


Investigating the key factors behind English - speaking anxiety among Iraqi and Yemeni college students and the role of AI in mitigation



 **Shameem Ahmed Banani**

Al-Bayan University, Iraq.
Email: shamim.a@albayan.edu.iq



ABSTRACT

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The current study looks into the key factors behind trepidation or anxiety among English-speaking Iraqi and Yemeni college students. The quantitative approach has been adopted focusing on two factors: fear of communication apprehension and negative evaluation. Twelve items were adapted from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) and administered to 110 Iraqi and 198 Yemeni students comprising both male and female students. Data analysis revealed that communication anxiety is a shared issue for college students in both Iraq and Yemen with females exhibiting significantly higher anxiety levels than males. The findings underscore that negative evaluation and communication anxiety are critical psychological barriers affecting language performance and participation. Additionally, the study highlights that a lack of sufficient language input and limited opportunities for speaking practice in English classes contribute to heightened anxiety levels. The study proposes the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) powered tools into language learning environments as this will provide an innovative, supportive, and non-judgmental environment. In contrast to traditional classroom settings, where students may fear negative evaluation or embarrassment, AI can help reduce anxiety and foster a positive learning atmosphere by simulating real-life communication and providing instant supportive feedback. The study recommends that teachers utilize AI and supportive teaching strategies to create a safe space for language development.

Contribution/ Originality: This study is original in its comparative analysis of Iraqi and Yemeni college students' language anxiety, an underexplored demographic in the EFL context. The research offers fresh insights into gender-based references and classroom-related anxiety triggers by modifying items from the FLCAS and focusing on communication apprehension and negative evaluation. Furthermore, it uniquely proposes the integration of AI- powered tools as an innovative pedagogical intervention to address speaking anxiety offering a novel perspective for future EFL teaching strategies.

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the common features among Iraqi and Yemeni students in learning English which is considered a foreign language in countries is the lack of opportunities to practice speaking English in class and in real- life situations, i.e., Iraqi and Yemeni university students learn English through the classroom. Indeed, the reality of foreign language classrooms demonstrates that students' concern about learning English plays a major role in their capacity to acquire the language university students' language anxiety was described as "alarming" by [Campbell and Ortiz \(1991\)](#) who also claimed that half of all language learners suffer from crippling speaking anxiety.

Studies have demonstrated that speaking is a crucial emotional factor that contributes to anxiety. It is important for language learning and leads to a decrease in learners' engagement and participation (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986).

Besides, research has also shown that speaking anxiety is one of the most prevalent sources of stress among EFL learners (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). According to MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) students who suffer from high anxiety levels typically have reduced self-confidence which influences their willingness to develop their language skills. This type of anxiety is linked to an excessive awareness of one's appearance and a dread of making mistakes.

Gardner (1994) found that learners who experience high levels of anxiety have lower self-confidence, which in turn affects their willingness to engage in language practice. This kind of anxiety is associated with a fear of making mistakes and being too much aware of one's appearance. Studies by Aida (1994) and Zhang (2008) focused on the impact of cultural norms and societal pressures on learners and how they intensify the learner's anxiety of speaking English. For example, learners in collectivist societies could feel more anxious because of being worried about face-saving and public opinion.

Teachers and learners must recognize the causes and consequences of this anxiety as it can highly affect language acquisition and proficiency. Elements, such as low self-esteem, divergent cultural norms, and previous negative experiences can all make this fear worse. Furthermore, speaking English anxiety exceeds mastering the language's proficiency, encompassing social and psychological obstacles to communication.

