Problematizing Speaking Anxiety in Language Learning Settings

Problemática de la ansiedad al hablar en contextos de aprendizaje de i diomas

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Abstract

Objective. The aim of this paper is to problematize speaking anxiety in order to have a solid understanding of this situation and its potential implications within language learning contexts. Another purpose is to explore the literature on strategies used by learners to handle speaking anxiety. Likewise, the paper is to offer an overarching panorama of such a phenomenon within the field. Methodology. The paper adopted an exploratory methodology that included a systematic revision of information on the phenomenon. Analysis of Results. The first section problematizes speaking anxiety and discusses the influence of this phenomenon in the learning process. The second part establishes social anxiety as a general construct to the discussion. The following sections discuss perspectives on anxiety and foreign language speaking anxiety as pivotal elements that provide the gist of the paper. Next, the paper offers a review of the literature on strategies to reduce speaking anxiety. After that, a much-needed section on criticism to speaking anxiety provides opposing views. Conclusions. The main conclusion establishes speaking anxiety as a significant issue that impacts students' performance in language learning settings.

Keywords: Problematizing, speaking anxiety, language learning strategies, language learning.

Resumen

Objetivo. El objetivo del artículo es problematizar la ansiedad al hablar para tener una comprensión sólida de esta situación y posibles implicaciones dentro de contextos de aprendizaje de idiomas. Otro propósito es explorar literatura sobre las estrategias utilizadas por personas estudiantes para manejar la ansiedad al hablar. Asimismo, el artículo pretende ofrecer un panorama general de dicho fenómeno dentro del campo. Metodología. El estudio adoptó una metodología exploratoria que incluyo una revisión sistemática de la información sobre el fenómeno. Análisis de resultados. La primera sección problematiza la ansiedad al hablar y discute la influencia de este fenómeno en el proceso de aprendizaje. La segunda parte establece la ansiedad social como un constructo general de discusión. Las siguientes secciones analizan las perspectivas en la ansiedad y ansiedad al hablar un idioma extranjero como elementos fundamentales que proporcionan la esencia del artículo. A continuación, el artículo ofrece una revisión de la literatura sobre estrategias para reducir la ansiedad al hablar. Además, una sección necesaria sobre la crítica a la ansiedad de hablar proporciona puntos de vista opuestos. Conclusiones. La conclusión principal establece que la ansiedad al hablar es un problema significativo que afecta el desempeño de estudiantes en entornos de aprendizaje de idiomas.

Palabras clave: Problemática, ansiedad al hablar, estrategias de aprendizaje de idiomas, aprendizaje de idiomas.

Introduction

One problem that impacts students' performance is speaking anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986). It is thus important to have a deep understanding of such a phenomenon and its implications within the language learning process and milieu. Speaking anxiety has the potential to influence foreign language learning (Horwitz et al., 1986). In addition, research indicates that students learning English as a Foreign Language, hereafter referred to as EFL, experience different degrees of speaking anxiety when communicating (Horwitz et al., 1986). Moreover, a negative correlation between anxiety and foreign language performance has been previously indicated (Gregersen, 2003). Arguably, speaking anxiety influences students in a more negative way when communicating. This phenomenon causes weaknesses and lacks that interfere with students' language learning process. For example, students' ability to perform effectively in conversation and other communicative tasks is jeopardized. Students' speaking anxiety does not let them fully comprehend specific types of feedback, for example recasting. A major difficulty relates to the relationship between content and intelligibility. Even though students might have a solid argument or concept, their speaking anxiety may interfere with the delivery of the message. Additionally, speaking anxiety poses challenges to the acquisition and development of linguistic features and might have a direct effect on students' language learning process. The specific types of information, data, and results derived from this inquiry are meant to increase the knowledge of the topic to better comprehend it. Likewise, these constructs are to provide useful information to explore ways of becoming aware and understanding this phenomenon within this context and parameters.

The aim of this paper is to problematize speaking anxiety in order to have a more solid understanding of this situation and its potential implications within language learning contexts. Another purpose is to explore the literature on strategies used by learners to handle speaking anxiety. In addition, the paper is to offer an overarching panorama of such a phenomenon within the field. It comprises seven sections containing relevant considerations and insights. Next, a thorough discussion is offered to synthesize and gauge salient concepts and implications. Framed within a general qualitative framework, this paper adopts an exploratory methodology. This type of methodology is intended to provide a deep understanding of the phenomenon within particular contexts and to identify potential

issues and new concepts (Hernández et al., 2010). The methodology included a systematic revision of articles and data on the topic.

