

Exploring the Factors Responsible for Learners' Anxiety in Speaking English as a Foreign Language

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Abstract

It has been observed that despite learners' seven year (Class VI to XII) consecutive input in English as a compulsory subject at school and college levels in the target context, in addition to their privately-made efforts; they still fail to obtain the desired level of oral proficiency in English as a foreign language. (National Education Policy Reports 2009 to 2013: 27, Higher Education Commission of Pakistan Reports 2009 to 2013: 50 & 164, Gillani, 2004: 5). This is, probably, due to EFL teachers' lack of attention to the learners' affective needs during teaching-learning practice. Affect in foreign language learning includes: emotions, feelings, beliefs, personality traits, motivation, learning styles, socio-cultural and psycholinguistic factors. These affective variables may affect the learners' ability to learn a foreign language. Foreign language anxiety is also one such affective variable (Horwitz, 1986: 125-132). Language anxiety is one of the major factors in learning a foreign language in any context or setting (Hurd, 2007: 488). It is one of the highly examined variables in all psychology and education (Horwitz, 2003: 13). Though, there has been a considerable research in the cognitive domain in learning English as a foreign language, but the aspect of emotion and the way to deal with emotion to maximize positive results in a language classroom has not been explored in Pakistan. The proposed paper thus, aims at exploring the factors responsible for learners' anxiety in speaking English as a foreign language in the target context.

Keywords: *Learners, EFL Speaking Anxiety, Factors*

Introduction

The world today has shrunk into a global village due to rapid technological advancements. Modern-day Information Technology

revolution has compelled us to live as a close-knit community with a dire need to communicate and compete in an international setting, which is no longer possible without our gaining oral proficiency in English. Pakistan being a developing country cannot afford to stay aloof to this communication imperative.

Moreover, it is unfortunate to observe that learning of English in Pakistan over the last six decades has not been as effective as it ought to have been. Situation in the private educational institutions has been a little encouraging, but at public-sector institutions, it has remained below the mark. The truth of this statement can be verified from the National Education Policy 2009-2012 (5.5: p. 27). The same factor is further authenticated by Federal Public Service Commission of Pakistan 2009-2013 Annual Report (7.31 & 7.32: p 54 of 167). Among other startling facts, the report says that candidates were dismally weak in their oral communication in English and that only 07 (seven) out of hundreds of them were able to secure above 60 (sixty) marks in interview.

The situation in terms of students' communicative competence in spoken English is more vulnerable in the province of Sindh (the researcher's context): Sindh Public Service Commission (SPSC) in annual reports (Dawn: November 11, 2011 & Dawn: March 01, 2004) observe that "It was so deeply shocked and offended by candidates' inability to express themselves orally it decided to set up English Language Centers across rural parts of Sindh." The desire has been reiterated by FPSC again in its recent report for the year 2012.

The students of public sector universities in Sindh happen to be the major victims of incompetence in oral proficiency in English due to the reasons the researcher intends to identify.

The issue merits investigation at university level as the universities serve as national nurseries as they churn out dynamic future leadership in all walks of life. Incompetence in oral communication skills among the youth of Sindh/Pakistan will only be synonymous to "development deadlock" for Pakistan at national as well as international level. In case of this researchers research site: University of Sindh, Jamshoro, the teaching –learning of English as a compulsory course is completing its sixty sixth consecutive year with special focus on the enhancement of learners' spoken English. This course has remained on the syllabus of

all teaching departments of the university with the same focus during this entire period; but no official attempt has ever been made by university administration or any individual faculty to ascertain its efficacy; which by general perception is significantly low.

This researchers, before embarking on any particular area of research; executed a pilot test with a view to find out which of the four skills the students thought they needed most to learn. Conclusively, the researcher discovered "Speaking Skills" as the most direly needed component of language learning among the target community. The pilot study was executed on fifty participants.

