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Exploring Freshmen Students of English Literature Reflections On Fears and Shames Provoking Factors in Speaking Classrooms

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Abstract

Fear and shyness in foreign language learning are common psychological barriers that EFL learners struggle with. This study explored the most critical-provoking factors that may lead to shame and fear when the learners participate in speaking tasks and activities in their language classes. The study population consisted of fifty-eight freshmen students of English literature, who were both genders and aged 21 to 27. The Oxford Placement Test was run to homogenize the participants. Based on the test results, eight subjects were eliminated, and the other 50 were selected as the study sample. To capture and collect the required data, the researcher used three instruments: The Oxford Placement Test to homogenize the sample, the foreign language anxiety scale made and organized by Horvitz et al. (1986), and finally, a semi-structured interview to seek the learners' attitudes on the sources of shyness. The questionnaire contained 23 items, all related to the degree of EFL speaking anxiety as well as possible causes attributed to it. Each item of the questionnaire was answered using a five-point Likert scale that includes the answers "strongly agree," "agree," "neither agree nor disagree," "disagree," and "strongly disagree." Based on the participants' responses, three primary sources of fear were identified: Test anxiety, negative evaluation, and communication apprehension. Moreover, the Chi-square Test results ($X^2 = 56.87$, $p = 0.001$) revealed a meaningful difference between the three variables. Besides, the participants in the interview referred to nine significant sources that could increase their shyness. Findings can be helpful for teachers to employ certain strategies to enhance confidence among their learners so as to overcome their students' fear and shyness.

Keywords: EFL learners, fear, shy, speaking skill

1. Introduction

Speaking is a pivotal skill in foreign language acquisition, yet it presents unique challenges for EFL learners. Many learners struggle with psychological barriers, including fear, anxiety, and shyness, which hinder their participation in speaking tasks (Rasool et al., 2023). Research indicates that these emotional barriers are influenced by factors such as self-perceived proficiency, fear of negative evaluation, and cultural expectations (Jinxin & Jiayuan, 2023). While previous studies have examined speaking-related anxiety, fewer have explicitly addressed the intertwined roles of fear and shame in EFL classrooms, particularly in the Iranian context.

Language learning anxiety manifests in various forms, including communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of public speaking (Horwitz, 2017). Although public speaking anxiety is often emphasized, other forms of anxiety—such as classroom social anxiety and cultural inhibitions—are equally relevant. Iranian students, for instance, may experience heightened fear of making mistakes due to cultural norms that emphasize academic excellence and social conformity (Zhang & Liu, 2013). These cultural dimensions warrant closer examination to develop more effective instructional strategies that mitigate fear and encourage active participation.

This study seeks to fill this gap by analyzing the role of fear and shame in Iranian EFL speaking classrooms. It adopts a sociocultural perspective, emphasizing the impact of social and cultural norms on language anxiety. Additionally, it aims to provide practical recommendations for teachers and educators to foster supportive learning environments that minimize anxiety and encourage student engagement.

2. Literature Review

Anxiety in language learning has been extensively studied, yet the intersection of fear, shame, and speaking apprehension remains underexplored. Horwitz et al. (1986) introduced the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), which identifies three primary components of anxiety: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. However, this framework does not fully address the cultural and emotional dimensions of speaking anxiety, particularly in collectivist societies such as Iran.

2.1. Theoretical Perspectives on Speaking Anxiety

Sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) provides a relevant framework for understanding speaking anxiety in EFL learners. It posits that learning occurs within a social context, where cultural norms and peer interactions shape students' confidence and willingness to speak. Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) further explains that intrinsic motivation plays a crucial role in overcoming language anxiety. Learners with a strong sense of autonomy and competence are less likely to experience debilitating fear and shame.

2.2. Cultural Influences on Speaking Anxiety

Cultural norms significantly shape learners' experiences in language classrooms. In Iranian educational settings, high academic expectations and a strong emphasis on error-free performance can exacerbate speaking anxiety (Soyoofoa & Jokar, 2014). Fear of making mistakes in front of peers often leads to avoidance behaviors, where students refrain from participating in oral activities. Studies suggest

that collectivist cultures, where social harmony is prioritized, may contribute to heightened anxiety due to fear of embarrassment (Mynard & Carlsen, 2017).