Problematizing Speaking Anxiety

Understanding the implications and subtleties of speaking anxiety within the language context becomes a must mainly for the potential impact on the learning process. This task is crucial as speaking underlies almost all the activities carried out by teachers and students in an EFL class (Bailey, 2005). The body of literature reviewed established speaking anxiety as a key issue that interferes with students in language learning and EFL contexts (Abedini & Chalak, 2017; He, 2017; Sadighi & Dastpak, 2017).

Previous research does highlight anxiety and speaking anxiety in EFL contexts as significant issues. First, it is important to mention that a considerable number of studies establish speaking anxiety as a situation-specific anxiety. In a study on speaking inhibiting factors for Iranian EFL adult learners, Abedini and Chalak (2017) concluded that anxiety constituted a significant element that limited students' communicative skills. Now, from the results of research on language classroom anxiety in Greek EFL learners' diaries, Gkonou (2013) concluded that anxiety fluctuated over time, hence "proving that language anxiety is a situation-specific as well as a dynamic variable in L2 contexts" (Gkonou, 2013, p. 51). Similarly, Cordero and Morales (2016) identified anxiety as a pivotal factor that interfered with and hindered EFL students' speaking performance in a study with adult learners in a Costa Rican university setting. Consistent with Cordero and Morales' (2016) findings, Shumin (2002) also noted anxiety as an important factor. Furthermore, when explaining this concept, Shumin (2002) stressed the importance of anxiety and its impact on EFL oral production by stating that "speaking a foreign language in public, especially in front of native speakers, is often anxiety-provoking. Sometimes, extreme anxiety occurs when EFL learners become tongue-tied or lost for words in an unexpected situation, which often leads to discouragement" (p. 206).

Interestingly, Gkonou (2013) proposed that there are causes directly related to the classroom environment and conducive to anxiety. These "major stressors" (Gkonou, 2013, p. 59) are input, extrinsic motivation, exams, the language teacher, skills, class mistakes, and dependence on marks. Moreover, Gkonou (2013) stated that "lin-

guistic factors as well as socio-psychological barriers combined to induce anxiety within the learners" (p. 59). Likewise, Foreign Language Anxiety, a more encompassing construct, was pinpointed as a significant feature that interfered with students' language learning process (Tran et al., 2013). Finally, Gkonou (2013) suggested the need to further investigate anxiety and individual differences. "Future research could be orientated towards a more thorough investigation of the way individual difference factors intertwine with anxiety…" (Gkonou, 2013, p. 65).

Now the influence of speaking anxiety in the learning process is established. The first element is that of concreteness. Students with high levels of debilitating anxiety provided more concrete messages than their non-anxious counterparts (Horwitz et al., 1986). This implies that the degree of interpretation and elaboration of the messages was diminished because of anxiety levels. Building on this explanation, Horwitz et al. (1986) stated that "…the more anxious student tends to avoid attempting difficult or personal messages in the target language" (p. 126).

Secondly, anxiety interfered with university students' impromptu speaking skills. On this concept, Horwitz et al., 1986 commented that "difficulty in speaking in class is probably the most frequently cited concern of the anxious foreign language students seeking help at the LSC" (Horwitz et al., 1986, p. 126). Specifically, anxiety affected students in impromptu activities or activities with little preparation. To illustrate this point, Horwitz et al. (1986) asserted that "students often report that they feel fairly comfortable responding to a drill or delivering prepared speeches in their foreign language class but tend to 'freeze' in a role-play situation" (p. 126). Based on this information, it can be concluded spontaneous speaking activities and real-life tasks are responsible for significant degrees of anxiety among students. This shows the impact of speaking anxiety and how it influences students' communicative competence when doing role-plays and extemporaneous activities that mirror day-to-day conversations where language is used for communicative purposes. In this sense, Horwitz et al., 1986 pinpointed the difficulty on anxious students, "since speaking in the target language seems to be the most threatening aspect of foreign language learning, the current emphasis on the development of communicative competence poses particularly great difficulties for the anxious student" (Horwitz et al., 1986, p. 132). How anxiety influences students' speaking skills has received a considerable degree of attention from scholars, universities, research

projects, and professional discussion since it entails a myriad of biological, psychological, linguistic, historical, and sociocultural aspects that are fundamental for human interaction and survival. Even though it is not exclusively related to speaking, anxiety might influence and contribute to Krashen's affective filter, an issue that impedes second-language acquisition (Krashen, 1982).

The third aspect is the connection between speaking anxiety and linguistics. In discussing this idea, Horwitz et al. (1986) manifested that "anxious students may also have difficulty grasping the content of a target language message. Many LSC clients claim that they have little or no idea of what the teacher is saying in extended target language utterances" (p. 126). Thus, the symbiotic relationship between listening and speaking is present one more time. On this relation, Horwitz et al., 1986 claimed that "anxious language learners also complain of difficulties discriminating the sounds and structures of a target language message" (Horwitz et al., 1986, p. 126). Clearly, mispronouncing a sound might not represent such an issue when attempting to communicate a message, whereas a complex grammar error or misunderstood meaning may seriously jeopardize the communicative intention and lead to breakdowns, pitfalls, and conundrums. Finally, this review provided robust evidence related to the existence of speaking anxiety as a major problem within EFL contexts.

