



The Effect of Communicative Language Teaching Strategies on the Reduction of the Speaking Anxiety in the Iraqi students in the Secondary School

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Abstract

The issue of Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety (FLSA) is devastating to the process of cultivating oral communication in students of Iraqi secondary schools and is not helped by the traditional, teacher-centered pedagogies. This was mixed-methods research which assessed the effectiveness of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) interventions as a measure to help decrease this anxiety. Using the sequential explanatory design, the study utilized 320 students during a 16 weeks span. A statistically significant decrease in the levels of speaking anxiety was observed using quantitative data gathered through administrations of an adapted Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) before and after the interventions ($t(319) = 15.42, p = .001$, $t(319) = 15.42, p = .001, Cohen d = 1.38$). The semi-structured interviews with 12 teachers and 20 students, and classroom observations revealed that there are three important mechanisms of this reduction: the establishment of a psychological safety net, a changed attitude to mistake correction, and an increased relevance of the tasks and self-efficacy. The combined analysis shows that CLT will be effective in reducing the affective filter since it creates a psychologically safe platform during oral practice. The research clarifies the exact processes by which CLT reduces speaking anxiety under a less studied condition and gives evidence-based recommendations that are culturally-contextualised and applicable to educators and policymakers. The results recommend the application of CLT concepts to English language instruction in Iraq and other exam-oriented environments to enhance linguistic and the well-being of learners.

Keywords:

Foreign language speaking anxiety, communicative language teaching, Iraqi second education, affective filter, psychological safety, speaking competence, mixed-method research.



1. Introduction and Problem Statement.

The academic mobility and socio-economic inclusion of a person into an ever-expanding globalized world are fundamentally based on English language proficiency (Richards and Rodgers, 2014). The role of English in the national education system of Iraq is obligatory in the secondary school curriculum, and its goals have a communicative competency focus. Yet, the continuity of the English language education has been disrupted by a complex of historical and socio-political forces in the form of decades of conflict, the instability of the curriculums, and the lack of consistency in teacher training (Al-Jarf, 2021). This situation has increased the living discrepancies between the curricular aspirations and the actual student outcomes, especially in oral communication (Al-Shboul et al., 2019).

One of the main obstacles to oral proficiency is Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety (FLSA) which is a psychological construct, and is symbolized by fear, anxiety, and avoidance of speaking the target language (Horwitz et al., 1986). The feeling of anxiety is embolized in the Iraqi pedagogical environment by established traditions of instructing in grammar, memorizing, and imparting knowledge by teachers (Khalil and Dweik, 2020). Other methods, usually accompanied by high-stakes tests which emphasize only written proficiency, sideline spontaneous oral expression. It, therefore, results in a large number of students as per their secondary education, having increased anxiety and a low degree of confidence in their English speaking skills, limiting their future academic and career paths (Young, 1991). The research paper discusses this urgent matter by empirically assessing the effectiveness of Communicative Language Teaching methods as a specific intervention to alleviate speaking anxiety in the context of the education system specific to Iraqi.



2. Theoretical Framework:

The theoretical framework of this study is the conceptual organization based on two synthesized theoretical areas: the psycholinguistic concept of the language anxiety and the principles of the communicative language teaching.

2.1 Anxiety of Foreign Language Speaking.

As Horwitz et al. (1986) define Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) is a particular combination of self-perceptions, beliefs, emotions, and behaviors associated with the learning of formal languages. Based on general psychological models of anxiety (Spielberger, 1983), FLCA has the most salient manifestation in the form of speaking anxiety, which has three main sources communication apprehension, negative evaluation fear, and test anxiety. In the classroom, this is translated into observable things like silence of students, unwillingness to participate and even manifestation of physical signs of distress. The Affective Filter Hypothesis postulated by Krashen (1982) holds that this anxiety acts as an affective filter, and it increases a psychological blockade in the way that language input reaches the language acquisition machine, therefore, hampering the language acquisition process.

2.2 Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Theories



As a paradigm shift of structural approaches, CLT re-frames the aim of language teaching as based on grammatical competence to communicative competence -ability to use language in a proper and effective way in the real world (Hymes, 1972). This notion, which is extended by Canale and Swain (1980), comprises grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic competences. CLT is built upon several main principles: meaning-oriented engagement, authenticity of materials and activities, learner centredness, tolerance of error and the role of the teacher as the facilitator.

The Affective Filter Hypothesis by Krashen (1982) lends a lot of credibility to the nexus between CLT and the alleviation of anxiety. CLT strategies are naturally set up to decrease this affective filter by establishing appealing, interactive, and low-threat learning settings that decrease the fear of negative judgment (Dewaele and Dewaele, 2020). In addition, CLT concurs with motivational theories in SLA like Dorynei (2009) L2 Motivational Self System in that it improves the Ideal L2 Self by using authentic tasks and providing a positive L2 Learning Experience.