It is required to examine techniques that can alleviate anxiety and create a more positive learning setting to resolve this problem. Iraqi and Yemeni college students' foreign language anxiety can somehow be reduced by implementing AI assisted methods in several ways, such as providing adaptive personalized and supportive learning experiences and offering interactive and engaging tools. Thus, integration of AI into language learning will establish an innovative, encouraging, and judgment that can mitigate language anxiety. This topic is essential for teachers and learners because it delves into the cognitive and emotional aspects of language acquisition.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies dealing with anxiety in the EFL domain have seen a real increase in the past twenty years. The idea of foreign language anxiety was first proposed by Horwitz et al. (1986) which could be divided into three different types of performance anxieties: communication anxiety, test anxiety, and fear of receiving a poor grade. Several researchers have been interested in examining situations that affect students' language learning anxiety. Giray, Alcala, Edem, and Sabacajan (2022) examined the English language anxiety of students attending a variety of colleges and universities in Metro Manila, the Philippines. 37 college students' data was gathered using purposive sampling. They used thematic analysis as an approach to classifying, evaluating, and understanding patterns. (Braun, Clarke, & Weate, 2016) looked at four themes: (1) poor language proficiency, (2) insecurities about oneself, (3) criticism of others, and (4) detrimental effects on behavior and performance.

In addition, Hidayati, Abdullah, Andriani, Rosmala, and Nurvianti (2022) consider learning activities causing EFL learners' speaking anxiety and ways to revolve around them. Three students from junior high school were chosen to participate. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather the data, and thematic analysis was used to examine the findings.

The findings showed that students are uneasy when teachers inquired using English and this lessens their participation in the classroom and their performance quality is poor. Learners concentrate on the teacher's explanation and ignore disruption from others to overcome the anxiety and engage in learning activities. This study has certain limitations, such as offering sociological and psychological viewpoints on the phenomenon of speaking anxiety. This study does not consider the impact of English teachers' instructional methods on students' speaking anxiety.

The speaking anxiety of Turkish children, adolescents and adults was examined by Akar (2021). The survey design was used in the study as part of the quantitative research methodology. 4016 individuals of various ages participated in the data collection. The results showed that age is an irrefutable element in the language learning process. Turkish learners have an average level of speaking anxiety. Young learners' anxiety is low in comparison with the anxiety of older learners. The latter are more anxious, uncomfortable, and petrified of making mistakes.

Zulfikar (2022) quantitative investigation intends to inspect the degree of anxiety experienced by EFL students in their second year of high school when speaking English. It uses selective error correction and group work to lessen students' fear. The results indicated that the majority of students had a high level of speaking anxiety. The application of selective error correction and collaborative efforts enhanced the learners' performance in their tasks and reduced their anxiety.

Tóth (2008) adopts and uses Horwitz et al. (1986) Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) in the context of Hungarian EFL. Examining this scale's psychometric qualities is the study's goal. The HFLCAS was taken by 117 students majoring in English and 66 students not majoring in English. The findings indicated that the Hungarian FLCAS demonstrated reliability and validity based on the evaluated measures. The results showed that the three main components of EFL anxiety are exam anxiety, fear of negative judgment, and communication apprehension. Furthermore, the primary causes of FL concern in speaking English among Yemeni students at Hodeidah University's English department in the college of education were examined by Banani (2016). According to the study, the most anxious students were in their first year. Besides, the department's female students reported moderate anxiety.

Researchers are actively exploring both the personal and environmental aspects that contribute to speaking anxiety. For example, Tsou, Wang, and Liou (2021) study found that teachers who maintain a positive and relaxed classroom provide valuable feedback and encourage teamwork activities can significantly decrease students' anxiety about speaking.

A recent study by Choi and Lee (2023) found that online language learning platforms can decrease speaking anxiety by allowing students to manage their response speed and reduce self-awareness. However, they also noted that the absence of in-person interaction can lead to isolation and heightened anxiety for some learners.

Technology has also emerged as an effective tool in reducing anxiety. A study by Liao (2019) suggested that mobile apps and language learning software which allow learners to practice speaking in a controlled, low-pressure setting can help reduce anxiety. These platforms allow students to speak without fear of judgment, and often provide immediate feedback, which can help boost confidence.

In this investigation, the investigator attempts to compare the anxiety degree among Iraqi and Yemeni students focusing on two major factors, communication apprehension anxiety and negative evaluation anxiety among both male and female Iraqi and Yemeni students. It also attempts to find solutions to reduce the anxiety level through AI tools.

3. QUESTIONS OF THE STUDY

- 1) To what extent the factor of communication apprehension affects Iraqi and Yemeni college students in speaking English?
- 2) To what extent the element of fearing a poor evaluation affects Iraqi and Yemeni students in speaking English?