The fourth element is performance within academic and social environments. When explaining how the construct of communication apprehension, a conceptual foundation of foreign language classroom anxiety, is significant to foreign language anxiety, specifically in relation to speaking, Horwitz et al. (1986) have posited that "difficulty in speaking in dyads or groups (oral communication anxiety) or in public ('stage fright'), or in listening to or learning a spoken message (receiver anxiety) are all manifestations of communication apprehension" (p. 127). Finally, Horwitz et al. (1986) specifically stated how foreign language anxiety influenced particular moments in the classroom "they [students] spoke of 'freezing' in class, standing outside the door trying to summon up enough courage to enter, and going back prior to tests" (p. 128).

Based on the previous information, it can be determined that speaking anxiety constitutes a problem for students within language learning settings, EFL contexts included. The implications of this phenomenon are closely related to the performance of students in the language learning

and acquisition process. These constructs represent fundamentals to problematize speaking anxiety.

Social Anxiety

In this part of the paper, social anxiety is discussed as an overarching element that contributes to the present analysis.

Generalities. Human beings experience anxiety in day-to-day situations to varying degrees. The problem arises when this behavior impedes students' optimal performance in communicative tasks. Social anxiety encompasses a fear of scrutiny by peers, which might lead to rejection and avoidance in different social situations, learning included. Many cultural, physical, social, and personal subtleties are involved in the speaking process. When defining speaking as a productive language skill, Bailey (2005) noted that "speaking consists of producing systematic verbal utterances to convey meaning… Speaking is such a fundamental human behavior that we don't stop to analyze it unless there is something noticeable about it" (p. 2). According to research, social anxiety affects and influences students' speaking skills (Koba, Ogawa, & Wilkinson, 2000; Tsui, 1996).

Distinctive features. Social anxiety is a pervasive type of mental phobia including a 12-month prevalence in about 18% of individuals (Stein & Stein, 2008). Students who experience social anxiety tend to manifest a degree of shyness and usually withdraw themselves intentionally when interacting in new settings and with unknown peers. They might even experience physical or emotional symptoms. Next, Stein and Stein (2008) noted that social anxiety "…has an early age of onset—by age 11 years in about 50% and by age 20 years in about 80% of individuals" (p. 1115). This phenomenon starts at an early age and persists in adulthood. Some causes of social anxiety in the EFL classroom are: "fear of making mistakes; fear of being negatively evaluated; limited vocabulary knowledge; lack of practice; fear of being the focus of attention" (Sadighi & Dastpak, 2017, p. 113). Fear constitutes a physiological threat or sensation that something wrong is likely to happen – that is, there is a strong sense of not being adequate.

Diagnostic criteria. Brown and O'Leary (2001) have established some general criteria. The first element is an exaggerated degree of anxiety and uneasiness over a considerable period during several activities. The second criterion is an impediment to manage worry appropriately. The third aspect is the connection of anxiety with these disorders: muscle tension, sleep disturbance, restlessness, irritability, and fatigue. The fourth factor is the impairment caused by anxiety in social manifestations. The last criterion claims that this disorder is not triggered by the effects of any specific substance or medical condition (Brown & O'Leary, 2001). These concepts are pertinent considerations of social anxiety.

Perspectives in Anxiety

This section goes over the main perspectives in anxiety and provides a more central view to the discussion. First, a definition of anxiety is provided. Next, the perspectives in anxiety are explored. Horwitz (2013) stated that anxiety is "a syndrome that occurs independently of any unique qualities of the patients who carry its symptoms or of the period of human history when it appeared" (p. 2). Closely related to this concept, Horwitz et al. (1986) posited that "anxiety is the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the automatic nervous system" (p. 125). MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) provide a more encompassing definition within the field of foreign language, "language anxiety can be defined as the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language contexts, including speaking, listening, and learning" (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994, p. 284). When analyzing these definitions, it can be concluded that a feeling of tension is a subjective phenomenon that interferes with students' ability to speak and perform. Finally, foreign language speaking anxiety represents a phenomenon leading to the difficulty or impossibility that students experience when attempting to speak and function in a foreign language.

