001) revealed that increased proficiency levels result in higher anxiety. Sparks and Ganschow (2007) found that high school English learners with higher anxiety levels performed differently based on their first language skills than those with less anxiety. Finally, Marcus-Llinas and Garau (2009) found that advanced students with higher levels of achievement carried a higher degree of anxiety too.

Conclusion

The study showed that the anxiety experienced by Omani EFL students in speaking test sessions may be due to lack of adequate sleep, lack of confidence, fear of failure, and no control over the scores. The study also revealed that gender did not remarkably affect anxiety. In addition, it was revealed that elementary students carry higher anxiety level, followed by pre-intermediate learner, while intermediate learners had a lesser level of anxiety than the other two groups.

The findings of this study can be beneficial for examiners and institutions. As receiving immediate feedback and fear of failure increase anxiety levels, examiners can start their session by introducing some jokes to create a friendly and comfortable situation that decreases students' anxiety and increases their confidence. It is suggested that examiners be punctual during the examination session as it might reduce the anxiety level of students. Examiners can consider giving one or two minutes extra to some of the stressed students to decrease the anxiety level before they start the speaking examination. Since students lack speaking skills, schools, institutions, and even the curriculum designers can implement some type of game-based learning or extracurricular activities outside of the classroom context to provide semi-authentic situations to practise their English skills in speaking examination situations.

This study dealt with the cognitive components of anxiety during the speaking examination. Further research can be conducted to find the techniques for dealing with these reasons for anxiety either during the speaking examination or speaking sessions in the class. This study focused on the students to examine the reasons and amount of stress, and further studies are suggested to investigate the teachers' viewpoints on the anxiety and strategies they use to reduce this type of anxiety during class and examinations. This study targeted the students at the foundation level, however, higher education students may suffer from similar anxiety too, therefore, to gain comprehensive data on Omani students, further research is suggested to be conducted in all Omani educational institutions.

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