4. METHODOLOGY

This research has adopted a quantitative method to investigate the two main factors causing anxiety among Iraqi and Yemeni English major students.

4.1. Participants

The study was conducted on 198 students from Yemen and 110 Iraqi students. The participants are English language majors at various phases of their academic education. Table 1 provides an example of the description.

Table 1. Example of a sample description.

Number	Male	Female	Total
Iraqi students	45	65	110
Yemeni students	46	152	198

The sample of this study is chosen randomly from different stages of college students in Iraq and Yemen.

4.2. Instrument

The investigator adopted the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) with some modifications to achieve the goals of this investigation and for data collection. The focus in the modified questionnaire was on the items related to the factor of communication apprehension and the items related to the factor of negative evaluation resulting in 6 items for each factor. Therefore, the total number of the items was 12 items on a 5-point Likert scale.

1= Strongly disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= Undecided, 4= Agree, 5= Strongly agree

Therefore, the theoretical mean will be 3.0.

4.3. Data Collection

The designed questionnaire which included 12 items was split into two categories. The first one focused on the factor of communication apprehension and the items were 1,3,5,7,9 and 11. The second focused on the factor of negative evaluation and the items listed in this category are 2, 4, 6, 8, 10 and 12.

The questionnaire was dispersed to Iraqi college students enrolled in the English department at Diyala University and Al-Bayan University and to the Yemeni college students in the English department of the Faculty of Education at Hodeidah University. The instructions were given in English and Arabic which is the native language in Iraq and Yemen.

4.4. Data Analysis

The data collected was analyzed and displayed in the tables below.

Table 2. Responses of Iraqi male and female students to the items related to the factor of communication apprehension.

No.	Items	Male		Female	
		Total score	Mean	Total score	Mean
1)	In my language lesson, I never feel completely confident speaking English.	153	3.44	207	3.18
2)	My anxiety causes me to forget things I know in my language class.	143	3.17	246	3.84
3)	Volunteering for answers, I know makes me feel embarrassed in my language class.	137	3.04	206	3.377
4)	I often feel that other students in my language class are more proficient than I am.	120	2.79	191	2.85
5)	When my name is called in my language lesson, I feel my heart racing.	142	3.227	249	3.66
6)	I'm really self-conscious when I speak English in front of my peers.	163	3.704	276	3.94

Table 2 shows that every student (male or female) is experiencing the problems listed in the table about the communication anxiety component. Compared to male students, female students are more affected by item 6 followed by items 1, 5, 2 and 3. Item 4 is less problematic to them as its theoretical mean is below 3.0. Moreover, compared to male students, female students experience higher levels of anxiousness.

Table 3. Responses of Iraqi male and female students to the items related to the factor of negative evaluation.

No.	Items	Male		Female	
		Total score	Mean	Total score	Mean
1)	I feel ashamed when I use incorrect English terms.	162	3.52	243	3.738
2)	When the teacher corrects me and I don't comprehend it, I become upset.	161	3.659	232	3.625
3)	When my English teacher is prepared to correct every error I make, it makes me nervous.	153	3.326	212	3.533
4)	When I can't speak English well in my language lesson, I get anxious.	162	3.6	243	3.626
5)	I'm frightened of making mistakes. Therefore, I don't provide my answers in my language lesson.	133	3.09	202	3.014
6)	When I make mistakes, I'm worried that other students will make fun of me.	128	2.84	213	3.132

Table 3 indicates that with the exception of item 6, which is less problematic for male students, nearly every item has a significant impact on speaking anxiety in male and female Iraqi students. Additionally, among female students, the mean score for every item listed under the negative evaluation element is high. This suggests that female students endure greater hardships.

Table 4. Responses of Yemeni male and female students to the items related to the factor of communication apprehension.