Anxiety as a personality trait. Trait anxiety is a general personality feature that some people exhibit as something constant in their day-to-day experiences; they are anxious by nature when performing in different contexts. MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) believed that "trait anxiety may be defined as an individual's likelihood of becoming anxious in any situation" (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991, p. 87). People with trait anxiety might be anxious or nervous when performing different tasks in different situations. MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) contended that "trait anxiety has been shown to impair cognitive functioning, to disrupt memory, to lead to avoidance of behaviors, and to have several other effects" (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991, p. 87). When discussing the characteris-

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tics of trait anxiety, Leal et al. (2017) claimed that "trait anxiety is, therefore, relatively stable over time and considered a central characteristic of patients with anxiety disorders, as they present higher trait anxiety in comparison to healthy individuals" (p. 148). A person exhibiting trait anxiety might not be able to perform under regular circumstances. In addition, people with trait anxiety will react differently – that is, personality traits have different connections and reactions to circumstances. Remarkably, MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) affirmed that "for most individuals, some situations will provoke anxiety whereas others will promote feelings of relaxation. Within a large group of people, the situations provoking anxiety will differ, even among individuals showing similar trait anxiety scores" (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991, p. 88). Specific features of the learners' personality determine the reactions to a given situation. Finally, the concept of time also plays a significant role in trait anxiety; "trait anxiety essentially is the idea that future anxiety propensities can be inferred from past anxiety experiences by the assumption of a continuity in the frequency and the intensity of anxiety behavior from past to future" (Reiss, 1997, p. 211). Interestingly, there is a connection between trait and state anxiety "… trait anxiety refers to a trait of personality, describing individual differences related to a tendency to present state anxiety" (Leal et al., 2017, p. 148). Research on the topic also established the connection; "in VMST, trait anxiety correlated to state anxiety (psychological parameters) in all test phases" (Leal et al., 2017, p. 147). Reiss established the connection too; "trait anxiety, or a propensity to experience state anxiety, cannot be directly observed but is manifested as state anxiety when stressed is experienced" (Reiss, 1997, p. 204).

Anxiety as an emotional state. A second perspective considers anxiety as an emotional state, the here-and-now approach. In certain individuals, it is a response triggered by a specific situation, for example, performing in a role-play in front of a class, "state anxiety is apprehension experienced at a particular moment in time, for example, prior to taking examinations" (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991, p. 90). For Leal et al. (2017), state anxiety "… reflects the psychological and physiological transient reactions directly related to adverse situations in a specific moment" (p. 148). In comparing these previous constructs, Horwitz (2001) posited that "…trait anxiety is conceptualized as a relatively stable personality characteristic while state anxiety is seen as a response to a particular anxiety provoking stimulus such as an important

test" (p. 113). Stressful situations or moments are a salient feature of state anxiety. For MacIntyre and Gardner (1991), "state anxiety is a blend of the trait and situational approaches" (p. 90). When establishing the connection between these perspectives, Reiss (1997) concluded that "the concept of trait anxiety requires an objective specification of the circumstances under which the inferred propensity for state anxiety can be observed" (p. 211). Research also established a correlation to state anxiety. In this sense, MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) said that "the moderately strong correlation usually found between state and trait anxiety suggests that increased levels of trait anxiety are associated with higher state anxiety" (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991, p. 90).

Anxiety as a situation-specific construct. A third approach deals with situation-specific anxieties. Particularly, the term *specific anxiety* or *situation-specific anxiety* has been used to describe language learning situations since; "situation specific studies can offer more to the understanding of anxiety because the respondents are queried about various aspects of the situation. A key difference is that respondents are required to make attributions of anxiety to particular sources" (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991, p. 91). Also, MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) imply that research results offer reliable data when using this approach, "it seems plausible to suggest that the more meaningful and consistent results have emerged from the latter group [situation-specific anxiety]" (p. 92). Additionally, the classification of foreign language anxiety as a situation-specific type of anxiety is discussed by Horwitz (2010); "typically referred to as language anxiety or foreign language anxiety (FLA), this anxiety is categorized as a situation-specific anxiety, similar in type to other familiar manifestations of anxiety such as stage fright or test anxiety" (Horwitz, 2010, p. 154). This concept is essential in terms of research purposes as it establishes foreign language anxiety as a situation-specific anxiety. Finally, this approach has been criticized for both its broadness and specificity. MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) pointed out that "a criticism of this approach is that the situation under consideration can be defined very broadly, more narrowly, or quite specifically" (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991, p. 91). It can be argued that the situation-specific type of anxiety is not established. To this end, MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) explained that "it is the researcher's responsibility to define a situation that is sufficiently specific to be meaningful for the purpose at hand, yet to have reasonable generality to permit genera-

lizations" (p. 91). However, other authors have identified situation-specific anxieties. These anxieties are communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986). Likewise, research offered evidence that language anxiety is an independent situation-specific anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986). Finally, authors suggest that foreign language anxiety should be considered as situation-specific, trait, and state anxiety (MacIntyre, 2007). These ideas are germane perspectives to the discussion in relation to anxiety.