3. Research Methodology

Research Design and Contextual Adaptation 3.1 Research Design and Contextual Adaptation .The research utilized a sequential explanatory mixed research (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2017). The methodology used in this was to first gather and analyze quantitative data to determine the statistical patterns then to get qualitative data in order to explain, put into context and elaborate the quantitative results. The design was selected to offer a detailed information about the outcome and the process of applying CLT in the classrooms in Iraq.

3.2 Participants and Sampling



Three hundred and twenty students (Grades 10-12, 15-18) and twelve English teachers of four public secondary schools in different districts of Thi-Qar took part. All the teacher consent was obtained and parental/guardian consent as well as student assent was taken.

Stratified random sampling was adopted in order to have proportional representation of student respondents in terms of gender (160 male, 160 female) and grade level. The 12 teachers who participated in the study were all certified English instructors who had at least five years of classroom experience.

3.3 Teacher Training and Faithfulness.

Before the intervention, all teachers attended a two-day practical workshop that was going to introduce them to the principles of CLT and how they can be applied in the context of the Iraqi curriculum. The workshop concentrated on: (1) the establishment of a low-anxiety classroom, (2) the construction and sequencing of communicative activities (e.g. information-gap activities, role-plays, project work) and (3) supportive, delayed-feedback methods. In order to make the training effective and to be sure that a further change could be explained by the intervention, the impact of the latter was tested through a post-workshop survey. The questionnaire determined the perceived knowledge of the teachers on CLT principles and their perceived confidence in applying them (on a Likert scale of 5 points). The findings showed a very strong improvement in both understanding ($M_{pre}=2.8$, $M_{post}=4.2$) and confidence ($M_{pre}=2.5$, $M_{post}=4.0$), which proved the initial effectiveness of the workshop as a basis to the intervention.

3.4 Data Collection Instruments:



There were three main tools involved:

- 1. Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS):** The 33-item scale used in the article by Horwitz et al. (1986) was successfully modified to enhance the emphasis on the speaking anxiety in the scale. During the administration of the full scale, the analysis mostly focused on the 12 items that were directly related to speaking apprehension (e.g., I tremble when I know that I will be called on in language class, I feel confident when I talk in English class - reverse scored). This modification made it possible to measure the main dependent variable of the study more accurately. The modified sub-scale proved to have a high internal reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.89$).
- 2. Semi-structured Interview Protocols:** Teachers and a sub sample of 20 students who represented different levels of anxiety were created to be administered separate protocols. Interviews with teachers (25-35 minutes each) were conducted on the perception of the student anxiety, challenges in the implementation of CLT, and noticed changes in behavior. The interviews with students (15-20 minutes each) were carried out in Arabic and English (depending on the preference of the student) and aimed at getting first-hand information on anxiety experience and response to CLT activities. The interviews were audio-taped, transcribed verbatim and in some cases, translated into English to be analyzed.
- 3. Structured CLT Classroom Observation Checklist:** Created in accordance with student anxiety-related indicators (e.g., avoidance behaviors, nervous behaviors) and fidelity of CLT implementation (e.g., student talk time, use of real-world tasks, role of teacher as facilitator). The inter-rater reliability was determined by two independent observations of 15 sessions and was 92%.



3.5 Procedures and Timeline of Intervention.

The research took place within one complete, 16-week academic semester and had a structured and phased nature:

- Week 1-2: Pre-test (FLCAS).
- Weeks 3-14: CLT strategy execution. Teachers incorporated at least three activities based on CLT in a week with tasks of high structure (e.g., guided interviews) shifting to more open ones (e.g., debates).
- Week 15: Post intervention testing (FLCAS post-test).
- Week 16: Qualitative data (interviews with the teachers and students, final observations).

3.6 Data Analysis

Analysis: A quantitative analysis of FLCAS data was done in SPSS (Version 28). Summary statistics were used to describe pre- and post-test scores. The paired-sample t-test was used to determine the level of significance of the mean difference in overall worry. Cohen d was used to obtain the effect size. The interaction effects between the intervention and gender, initial anxiety level (students were median-split into high- and low-anxiety groups according to pre-test scores), etc were tested by a two-way ANOVA. Pairwise deletion was used to remove any cases of missing data (less than half of the items).

Qualitative Analysis: Transcripts of interviews and notes of observations were analyzed through the reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022) with the help



of NVivo software. It was done through familiarization, systematic coding, theme development and refinement. Member checking was performed with participating teachers, peer debriefing was conducted with an external colleague and also an elaborate audit trail of analytical decisions was maintained to assure credibility and trustworthiness.