No.	Items	Male		Female	
		Total score	Mean	Total score	Mean
1)	In my language lesson, I never feel completely confident speaking English.	11.25	2.81	13.03	3.26
2)	My anxiety causes me to forget things I know in my language class.	14.01	3.50	14.37	3.59
3)	Volunteering for answers I know makes me feel embarrassed in my language class.	10.2	2.55	12.49	3.12
4)	I often feel that other students in my language class are more proficient than I am.	11.23	2.81	11.94	2.99
5)	When my name is called in my language lesson, I can feel my heart racing.	12.48	3.12	11.87	2.97
6)	I'm really self-conscious when I speak English in front of my peers.	13.58	3.40	13.29	3.32

It is evident from Table 4 that items 2, 5, and 6 are difficult for Yemeni male students. Items 1, 3, and 4 are less problematic for them. For Yemeni female students, items 1, 2, 3, and 6 contribute to speaking anxiety, which affects their participation and communication. On the other hand, items 4 and 5 are less challenging for women.

The data presented in Table 5 show that Yemeni male students experience greater difficulty with the first three items 1, 2, and 3, while items 4, 5, and 6 are less problematic for them. In contrast, Yemeni female students face speaking anxiety related to items 1, 2, 3, 4, and 6 with item 5 being less of an issue for them.

Table 5. Responses of Yemeni male and female students to the items related to the factor of negative evaluation.

No.	Items	Male		Female	
		Total score	Mean	Total score	Mean
1)	I feel ashamed when I use incorrect English terms.	12.12	3.03	13.82	3.46
2)	When the teacher corrects me and I don't comprehend it, I become upset.	13.19	3.298	14.15	3.54
3)	When my English teacher is prepared to correct every error I make, it makes me nervous.	12.02	3.01	13.04	3.26
4)	When I can't speak English well in my language lesson, I get anxious.	10.67	2.67	14.54	3.64
5)	I'm frightened of making mistakes. Therefore, I don't provide my answers in my language lesson.	9.71	2.43	11.95	2.99
6)	When I make mistakes, I'm worried that other students will make fun of me.	10.63	2.66	12.43	3.11

Table 6. Responses of Iraqi male and Yemeni male students to the items related to the factor of communication apprehension.

No.	Items	Iraqi male		Yemeni male	
		Total score	Mean	Total score	Mean
1)	In my language lesson, I never feel completely confident speaking English.	153	3.44	11.25	2.81
2)	My anxiety causes me to forget things I know in my language class.	143	3.17	14.01	3.50
3)	Volunteering for answers I know makes me feel embarrassed in my language class.	137	3.04	10.20	2.55
4)	I often feel that other students in my language class are more proficient than I am.	120	2.79	11.23	2.81
5)	When my name is called in my language lesson, I can feel my heart racing.	142	3.227	12.48	3.12
6)	I'm really self-conscious when I speak English in front of my peers.	163	3.704	13.58	3.40

Table 6 suggests that Iraqi male students experience speaking anxiety related to items 1, 2, 3, 5, and 6, while item 4 causes less anxiety, as its mean score is below the theoretical mean. In contrast, Yemeni male students report less difficulty with the issues listed in items 1, 3, and 4. Therefore, item 4 appears to be less of a concern for both Iraqi and Yemeni male students in terms of speaking anxiety.

Table 7. Responses of Iraqi male and Yemeni male students to the items related to the factor of negative evaluation.

No.	Items	Iraqi male		Yemeni male	
		Total score	Mean	Total score	Mean
1)	I feel ashamed when I use incorrect English terms.	162	3.52	12.12	3.03
2)	When the teacher corrects me and I don't comprehend it, I become upset.	161	3.659	13.19	3.298
3)	When my English teacher is prepared to correct every error I make, it makes me nervous.	153	3.326	12.02	3.01
4)	When I can't speak English well in my language lesson, I get anxious.	162	3.6	10.67	2.67
5)	I'm frightened of making mistakes. Therefore, I don't provide my answers in my language lesson.	133	3.09	9.71	2.43
6)	When I make mistakes, I'm worried that other students will make fun of me.	128	2.84	10.63	2.66

According to the responses shown in Table 7, Iraqi male students experience difficulties with the factor of negative evaluation as the mean scores for items 1,2,3, 4 and 5 are higher than the theoretical mean. However, item 6 has a mean score below the theoretical mean, indicating less concern. On the other hand, Yemeni male students report struggling with the issues in the first three items (1,2, 3) but find items 4,5, and 6 less problematic.

Table 8. Responses of Iraqi female and Yemeni female students to the items related to the factor of communication apprehension.