Background

Due to the researchers' long experience (1997-2013) in teaching of English as a foreign language at the University of Sindh, Jamshoro and Karachi they have been having the opportunity to informally observe scores of learners attempt to speak English. The said assessment has enabled him to note that majority of these learners experienced significant degree of anxiety in their effort to do so. To investigate the issue further and to know whether or not such kind of language anxiety existed elsewhere also, and if it did; what could be its possible causes. And in order to understand these questions and some other considerations related to anxiety factor, (as to how anxiety correlated with learners' overall proficiency in oral communication skills), they began reviewing literature on this highly important and critical problem.

They have thoroughly probed literature on language anxiety. The review is original, reliable and relevant to the researcher's proposed study.

The researchers, then, read reports on students' proficiency in English (National Education Policy Reports 2009 & 2012, FPSC Annual Reports 2009 & 2012 and Sindh Public Service Commission Report 2012). He learnt from these reports that majority students who had taken examinations, in the context of Sindh-Pakistan, were highly language-conscious and non-proficient in speaking English. All these students inspired the researcher to examine this issue in their own context, and to execute this objective, they embarked upon this research project.

Statement of the Problem

The researchers eighteen years formal experience at the university as a faculty in English, his twelve year experience of teaching English as a part-time practitioner at various private institutions, convince them of the acute levels of anxiety the students (They have interacted with over the span of these long years) experience at the time they speak English. The researchers observation was further confirmed, first by FPSC & SPSC Annual Reports (2004-2005 to 2009-2012); and next by his formal interviews with four senior faculty within his institute.

Moreover, twelve years of schooling at school and college levels in the target context aimed at enabling students to speak English, students' own private efforts in form of "taking tuition", four semesters teaching of English at the university; all have failed to enhance learners' capability to interact with the others without facing any practical difficulty. When it comes to speaking, they generally "freeze", their hands "get clammy", "heart races wildly", their "legs go jelly" and "they go short of breath... they stifle". Up ahead in their careers as professionals, in line with their seniors, they too shy away situations that might require them to speak English, they falter for words when they are invited to say a few words, speak incorrectly, and end up saying things they never wanted to say. This facet holds true also for most of Pakistan's top-brass in civil bureaucracy, elected representatives, journalists, ministers etc. Their incompetence in oral proficiency can be traced back to their lack of exposure and practice in their EFL classrooms at school, college and university.

Students learning English language in the researchers' context usually speak of fear, stress, anxiety and nervousness while they speak English in both in and outside the classroom settings. The learners wonder over the gap they witness between their compulsive efforts to speak and their failed performance to do so.

Horwitz and Young (1991: 14)-two prominent experts in the domain of "language anxiety" express, "we have truly been surprised at the number of students who experience anxiety and distress in their language classes." Similarly, Campbell and Ortiz (1991: 159) found language anxiety among university students to be "alarming" and estimated that up to one half of all language students experience debilitating levels of language anxiety.

This researcher, in his context, witnessed a higher level of language anxiety among his own classmates and batch mates while he was a student. And later as a faculty, he has been beholding his students endlessly suffering from anxiety in speaking English as a foreign language. The researcher, therefore, investigated this issue as a case study of Bachelor Classes at Institute of English Language and Literature, University of Sindh, Jamshoro.

Rationale

The issue of anxiety with language learning has been widely acknowledged among world language researchers due to its significant impact on EFL learners, especially so, on account of the varied socio-cultural and psycholinguistic contexts in which they are required to speak in a language in which they possess little proficiency (Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope: 1986: Young: 1991, McIntyre: 1999, Shamas: 2006 p.5). Hurd (2007, pp. 488) observes, "Language anxiety is one of the major factors influencing language learning in any context or setting."