The implications of these perspectives to the language learning context are now explored. As a language teacher and a researcher, the author aligns with the concept that anxiety can be considered an emotional state and can be triggered by a specific situation such as an exam or an oral presentation. Nonetheless, all the perspectives present issues and complexities to learning contexts. For example, a student exhibiting anxiety as a personal trait might find functioning properly in impromptu settings or scenarios with little preparation challenging. Furthermore, students may get anxious about unexpected activities or exams involving complex mental abilities. Thus, the degree of preparation and scaffolding becomes essential to lower potential insecurities that could generate different levels of anxiety. Furthermore, it is relevant to foster non-threatening environments where students feel safe and within learning circumstances conducive to language acquisition and proper functioning. Anxiety poses concerns to language teachers in EFL environments as it encompasses a subjective phenomenon with diverse behaviors and attitudes that impact the language class in different forms. Depending on the specific situation, the language teacher might not be prepared to approach such a phenomenon in an effective way. These concepts are relevant implications of the perspectives on anxiety within foreign language learning contexts.

Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety

This section analyzes foreign language speaking anxiety as a pivotal construct within the field of anxiety and its influence on language learning settings.

Generalities. When defining foreign language classroom anxiety, Horwitz et al. (1986) posited that "anxiety is the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system" (p. 125). In addition, Horwitz et al. (1986) indicated that "…we conceive foreign language

anxiety as a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (p. 128).

Evidence of foreign language speaking anxiety. The body of literature related to foreign language anxiety provides evidence that students have experienced anxiety in EFL contexts, speaking included (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). The literature to be discussed in this section can be organized into an overarching category.
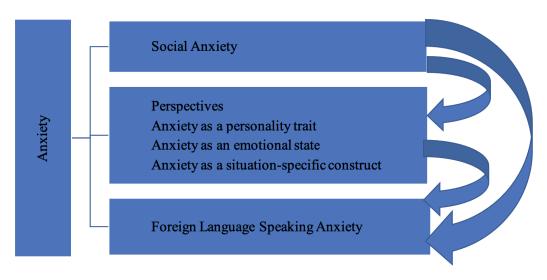
The literature dealt with studies based on anxiety as a situation-specific approach and the foreign language classroom anxiety theory proposed by Horwitz et al. (1986). Three interrelated components served as the underlying basis of this theory. The first component is communication apprehension, which entails a cognitive awareness of the difficulty of functioning properly in a foreign language. A key element to consider is that of communication in a language that has not been fully mastered, among the many other concerns related to oral production (Horwitz et al., 1986). The second factor is test anxiety. It relates to a fear of failure in examinations in the language class. A pivotal element is that oral exams have a real potential to cause anxiety and that they are a common feature in class (Horwitz et al., 1986). The third element is fear of negative evaluation. It implies a negative perception in a different range of social activities. Negative evaluations of other stakeholders in the communicative process interfere with students' performance and competence in the foreign language (Horwitz et al., 1986). Horwitz et al. (1986) and Horwitz (2016) have provided evidence that supports foreign language classroom anxiety theory.

A study conducted by Çağatay (2015) examined the connection between foreign language speaking anxiety, potential reasons and solutions in a Turkish EFL environment. Findings revealed four major concepts. The first one showed that students did experience moderate levels of foreign language speaking anxiety. This study provides evidence as these results established foreign language speaking anxiety as an issue in EFL milieus: "A total score more than 60 demonstrated a high level of anxiety; a total score ranged from 31 to 60 presented a moderate level of speaking anxiety…" (Çağatay, 2015, p. 652). Even though these results entailed a quantitative approach, it is precisely this evidence that corroborates the connection. A second pertinent finding was that of gender differences.

Figure 1. Connection of anxiety with anxiety perspectives, social anxiety and foreign language speaking anxiety.

Source: Elaborated by the researcher.

Interestingly, female students tend to be more anxious when speaking English as a foreign language (Çağatay, 2015). This study is in accordance with the results of Luo (2014), indicating that female students were found to be more anxious than their male counterparts when speaking Chinese as a foreign language. A caveat, Çağatay (2015) suggested the idea that this result might have its genesis in Turkish cultural background. Gender influence on foreign language speaking anxiety might represent a sensitive issue in specific types of societies or cultural groups. The third concept provides data on the connection between proficiency level and speaking anxiety. The proficiency level did not influence the students' level of anxiety (Çağatay, 2015). This is enlightening in the sense that language teachers might be inclined to believe that the students' proficiency level and level of anxiety are inextricably intertwined. The fourth was that speaking with native speakers of the language made a significant difference when compared to other types of speakers (Çağatay, 2015). This piece of evidence is significant as it is closely related to impromptu speaking and real communication in EFL contexts.