2.3. Differentiating Between Types of Anxiety

While public speaking anxiety is a dominant concern, research highlights the importance of distinguishing between different forms of speaking-related anxiety. Zheng et al. (2024) found that learners' self-efficacy perceptions directly correlate with their anxiety levels. Those who perceive themselves as competent speakers experience lower anxiety, whereas students with low self-confidence are more prone to fear and shame. Similarly, Zhang & Liu (2013) identified test anxiety as a distinct construct that negatively impacts oral performance, particularly in high-stakes assessment settings.

2.4. Pedagogical Strategies to Reduce Speaking Anxiety

Recent studies advocate for a combination of psychological support and pedagogical interventions to alleviate speaking anxiety. Group collaboration has been shown to foster a supportive environment where students feel less exposed to negative evaluation (Majaliwa et al., 2024). Additionally, AI-driven language learning tools, such as CiciBot, offer personalized feedback that reduces fear of public speaking (Yang et al., 2024). However, these tools must be supplemented with human interaction to maintain emotional engagement (Muthmainnah, 2024).

Moreover, positive psychology interventions, such as mindfulness techniques and cognitive restructuring, have been proposed to help students reframe their anxiety (Fredrickson, 2001). Encouraging risk-taking in a non-judgmental classroom environment can empower students to embrace speaking challenges without fear of failure (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2013).

2.5. Addressing the Role of Shame in Speaking Anxiety

Shame, though less frequently discussed than fear, is a critical component of speaking anxiety. It is linked to negative self-evaluation and social comparison, which can lead to long-term disengagement from speaking tasks (Cook, 2006). Research indicates that shame-based anxiety can be mitigated through self-compassion exercises and peer support systems (Jinxin & Jiayuan, 2023). By acknowledging the emotional experiences of learners, educators can create a more inclusive and psychologically safe learning environment.

3. Research Questions

Based on the given objective proposed above, the present study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the most important causes of fear-provoking factors experienced by EFL learners in English-speaking classrooms?
2. What are the sources of shame in speaking in a foreign language classroom?

4. Method

4.1. Research Design

The researcher followed a mixed-methods study using qualitative and quantitative data-gathering procedures to answer the research questions. To this goal, questionnaires and interviews were

used to collect the required data. The questionnaire was used to answer the first research question on fear and anxiety. For the second question, a semi-structured interview was organized to explore the EFL learners' views on the sources of shame they felt in the language class.

4.2. Participants

Fifty-eight male and female Freshmen Students of English Literature at Ayatollah Amoli Branch of Islamic Azad University, aged 21 to 27, comprised the study population. They had been studying English Literature for over one and a half years. A convenient sampling procedure was employed to select the most appropriate samples. Oxford Placement Test was administered to homogenize the participants. Based on the test results, eight subjects whose scores were too high or too low were eliminated, and the other 50 established the study sample.

4.3. Instruments

To capture and collect the required data, the researcher used three instruments: The Oxford Placement Test to homogenize the sample, a questionnaire on fear in the language class, and finally a semi-structured interview to seek the learners' attitudes on the sources of shyness. Posttest.

4.3.1. Oxford Placement Test (OPT)

The OPT consists of 60 multiple-choice items, which determine a student's general language ability and can place learners at the appropriate level for a language course. This test is different from most other placement tests. The students of this study were pre-intermediate, whose OPT scores ranged between 30 and 39. The reliability index for OPT was reported to be 0.88 using Cronbach's Alpha. Besides the face and content validity of the OPT, it was accredited by three experienced EFL teachers.

4.3.2. The Questionnaire on Fear in the Language Class

A questionnaire was used to collect the data. It was to examine English language learners' anxiety (fear) of language learning in speaking classrooms. For this purpose, a foreign language anxiety scale was used. The questionnaire being used was made and organized by Horvitz et al. (1986). It is a self-report tool called FLCAS to elicit the participants' fear (anxiety) responses towards speaking in oral classes. The FLCAS was created by Horwitz and her colleagues when they saw the need for an accurate tool to measure foreign language speaking anxiety levels among language learners. To meet the needs of this study, the number of questionnaires was reduced from 33 to 23 by deleting the fear related to reading, writing, and listening which were not the goal of this study to investigate. On the whole, the questionnaire of this study contained 23 items all related to the degree of EFL speaking anxiety as well as possible causes attributed to it. Each item of the questionnaire was answered using a five-point Likert scale.