Moreover, several studies have indicated that performance in the foreign language is negatively correlated with language anxiety (Scovel: 1978, Horwitz: 1986, Phillips: 1992, McIntyre: 1993, Aida: 1994, Samimy: 1994, Clement: 1997 and Saito and Noels, K. 1998, and Horwitz and Garza: 1999). All these researchers have noted "anxiety" as the most negatively influential affective variable which prevents learners from successfully learning a foreign language. "Anxiety" in language learning involves various aspects of emotion, feeling, attitude, learning styles, beliefs about language learning, learner and teacher perception about speaking English as a foreign language, issues related to self-esteem, and confidence of the learner along with his/her subjective feelings of tension, vague fear, nervousness, and worry (Spielberg: 1983, p.1). Horwitz and Young (1991: p.14) two prominent experts in the domain of "language anxiety" observed, "we have truly been surprised at the number of students who experience anxiety and distress in their language classes, especially in speaking English as a foreign language." Similarly Campbell and Ortiz (1991: p.159) found language anxiety among university students to be "alarming" and estimated that up to one half

of all language students experience negative effect of language anxiety.

Some researchers have also pointed out that the skill producing most anxiety is “speaking” (McIntyre and Gardner: 1991) and that it is just not due to students’ poor knowledge of language, for if it were so, students would feel scared in all four skills; but what makes speaking a different and difficult skill is its public nature, it is the speaker’s fear to lay open his/her language loopholes in front of others (Arnold: 2000: p.03).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to find out the factors that become responsible for learners’ anxiety in speaking English as a foreign language.

Sample of the Study

The study was limited to 64 students from a population of 320 belonging to BS P-I and BS P-II of Institute of English, University of Sindh, Jamshoro. These students were selected through purposive random sampling.

Scope of the Study

This kind of study is being undertaken for the first time in Pakistan in general and in the researchers’ context in particular. It addresses the significant issue of affective domain. It, therefore, possesses wide scope as it will help EFL teachers. Though the results of the study may not be generalizable as it is a case study research; yet it will be of immense value as a rich resource, reference and guidance for further studies in this respect.

Research Question

What are the factors that become responsible for target learners’ anxiety in speaking English as a foreign language at the target site?

Hypothesis

There is a significant effect of EFL classroom and outside-the EFL classroom factors on the learners’ level of anxiety in speaking English as a foreign language.

Literature Review

Teaching of English was commenced in the Medieval Period surrounding the years of French Invasion. Since then, a horde of methods, methodologies and approaches have been used to teach English effectively. And since those days, language experts have been conducting research to find the best teaching methods ever to obtain maximum success.

The issue of 'language anxiety' in speaking English has always remained central to the practice of English Language Teaching (ELT) (John Locke: 1693). Several researchers have indicated that the skill producing most anxiety is speaking (McIntyre and Gardner 1991) and that it is just not due to our poor knowledge of language (for if it were so all skills would be affected equally), but what makes speaking a different and difficult skill is its public nature, it is the speaker's fear to lay open his/her language loopholes in front of others (Arnold: 2000: 3).

Before the Roman Empire, the Romans learnt Greek and to abate their anxiety, they hired Greek-speaking slaves at their homes to practice the target tongue with them. Montaigne's Essay on Education (1586) suggested natural process of learning a language as the best tool to reduce language anxiety. Famous Czech Educator John Comenius (1651) stressed on maximum amount of language use as an instrument to alleviate anxiety. Jaclot and Toussaint (1799) insisted on grammar and text reading to lessen speech anxiety, Claude Marcel (1867) opposed Jaclot and Toussaint, George Ticknor (1845) emphasized to learn language as speech to cope with 'language anxiety'. The seven first decades of twentieth century witnessed a variety of methods put to practice to teach English language including speaking skills: Grammar Translation Method, Series Method, Direct Method, The Audio-Lingual Method, The Silent Way, and the Total Physical Response Method (TPR).

1970's onwards Second Language Acquisition Researchers turned their focus to scrutinize the substantial role played by a learner's person, perception, motivation, style, personality traits that may reduce or raise his/her 'level of anxiety' in speaking English as a foreign language with right semantics as well as pragmatics in varied social contexts (Shamas: 2006: 5). Among these variables, learner anxiety has come to be recognized as an important area of study in

foreign language acquisition due to potential adverse impact it can have on students' performance and achievement (Samimy: 1994: 30).