No.	Items	Iraqi female		Yemeni female	
		Total score	Mean	Total score	Mean
1)	In my language lesson, I never feel completely confident speaking English.	207	3.18	13.03	3.26
2)	My anxiety causes me to forget things I know in my language class.	246	3.84	14.37	3.59
3)	Volunteering for answers I know makes me feel embarrassed in my language class.	206	3.377	12.49	3.12
4)	I often feel that other students in my language class are more proficient than I am.	191	2.85	11.94	2.99
5)	When my name is called in my language lesson, I can feel my heart racing.	249	3.66	11.87	2.97
6)	I'm really self-conscious when I speak English in front of my peers.	276	3.94	13.29	3.32

The responses of Iraqi female students reveal that they experience issues related to communicative apprehension in items 1,2, 3, 5 and 6 but not in item 4 (Table 8). Similarly, Yemeni female students report facing the same challenges in items 1,2, 3 and 6 but find items 4 and 5 less problematic.

Table 9. Responses of Iraqi female and Yemeni female students to the items related to the factor of negative evaluation.

No.	Items	Iraqi Female		Yemeni Female	
		Total score	Mean	Total score	Mean
1)	I feel ashamed when I use incorrect English terms.	243	3.738	13.82	3.46
2)	When the teacher corrects me and I don't comprehend it, I become upset.	232	3.625	14.15	3.54
3)	When my English teacher is prepared to correct every error I make, it makes me nervous.	212	3.533	13.04	3.26
4)	When I can't speak English well in my language lesson, I get anxious.	243	3.626	14.54	3.64
5)	I'm frightened of making mistakes; therefore, I don't provide my answers in my language lesson.	202	3.014	11.95	2.99
6)	When I make mistakes, I'm worried that other students will make fun of me.	213	3.132	12.43	3.11

As indicated in Table 9, Iraqi female students experience issues related to negative evaluation, as their mean scores for all the items listed are higher than the theoretical mean. Yemeni female students face similar challenges, although item (5) appears to be less problematic for them compared to the Iraqi female students.

5. DISCUSSION

The data analysis of this investigation has offered valuable insights into the type and degree of anxiety that Yemeni and Iraqi college students face when speaking English. The two main components that form the basis of the analysis are negative assessment and communication anxiety. The data was collected using a modified version of the

Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) which included 12 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale. Regarding the communication apprehension the data collected shows a significant concern among both Iraqi and Yemeni students although with notable gender-based differences: the Iraqi female students consistently reported higher levels of communication apprehension. Their responses were particularly elevated on items that reflect physical symptoms of anxiety (e.g., heart racing when called upon) and psychological self-consciousness (e.g., feeling self-conscious when speaking English). Whereas the Iraqi male students showed moderate anxiety, but with lower mean scores across all communication items compared to their female counterparts. However, they still exhibited a clear pattern of apprehension, particularly when being called upon or when volunteering answers. On the other hand, the Yemeni female students demonstrated considerable anxiety, especially in areas, such as forgetting known information due to anxiety and feeling self-conscious. However, the Yemeni male students reported the lowest levels of communication apprehension among the four subgroups. Their scores were closest to the neutral theoretical mean (3.0), suggesting a relatively less anxious disposition, though items like nervousness and forgetfulness still surfaced as problematic. According to these findings, anxiety connected to communication is more common among female students in both countries. Conservative societies, such as Yemen and Iraq may exacerbate this concern through cultural expectations regarding gender and public performance.

As for the negative evaluation factor the analysis strengthens further the understanding of student anxiety: the Iraqi female students once again demonstrated the highest anxiety levels, particularly when they made mistakes, received corrections, or anticipated judgment from peers or teachers. All items scored well above the mean, suggesting a pervasive fear of being negatively evaluated. The Iraqi male students also expressed considerable discomfort, especially in response to teacher corrections and embarrassment over pronunciation errors. While slightly less pronounced than in females, the data reflect a fear of criticism and a resulting reluctance to participate. Besides, Yemeni female students were similarly affected with high mean scores for most items, though slightly lower than their Iraqi counterparts. The fear of being corrected or laughed at remains a prominent anxiety trigger. Additionally, with multiple items falling close to or below the neutral mark, Yemeni male students once again showed the lowest levels of negative evaluation anxiety. This implies that they either have coping strategies that protect them from such anxieties or that they feel less threatened in assessment environments. This data supports the conclusion that the fear of negative evaluation is particularly severe in female students, especially in Iraq. The data indicates that teacher correction methods, fear of peer judgment, and public speaking are all major contributors to nervousness. Based on this discussion, it can be concluded that Iraqi students, both male and female, generally reported higher anxiety levels across both factors than Yemeni students. This may point to contextual or pedagogical differences in classroom environments, levels of exposure to English, or societal pressures.