Another significant element to take into consideration is that of students' perception of the foreign language. Luo (2014) established a positive correlation between speaking anxiety and students' perception of the Chinese language. Interestingly, Luo (2014) reported a negative correlation between speaking anxiety and self-perceived language ability. This suggests that students' perception

of the language might influence their speaking skills. Similar to these studies, Yalçın and İnceçay (2014) proposed that the feeling of success and preparedness tends to lower anxiety: "Moreover, it was found that the more the students were familiar with the activities, the more relaxed they felt in speaking" (Yalçın & İnceçay, 2014, p. 2624).

Tellingly, literature established language anxiety in a more general sense. MacIntyre and Gardner (1989) stated that language anxiety develops as students encounter frequent, negative experiences in the language classroom. Language anxiety might have a debilitating influence on students' learning ability and performance (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989). This construct implies that language anxiety is framed in emotional states and situation-specific constructs.

The following figure illustrates the connection that links anxiety with anxiety perspectives, social anxiety, and foreign language speaking anxiety.

As observed in the figure, social anxiety offers a general panorama to situate the reader within the field – social anxiety informs the perspectives of anxiety. Along with the perspectives of anxiety, foreign language speaking anxiety constitutes a major element that is pivotal to the discussion within the field of anxiety. The figure offers a more encompassing visual representation of the connection of these elements.

Strategy Use to Reduce Speaking Anxiety

It is evident that speaking anxiety represents a major issue that interferes with students in language learning settings and EFL contexts based on the literature reviewed. However, this did not fully clarify the strategies that students use to handle speaking anxiety in language learning settings. This section of the paper goes over literature on reducing speaking anxiety and its implications within EFL and language learning contexts.

There are two key elements of language learning strategies that aid to the discussion and are essential for research purposes. First, language learning strategies entail an internal process that poses issues for students to verbalize and for researchers to determine. This is paramount as researchers depend heavily on students' skills and disposition to share their insights. Oxford (2002) asserted that "observational methods are often difficult to employ because many learning strategies are internal and thus invisible to observers. Therefore, much learning strategy research depends on learners' willingness and ability to describe their internal behaviors, both cognitive and affective" (Oxford, 2002, p. 125). The second aspect is the context of the inquiry. In relation to this factor, Oxford (2002) posited that "by conducting studies with clear instructions in non threatening circumstances, researchers have found that many or most L2 learners are capable of remembering their learning strategies and describing them when asked" (Oxford, 2002, p. 125). Arguably, a non-threatening context might be conducive to a state of cooperation.

When discussing the results of research on learning strategies, Oxford (2002) provides a classification for organization purposes. The first one is lists: "… L2 researchers made lists of strategies presumed to be essential for all good language learners" (Oxford, 2002, p. 125). Research shows the use of lists with learning strategies in EFL and ESL contexts (Lessard-Clouston, 1997). The second category is effectiveness of strategy use: "Research indicates that appropriate use of language learning strategies, which include dozens or even hundreds of possible behaviors, results in improved L2 proficiency overall, or in specific language skill areas" (Oxford, 2002, p. 126). The third one is orchestration by effective learners. Effective L2 learners resort to a variety of strategies in relation to the communicative task (Oxford, 2002). Influence on strategy use is another aspect. Elements like motivation, sex, cultural background, and age are factors that influence the use of a learning strategy (Oxford, 2002). For instance, the particularities of an exercise and learners' experience determine the use of a specific strategy (Oxford, 2002). Finally, Oxford (2002) developed a system "to place strategies into a more coherent and comprehensive typology and to redress the woeful lack of research emphasis given to social and affective strategies" (p. 128). The strategy groups of the system are affective (laughter and meditation), social (asking questions and becoming culturally aware), metacognitive (checking errors and paying attention), memory-related (grouping and rhyming), general cognitive (reasoning and analyzing), and compensatory (guessing meaning and using synonyms) (Oxford, 2002).

Speaking strategies have been conceived as techniques that learners use to understand the lack of lexis and structures when attempting to communicate (Cohen, 2010). Chou (2018) commented that "speaking strategies have been viewed as first aid devices used for interaction and communication, to address problems or breakdowns, and to remain active in communication" (Chou, 2018, p. 611). When referring to language learning strategies, Oxford (2002) stated that "strategies are tools for the self-directed involvement necessary for developing communicative ability" (p. 124). Oxford (2002) explores the nature of the use of language learning strategies; "… language learning strategies – specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques that students (often intentionally) use to improve their progress in developing L2 skills. These strategies can facilitate the internalization, storage, retrieval, or use of the new language" (Oxford, 2002, p. 124). Language learning strategies are significant for students in EFL contexts. It is a fact that speaking anxiety constitutes a major issue that interferes with students' communicative skills, hence the relevance of this section.