Social and communicative facets of language learning are the principal causes of anxiety in speaking or learning as language (McIntyre and Gardner, 1989, 1991 cited in McIntyre 1995:91). Anxiety in speaking English occurs most, where English is not used as L1, due to minimal use of the target language i.e. English as a Foreign Language: L2 classroom is found to be the only place where the learners have very less contact with the target language.

Lightbown and Spada (2006: 30) have observed that even in situations where English is used as L1, the non-native learners do not achieve native-like proficiency in speaking English as a foreign language, due to learners' use of cognitive skills and their meta-linguistic awareness (world and social knowledge) which interferes with their language learning process.

Errors in social setting also come as a potential cause of anxiety to learners who attempt to speak English as a Foreign Language. Lightbown and Spada (2006) identify classroom feedback as the biggest source of cause of nervousness, frustration, embarrassment and anxiety in speaking English, as it is in the classroom, where frequent feedback on errors is provided to learners on regular basis. These researchers observe that in other situations, however, errors of speakers of the target language are generally ignored as it is considered impolite by the interlocutors to interrupt the speakers when he or she attempts to make conversation with them.

Social status, nature of social relationship and a sense of self as well as social identity of others also become substantial causes of anxiety to speakers who try to speak English as a foreign language sociolinguists speak of deep impact on learners' ability to speak a target language on account of the above-said factors. Wolfsan (1989), Pica (1987), Leary and Kowalski (1995) assert that "social anxiety" is caused when one speaks to boss or to someone higher in position, power or status or when speaking to strangers, a potential sense and feelings of awkwardness, uncertainty and discomfort springs up in the heart and mind of the speaker. Pierce (1995:21) also reports that sense of power, social distance and self-identify potentially exists in interaction between L1 and L2 (FL) speakers.

Interethnic and Intercultural communication Apprehension (ICA) is found to be another significant factor responsible for learners anxiety in speaking English as a foreign language. ICA occurs when a person interacts with people of other cultures or ethnic affiliations. Neuliep and McCorskey (1997) have reported ICA as a major hindrance factor to this effect.

Gender has also been found as a major contributory factor of anxiety in learners who attempt speaking English as a foreign language. Machida (2001: cited in 2003) examined Japanese EFL language class anxiety and found that female learners experienced more anxiety in speaking as compared to male students. Spielberger (1983:19), in her study, however, found that females are more emotionally stable than males in their reactions to highly stressful and relaxing situations.

Methodology

The researchers exploited adapted version of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale developed by Horwitz et al. 1986. The test and re-test reliability level of the instrument was Cronbach| alpha .83. This Likert scale ranged from option one to five: agree, disagree, strongly disagree neutral and strongly agree options. It consisted of 6 items.

Data Collection

Data was collected from 64 respondents at the target site. 32 respondents belonged to BS Part-1 Class, whereas, the other 32 belonged to BS Part-2 Class. 8 respondents each in both streams were male urban, male rural, female urban and female rural. This was done to lend the sample representative character.

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed by using SPSS (Version 17) package; quantitative inferences were drawn from the data. Hypothesis was tested by using Descriptive statistical tools like measure of central tendency, measure of dispersion to ascertain valid, reliable, cumulative results. Besides, detailed tabular as well as graphical forms of presentations were used to clearly understand, examine and explain the level of accomplishment.

Graphical, Tabular and Descriptive Presentation of Findings

1. I feel anxious to speak English in my EFL class because of my mother tongue accent as I fear that other students will make fun of me.