4. Results and Interpretation

4.1 Quantitative Findings

A comparison of the results showed that the speaking anxiety reduced significantly before and after the intervention with the mean of 98.7 and standard deviation of 12.4 respectively before and after the intervention. It was established that this reduction was very significant using the paired-sample t-test ($t(319) = 15.42, p < .001$), and this effect size (Cohen's $d = 1.38$) is large. The two-way ANOVA revealed that there was a significant interaction effect between the intervention and the initial anxiety level of students ($F(1, 316) = 8.42, p < .01$). The post-hoc test demonstrated significantly greater mean anxiety reduction in the high-anxiety group ($\Delta M = 30.2, SD = 8.1$) than in the low-anxiety group ($\Delta M = 22.4, SD = 7.3$), which indicates that the CLT intervention was effective especially in more anxious students. Gender did not have any significant interaction ($F(1, 316) = 0.87, p = .35$). Table 1 provides a summary of some important quantitative findings.

Table 1

Summary of FLCAS Pre and Post-Intervention Scores and Change by Anxiety Group.



Group	n	Pre-Test M (SD)	Post-Test M (SD)	Mean Reduction (ΔM)	Effect Size (d)
Total Sample	320	98.7 (12.4)	72.3 (10.8)	26.4	1.38
High-Anxiety	160	112.5 (8.2)	82.3 (9.5)	30.2	2.21
Low-Anxiety	160	84.9 (7.1)	62.5 (8.0)	22.4	1.65

Note. FLCAS = Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale.

4.2 Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis provided three main themes as to why anxiety was reduced but a fourth theme included nuances of implementation:

1. The Psycho-Social Safety Net: Teachers and students stressed the importance of small-group work to diminish the so-called spotlight effect. One of the teachers observed, "When they are in groups, they are hidden... they begin whispering then they are a voice. It is as though they are rehearsing in front of the classroom, and such performance is simply about sharing with a different group, although it is not performance, according to the teacher (Teacher 7). One student told me: I was safe with my friend. We were all wrong, so there was nothing wrong. It was not similar to the situation when the teacher is pointing at you and everybody is staring at you (Student 14).



2. **Reorganization of the Error Correction Paradigm:** The reorganization of the immediate public correction was into the delayed collective feedback. It was observed that teachers would take a list of common mistakes and write them anonymously on the board to be discussed in entire classes. One of the students commented, "I found myself seeing mistakes on the board that were not necessarily mine and this made me realize that everyone has a problem. We stuck them together, and it was a lesser humiliation" (Student 8).

3. **Better Perceived Relevance and Self-Efficacy:** More authentic tasks (e.g. planning a trip, arguing about a local news topic) enhanced engagement and personal investment. One of the students mentioned that, "when we discussed the process of applying to a university scholarship or talking about a football game, I forgot that I felt scared. I had something to tell that was not in the book, I had sentences" (Student 5). Educators noted that there was a notable improvement in the willingness to try and readiness to volunteer of students, which is a sign of more linguistic self-efficacy.

4. **Overcoming the Obstacles and Resistance:** There were also some minor challenges recognized in the analysis, which enriched the analysis and made it balanced. Other teachers too felt the fear of losing control over the classroom or having less curriculum covered. Some of the high-performing students who were used to traditional approaches initially felt some resistance, the pedagogical worth of simple talking. These concerns were, however, generally cited as reducing as the teachers became more adept with managing activities and as the students gained the advantages of greater involvement and confidence.

4.3 Integration of Findings



Results presented by the mixed methods show high convergence and complement. The objective statistics are a strong support of the fact that the level of anxiety has been decreased significantly, with the students of high anxiety being one of the most affected groups. The qualitative data offers the explanation of this change and puts the context of this change into perspective: CLT strategies actively restructure the classroom ecology by facilitating collaboration (overcoming the fear of negative opinion), redefining the errors (reducing the fear of negative evaluation), and highlighting meaningful communication (increasing the motivation). The mentioned obstacles emphasize the fact that to make the implementation successful, one not only needs pedagogical investment but also a change in the mentality of the learners and teachers.

5. Discussion:

The results provide strong empirical evidence related to the proposed connection between CLT and lower language anxiety in accordance with and adding to regional research (e.g., Khalil and Dweik, 2020). The huge effect size highlights the fact that CLT is not only a methodological option but also a strong affective change intervention. This research will help the field of research because:

1. **Elucidating Contextualized Mechanisms:** It outlines the way CLT lowers anxiety in a conventional environment based on the psychological safety, reforming errors, and task relevance, and the challenges of implementing it in the real world.



2. **Examples of Adaptive Viability:** It shows that CLT principles are indeed adaptable and applicable even in traditional, exam based education systems such as the one of Iraq, although there were obstacles and doubt initially.