Noticeably there has been a prominent focus on the use of speaking strategies to alleviate speaking anxiety. Previous research considered speaking anxiety as an issue that needed to be solved or reduced by using specific strategies or approaches. Atas (2015) reported the use of drama as a strategy that had positive effects on the level of speaking anxiety in EFL learners: "Drama had many positive effects… Among the most important ones, we can count the lowering of speaking anxiety levels; improving self-confidence; increasing motivation; decreasing the level of their fear of being laughed at; and being called on in English class" (Atas, 2015, p. 966). This study has an evident problem-solving nature: "This study shows that

drama helped to reduce speaking anxiety in FL classes" (Atas, 2015, p. 968).

In another study that investigated university students' anxiety and strategy use when speaking, it was found that learners in a full English-medium instruction context had a great level of confidence and lower speech anxiety when speaking in English (Chou, 2018). Some of the strategies used were imitation of native speakers, initiation of conversations, discussion of unfamiliar topics, and the use of synonyms (Chou, 2018). Moreover, speaking anxiety reduction is established when Chou (2018) posited that "…courses with full EMI appear to be more beneficial for enhancing speaking ability in EFL learners, at least in Taiwan, in terms of lowering speaking anxiety…" (p. 626). Next, it is suggested that affective strategies such as self-encouragement and positive self-talk may lower anxiety (Chou, 2018). Finally, Chou (2018) concludes that lowering speaking anxiety is closely intertwined with instruction in English; "…increasing lexical bundles, content knowledge, frequent exposure to inputs, and opportunities to practice are the core foundations that guarantee meaningful interaction in English and lower anxiety in speaking" (Chou, 2018, p. 629). This is paramount in terms of teaching practices as L2 teachers ought to be focused on exposing students to the target language and providing speaking opportunities.

Closely aligned with the concept of reducing EFL speaking anxiety and concurrent with previous results, Han and Keskin (2016) reported that the use of a mobile application significantly helped students to lower speaking anxiety, particularly in female students. A caveat, the reduction of speaking anxiety may come from the implementation of a mobile application or from direct exposure to the target language (Chou, 2018).

Additionally, He (2017) explored practical strategies to reduce foreign language speaking anxiety from a quantitative approach. In exploring and examining effective strategies, two major constructs were identified: strategies concerning teacher's characteristics and strategies concerning error correction (He, 2017). It is worth noting that the teacher's personal characteristics are positively associated in alleviating foreign language speaking anxiety by creating a supportive learning environment (He, 2017; Vargas, 2015).

Finally, Foss and Reitzel (1988) proposed strategies to manage second language anxiety based on a relational model. These strategies are a matter of the utmost importance to this paper because they deal with managing second language anxiety with the notion of alleviating or reducing speaking anxiety. Even though these strategies were conceived for second language contexts and they addressed anxiety as a general learning concept, they do provide rich and very useful information on how to handle speaking anxiety. The first strategy relates to the concept of motivational approaches (Foss & Reitzel, 1988). First, rational emotive therapy consists of a solid state of awareness of what kinds of beliefs interfere with language learning. Foss and Reitzel (1988) claimed that "if these beliefs can be recognized, students can learn to interpret such situations in more realistic ways and thus may choose to approach rather than avoid situations demanding conversation" (Foss & Reitzel, 1988, p. 445). Second, anxiety graphs are visual representations that let learners identify the nature of the anxiety and pinpoint the intensity level. This particular strategy becomes crucial for the paper as it directly relates to speaking. Foss and Reitzel (1988) added that "the anxiety graph can help students internalize the fact that speaking a new language is not a uniform process that is consistently difficult and anxiety provoking" (Foss & Reitzel, 1988, p. 447).

The second strategy is associated with knowledge and skills (Foss & Reitzel, 1988). Activities that aid learning and help develop skills are role plays, drama drills, and oral interpretations: "The group preparation, evaluation, and performance lessen communication anxiety for many students, as does the fact that they are performing the works of others" (Foss & Reitzel, 1988, p. 449).

The third strategy is related to outcomes (Foss & Reitzel, 1988). Outcomes are associated with the general impressions and feelings of the communicative event, for example the use of journals for reflective purposes. Foss and Reitzel (1988) affirmed that "the opportunity to reflect upon the outcomes of communication is necessary for developing specific objectives for continuing competence… it allows students to realize, once again, the importance of their perceptions in determining the outcome of a particular communication episode" (Foss & Reitzel, 1988, p. 450).

The final strategy deals with the context (Foss & Reitzel, 1988). Context "involves identifying the objective environment and the subjective perceptions that influence how students interact in that environment" (Foss & Reit-

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zel, 1988, p. 451). Particularly, case studies and artifacts are used to pinpoint cultural perceptions and differences. These are thought-provoking insights in relation to the use of strategies to alleviate speaking anxiety particularly in EFL contexts.