Figure No. 01

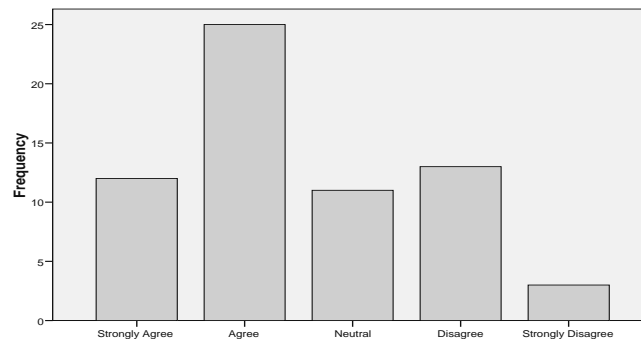


Table No. 01

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly Agree	12	18.8	18.8	18.8
Agree	25	39.1	39.1	57.8
Neutral	11	17.2	17.2	75.0
Disagree	13	20.3	20.3	95.3
Strongly Disagree	3	4.7	4.7	100
Total	64	100	100	

Figure number 01 and the accompanying Frequency Table Number 01 clearly show that a significant amount of anxiety in speaking English as a foreign language exists among the participants of this study. 18.8% participants have strongly agreed that they feel anxious to speak English in their EFL classroom due to their mother tongue accent and they also fear that other students will make their fun. 39.1% of them agreed to this, the answer of 17.2% was neutral. 20.3% participants disagreed to this and 4.7% of them strongly disagreed with this statement.

2. My lack of exposure and practice to speaking English during my school and college years hinders me from speaking English in my EFL class.

Figure No. 02

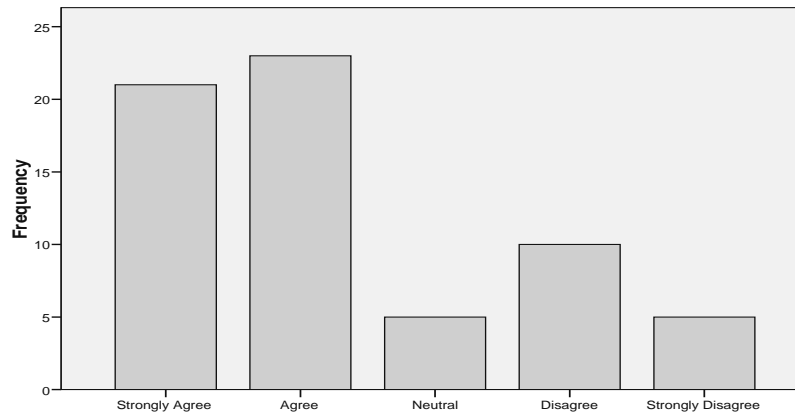


Table No. 02

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly Agree	21	32.8	32.8	32.8
Agree	23	35.9	35.9	68.8
Neutral	5	7.8	7.8	76.6
Disagree	10	15.8	15.8	92.2
Strongly Disagree	5	7.8	7.8	100
Total	64	100	100	

Figure number 02 and the accompanying Frequency Table Number 02 clearly show that a significant amount of anxiety in speaking English as a foreign language exists among the participants of this study. 32.8% of the participants strongly agreed with the statement that their lack of exposure to English language during their school and college years hinders them from speaking English in their EFL class. 35.9% of them agreed with it. The view of 7.8% participants was neutral. 15.6% participants disagreed with the statement and 7.8% of the participants strongly disagreed with the given statement.

3. I fear to speak English outside my classroom as I remain afraid that people around will think that I am showing off/trying to be over-smart.