Therefore, it would be appropriate to integrate AI in English language learning classrooms as it offers a powerful, scalable, and flexible solution for mitigating speaking anxiety, particularly in socio-culturally sensitive environments such as Iraq and Yemen. AI tools can transform how language is taught and perceived by creating personalized, private, and non-judgmental learning environments. Teachers must consider blending AI with traditional human-centered approaches to preserve empathy while benefiting from technological precision. Moreover, our future pedagogical practices should aim to 1) train teachers in AI-assisted instruction. 2) Encourage learners to use AI as a support tool, not a replacement for social learning. 3) Invest in research on the long-term psychological effects of AI-driven language education. Educational institutions can move toward a more inclusive, innovative, and anxiety-free model of language education.

6. CONCLUSION

The result of this investigation shows that communication anxiety has a significant impact on Iraqi and Yemeni students, with females displaying higher levels of anxiety than males. This responds to the study's opening query. In response to the study's second question, Iraqi and Yemeni students are generally greatly impacted by the

negative evaluation component. However, female students are disproportionately affected by it. The study also showed that speaking anxiety is frequently caused by inadequate language input and poor English-speaking practice in language classrooms among college students from Yemen and Iraq. Consequently, it is recommended that teachers provide a secure and encouraging environment to assist students in lowering their speaking anxiety levels.

Besides, AI can help college students who are anxious about learning a foreign foreign language in several ways by providing individualized, non-judgmental, and flexible support that can boost self-esteem and enhance abilities. Here are some ways which suggest how AI can assist:

1. Personalized Language Learning

AI can offer individualized language learning experiences according to each student's proficiency, interests, and objectives. AI-powered language apps (like Duolingo, Babbel, or Memrise) can provide lessons that feel less daunting and more engaging by adjusting to a student's pace, weaknesses, and strengths. This helps to alleviate the anxiety that comes with being in a one-size-fits-all learning environment.

2. Non-Judgmental Practice with Virtual Conversation Partners

Many students feel anxious about speaking a foreign language because they fear judgment from others. Students will be able to practice speaking and writing under AI guidance feeling free from worrying about making mistakes or embarrassing themselves.

3. Real-Time Feedback and Correction

Solutions provided by AI will enable students to understand and fix their errors in real time. This instantaneous support can help them improve their language usage. Similarly, a growth mentality is also encouraged by the gentle corrections and encouragement that AI technologies usually provide.

4. Interactive and Adaptive Learning

Based on the student's performance artificial intelligence can modify the difficulty of courses ensuring that they are neither too easy nor too difficult. Students are kept interested and engaged by this customized difficulty curve, which prevents them from becoming frustrated or disheartened.

5. Reduced Pressure of Peer Comparison

AI tools help students overcome the fear of peer comparison by providing a private practice area. When students are not vying with others for grades or attention, they may feel less anxious and more ready to take chances and make mistakes, which are considered crucial for language development.

6. Encouragement and Positive Reinforcement

When students make progress, even in tiny ways the AI systems are designed to provide positive reinforcement and encouragement. This constant support students get makes them feel confident and motivates them to keep learning, which lessens their fear of failing and fosters a more positive attitude towards learning.

Integrating AI into language learning settings offers a creative, encouraging, and judgment-free environment that lessens language speaking anxiety. Through providing students with individualized, interactive, and captivating resources, AI can boost students' confidence and inspire them to take chances in their language learning process. Finally, these AI- powered solutions promote a more constructive educational environment that lessens stress and gives students the tools they need to thrive.

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