3. **Bridging and Extending Theory and Practice:** The results of the findings have great links to the existing theories. It was noticeable by the process of the affective filter being reduced (Krashen, 1982). More importantly, the findings provide a tangible example of L2 Motivational Self System by Dornyei (2009). The Ideal L2 Self was improved because real, practical activities enabled students to imagine and rehearse on using English in significant activities (e.g., later in education, in communication). At the same time, the nature of CLT activities that provide support and collaboration directly enhanced the L2 Learning Experience, thus making the learning process enjoyable and less threatening, which subsequently made motivation stronger and anxiety low. The absence of gender interaction is an indication that the affective benefits of CLT, as applied, are equally available to both the male and female students in this context, which should be explored in the future researches.

5.1 Short-term Practical Implications.

In the case of the Iraqi educational context, the given study can be regarded as an effective evidence-based case supporting the introduction of CLT in the national in-service teacher training programs and a revision of the secondary English curriculum and examination system that would help to appreciate oral communicative skills.

5.1.1. Generalizability Considerations



The sample was limited to Thi-Qar and therefore, this restricts the generalizability of this study to the geographical area of Iraq, but the results can be applicable to other educational settings outside the national borders. The context of the study, which consists of teacher-centered traditions, high stakes examinations, and a focus on accuracy in the society is common to most of the secondary school systems in Arab region and other cultures with exam-centered education. Thus, the presented effectiveness of CLT and the recommended strategies of adaptation can be viewed as an effective model to follow by educators and policymakers in culturally and pedagogically similar environments to treat the case of foreign language speaking anxiety.

5.1.2 Limitations

Despite its contributions, this research has shortcomings. To begin with, the sample was narrowed down to Thi-Qar. Second, future studies may consider using physiological or behavioral measures to supplement the use of self-reported anxiety measures, which have been verified to be valid. Third, this retention of reduced anxiety and its influence on gains in language proficiency may not be long-term and may not be reflected in the 16-week duration.

6. Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following are the multi-level and context-based recommendations that are proposed to be effectively implemented in the implementation



of the CLT strategies to address the speaking anxiety issue in the Iraqi secondary schools.

6.1 For Classroom Teachers:

1. **Relevant and graded Communicative Tasks Design:** The design of these tasks should be made to be easy and then hard. Practices should be created according to the cultural and personal reality of students to make them more relevant.
2. **Implement Supportive Feedback Structures:** Implement fluency-first zones during the core speaking process. Use impersonal, group analysis of error to impersonalize and development-oriented correct the correction.
3. **Develop Explicit Group Dynamics:** Model explicitly collaborative, low-risk participation Behave to build helpful pairs/groups (especially with nervous learners)

6.2 Teacher Trainers/School Administrators:

1. **Create Professional Learning Communities (PLCs):** Build teacher-teacher organizations in which teachers have an opportunity to jointly plan CLT lessons, problem solve and practice.
2. **Pilot Alternative Speaking Assessments:** It suggests that oral skills should be assessed with low levels of stakes in form of low-stakes, formative assessment (e.g. digital portfolios, peer assessments) so as to remove anxiety.
3. **Organize Support:** Material (materials, time) and reward communicative instruction on performance appraisals.

6.3 To the Ministry of Education and Curriculum Designers:

1. **Review Curricular Records:** (codify) the communicative competence objectives and suggest CLT activity patterns national curriculums and textbooks.



2. Reform High-Stakes Assessment: Begin to add gradually a criterion based speaking component to national tests to determine the positive backwash.
3. Create a National Support System: Have an online database of locally available CLT materials and compel practical CLT teaching in undergraduate and graduate teacher education courses.

7. Limitations to research and Future research directions.

This study had various limitations, which determine the possible research directions in future studies. The sample was not only chosen in Thi-qar, other urban and rural areas in Iraq will have to be included in the next study to enhance the generalizability. Although such dependence on the FLCAS is valid, the physiological indicators of anxiety (e.g., heart rate variability) can be used to check it and perceive the concept in a broader context. The study did not address the long-term influence on the language proficiency and, therefore, on the connection between the alleviation of anxiety and language success was not evident.

8. Conclusion

The research provides a firm and multi- levels evidence that the Communicative Language Teaching methods could be applied to reduce Foreign Language Speaking



Anxiety among Iraqi students studying in high schools to a significant extent. Radically redefining classroom relationships, such as through the establishment of a feeling of psychological safety, redefining mistakes, and making authentic dialogue the ensuing priority, CLT is a useful intervention to decrease affective filter (Krashen, 1982) and empower learners. Despite the systemic concerns, with the introduction of the CLT that is going to be informed with the recommendations that are to be made, informed by the recommendations that are going to be made based on the recommendations that are provided based on the context sensitivity of the recommendations, the classes of English language in Iraq and other situations can be translated into an active community of practice. And last, switching to the other form of communication does not only represent a pedagogic switch but a shift towards equipping a generation of students with the linguistic and psychosocial resources of significant engagement in a globalized dialogue.

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