Figure No. 03

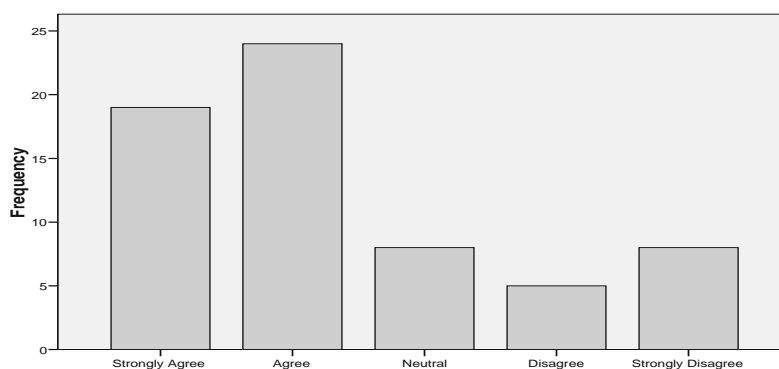


Table No. 03

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly Agree	19	29.7	29.7	29.7
Agree	24	37.5	37.5	67.2
Neutral	8	12.5	12.5	79.7
Disagree	5	7.8	7.8	87.5
Strongly Disagree	8	12.5	12.5	100
Total	64	100	100	

Figure number 03 and the accompanying Frequency Table Number 03 clearly show that a significant amount of anxiety in speaking English as a foreign language exists among the participants of this study. 29.7% of the participants strongly agreed with the statement that they fear to speak English outside their classroom as they remain afraid that people around would think that they (participants) are showing off or they are trying to be over-smart. 37.5% of them agreed with it. The view of 12.5% participants was neutral. 7.8% participants disagreed with the statement and 12.5% of the participants strongly disagreed with the given statement.

4. I feel nervous to speak English in my EFL class and outside as I am always expected to speak accurately; which is hardly ever possible at the learning stage.

Figure No. 04

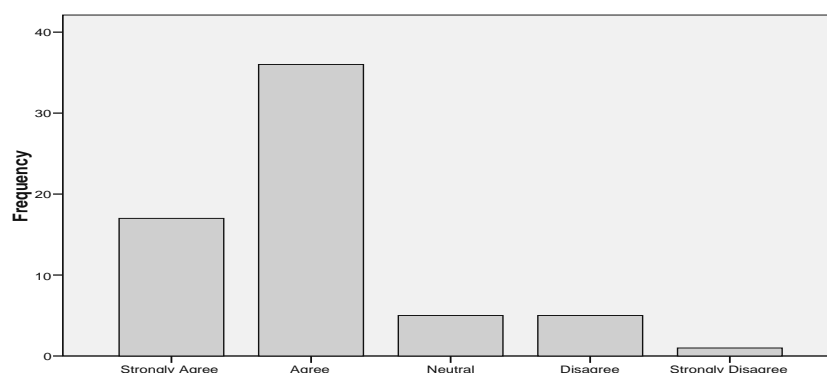


Table No. 04

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly Agree	17	26.6	26.6	26.6
Agree	36	56.3	56.3	82.8
Neutral	5	7.8	7.8	90.6
Disagree	5	7.8	7.8	98.4
Strongly Disagree	1	1.6	1.6	100
Total	64	100	100	

Figure number 04 and the accompanying Frequency Table Number 04 clearly show that a significant amount of anxiety in speaking English as a foreign language exists among the participants of this study. 26.3% of the participants strongly agreed with the statement that they felt nervous to speak English in their EFL class and outside as they are always expected to speak accurately; which is hardly ever possible at learning stage. 56.3% of them agreed with it. The view of 7.8% participants was neutral. 7.8% participants disagreed with the statement and 1.6% of the participants strongly disagreed with the given statement.