Criticism to Speaking Anxiety

This part of the paper intends to provide much-needed criticism on speaking anxiety. This inclusion is to bring a healthy balance when considering opposing views and critiques. Ironically, the most relevant piece of criticism emanates from the authors that have tried to establish a relationship between language learning and speaking anxiety: Elaine Horwitz, Michael Horwitz, and Joann Cope. Research on second language "…has neither adequately defined foreign language anxiety nor described its specific effects on foreign language learning [speaking included]" (Horwitz et al., 1986, p. 125). The impossibility of clearly establishing the specific effects of foreign language anxiety on language learning constitutes a major gap in terms of a theoretical foundation or theory. Now, the unfeasibility to define foreign language anxiety does not seem to pose a real problem since other bodies of literature and research have been able to successfully achieve this task, these same authors included.

Also, according to specific clinical experience, there is no difference between different types of anxiety. In exemplifying this idea, Horwitz et al. (1986) indicated that "the subjective feelings, psycho-physiological symptoms, and behavioral responses of the anxious foreign language learner are essentially the same as for any specific anxiety" (p. 126). Even though this piece of evidence demonstrates no difference between foreign language anxiety and other types of anxiety, it does offer solid evidence of the relation between anxiety and foreign language, speaking included.

Likewise, one can say that there is a tendency to romanticize ways to alleviate speaking anxiety with unsubstantiated generalizations and recommendations. Light in content and trustworthiness, these utterances become the norm in the conclusion section of some studies. Learners "should be provided with as much opportunity as possible to practice speaking in the classroom" (Alrabai, 2014, p. 95). Even though denying the link between speaking anxiety and EFL contexts might be harmful, not establishing a solid research-based connection may jeopardize serious endeavors to explore, explain, and understand the

connection between speaking anxiety and its influence on students' oral production in the EFL classroom in the light of research-related data. Tianjian (2010) indicated that "in the state of positive moods, the learners are less likely to experience anxiety. Happy learners are comfortable learners" (Tianjian, 2010, p. 107). It needs to be clear – as an educator himself, the author is not saying this is not the case. The lack of reliability (not in a quantitative fashion) is just being pinpointed. These are rather commonalities for any language class. The concepts analyzed in this section represent elements of criticism to speaking anxiety.

Conclusion

This section of the paper goes over final considerations. It is a foregone conclusion that speaking anxiety constitutes a key issue that affects students and other actors in language learning settings, particularly in EFL contexts. This fact becomes central as it poses particular challenges and conditions to the teaching-learning process that must be addressed properly in order to have a solid understanding of such a phenomenon and its implications. Language learners and teachers need to be conscious of these implications and how they influence and impact the language learning process. Raising awareness on speaking anxiety becomes a must for the different stakeholders of the language learning process.

Even though the discussion in this paper offers an overarching panorama of the phenomenon within the field of language learning, more research projects are required to develop a better comprehension of the implications of speaking anxiety from the perspective of language teachers and how these affect the learning-teaching process as a whole, particularly qualitative and quantitative attempts. It is true that the vast majority of research projects intend to provide data based on students' experiences and perceptions. Research projects and educational policies must necessarily start considering different perspectives and scenarios.

As a non-native language teacher, one has to admit that specific conditions and situations might trigger scenarios conducive to different types and degrees of anxiety when teaching a class. Non-native and native language teachers might be influenced by these anxieties and this reality clearly affects the teacher's performance and students' acquisition process. Thus, more research is needed to establish potential connections and implications to the learning-teaching process and its effectiveness. Likewise,

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students' perceptions on these types of teachers' anxieties must be explored and considered.

It is also evident that speaking anxiety constitutes a multifaceted phenomenon that relates to personal and inner situations – that is, speaking anxiety is a construct with particular and specific nuances that impact learning processes in a variety of ways. As such, a multifaceted approach is required to encompass an ongoing variety of techniques and strategies to successfully alleviate and reduce speaking anxiety and its impact in the language classroom. Experience becomes absolutely relevant when addressing speaking anxiety, but language teachers also need to fully understand the uniqueness and subtleties of each situation.

Arguably research offers solid and thought-provoking evidence on techniques and strategies that might be used as a framework for national and international policies to establish behavioral models or systematization processes that include protocols to address speaking anxiety in more formal and effective ways. These systems or models are to equip teachers and students with tools to handle such a phenomenon and its implications to language learning settings and in the decision-taking process. Noticeably, these models must be based on tenets and theoretical backgrounds that are corroborated and exemplified by research data. These insights are pertinent conclusions about the phenomenon of speaking anxiety in language learning settings.

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