5. Intolerant attitude of my peers to my slow pace of speaking also becomes cause of my anxiety in speaking English.

Figure No. 05

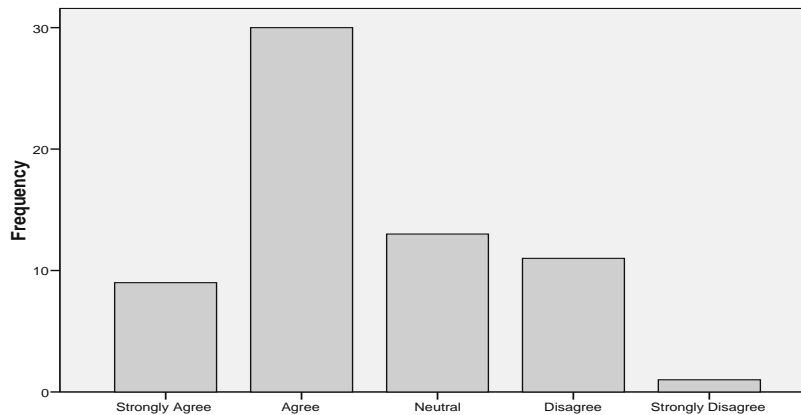


Table No. 05

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly Agree	9	14.1	14.1	14.1
Agree	30	46.9	46.9	60.9
Neutral	13	20.3	20.3	81.3
Disagree	11	17.2	17.2	98.4
Strongly Disagree	1	1.6	1.6	100
Total	64	100	100	

Figure number 05 and the accompanying Frequency Table Number 05 clearly show that a significant amount of anxiety in speaking English as a foreign language exists among the participants of this study. 14.1% of the participants strongly agreed with the statement that intolerant attitude of their peers to their slow pace of speaking also became cause of their anxiety in speaking English. 46.9% of them agreed with it. The view of 20.3% participants was neutral. 17.2% participants disagreed with the statement and 1.6% of the participants strongly disagreed with the given statement.

6. Socio-cultural and in-class insistence on native-like (British or American) fluency and accent highly adds to my EFL speech anxiety.

Table No. 06

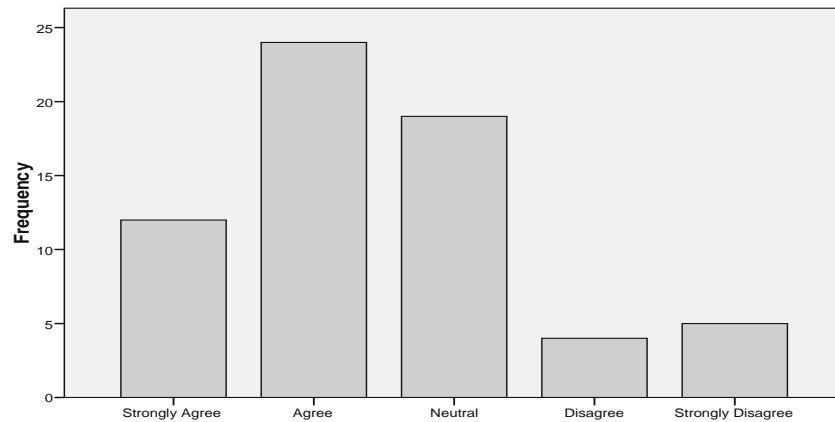


Table No. 06

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly Agree	12	18.8	18.8	18.8
Agree	24	37.5	37.5	56.3
Neutral	19	29.7	29.7	85.9
Disagree	4	6.3	6.3	92.2
Strongly Disagree	5	7.8	7.8	100
Total	64	100	100	

Figure number 06 and the accompanying Frequency Table Number 06 clearly show that a significant amount of anxiety in speaking English as a foreign language exists among the participants of this study. 18.8% of the participants strongly agreed with the statement that socio-cultural and in-class insistence on native-like (British or American) fluency and accent highly added to their EFL speech anxiety. 37.5% of them agreed with it. The view of 29.7% participants was neutral. 6.3% participants disagreed with the statement and 7.8% of the participants strongly disagreed with the given statement.

Findings

Commensurate with the earlier research, this study also found that a significant level EFL anxiety existed in the participants of this study. The target learners' mother tongue accent, their lack of exposure to and practice of speaking English in their EFL classrooms, classroom and social insistence on accuracy rather than fluency and learners fear that if they spoke English people will assume they were trying to be over-smart were found to be the factors responsible for their anxiety in speaking English as a foreign language.

Conclusion

The survey data and its analysis validate the hypothesis that there is a significant negative effect of EFL classroom and outside-the EFL classroom factors on the learners' level of anxiety in speaking English as a foreign language.

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