The original version of the questionnaire had a reported Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.83, which implies quite high internal reliability (Horwitz et al., 1986). Other researchers who have employed a translated and/or adapted version of the FLCAS have reported Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.84. These results suggest that the FLCAS is a highly reliable tool used to measure foreign language speaking anxiety, which is why it has been selected as the data elicitation instrument in the present study. However, the researcher ran Cronbach's Alpha to estimate the reliability of the questionnaire for the present study, which resulted in a value of 0.82. It was high enough to guarantee the reliability of the questionnaire.

To ensure the validity of the questionnaires, a sample of ten experienced EFL teachers as experts in the teaching English field were asked to leave their comments on the items to mark unclear parts in the questionnaire. Then the answers were analyzed based on the Content Validity Ratio Formula. The validity of the anxiety questionnaire used in this study was 0.95.

4.3.3. The Semi-Structured Interview on Shyness

The participants were asked to respond to one open question seeking their attitudes on the sources that could lead to their shyness. The question asked: “What could be the most important sources that would lead to your shame in the language class? Explain. You can refer to any source and problem that you have faced to make you feel shy.

4.4. Procedure

The selected Freshmen Students of English Literature were invited to complete the questionnaire and take part in interview sessions in the classroom environment. Before completing the questionnaire, the students were informed about the goal of the study and the processes of the interview. The researcher informed the participants that their information would remain confidential and anonymous, allowing them to express their ideas freely. It took approximately 30–40 minutes for each respondent to complete the questionnaire and take part in interview sessions.

The interview was designed after talking to several learners. The most important item was selected, which then established the semi-structured interview. However, the content was consulted with a number of experts for credibility. The interview sessions were carried out in the participants’ mother tongue, Persian, so that they felt more at ease and their message was conveyed more thoroughly. All the interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed. While the first categorization system was developed from the data, the data was translated from Persian to English by the researcher and double-checked to ensure loyalty to the original data.

The interview contents were thematically analyzed and 6 themes were extracted, each has been explored and explained in the following chapter. To begin the analysis, the researcher developed the essential elements in each interview to form an understanding of each participant’s shame. Therefore, first, the researcher read and took notes from the transcripts of the interviews. In the next stage, the researcher used open and pattern coding to analyze data and find the main groups and subgroups.

4.5. Statistical Analysis

The current study was a mixed-methods study using qualitative and quantitative data based on descriptive and inferential statistics analysis. To analyze the quantitative data, descriptive and inferential statistics using means, standard deviations, and χ^2 were used. After perusing the transcript of the participant's interview, conceptual themes were identified. Manual qualitative data analysis was done through thematic analysis in four steps. In the first step, the data were coded. This process involved bolding certain phrases and sentences of the text and developing codes to represent the content of the bold parts.

5. Results

5.1. Addressing Research Question One

Table 1 presents all of the questions and the mean of the responses to each question on anxiety in the speaking class. They were answered by 50 subjects, both male and female. In fact, each question item was followed by the relevant mean, indicating the degree to which the participants agreed or disagreed with the point. For instance, in terms of the first question, they showed their almost perfect agreement with the given question item. The mean of 1.39 indicates that the subjects strongly agreed with the idea, demonstrating the participants' overall strong desire to speak a foreign language. The low means show that the participants were in agreement about most of the investigated question items. In fact, the lower the mean, the higher the level of agreement.

According to Table 1, although the majority of the Mean scores suggest that none of the participants struggle with high levels of foreign language speaking anxiety, there are still indications that the learners do not experience the foreign language classroom as a place of comfort that provides confidence. Only one item, item number 6, received a mean score higher than 3.4 and is categorized as high anxiety. Item number 6 stated that during language class, "I find myself thinking about things that have nothing to do with the course and belong to the performance." The item was, due to its relatively high mean score, the most pronounced item within the category. The item within the same performance anxiety that received the second highest mean score was item number 15, which received a mean score of 3.25. It stated, "Even if I am well prepared for a language class, I feel anxious about it". The fear of having an oral presentation in English class seems to be moderate concerning foreign language speaking anxiety levels. Both items 3 and 4, which stated, 'I tremble when I know that I am going to be called on in the oral class' and 'It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in the oral class,' respectively had low means. These items can be major causes of fear and anxiety when learners are unprepared to answer questions. In other words, asking questions that are some sort of evaluation can be a source of fear. Item number 8 said: "I am usually at ease during the oral class" with a mean of 3.07 proving that learners disagreed with the idea and did not feel comfortable in this speaking class. To them, speaking naturally is an anxiety-provoking source and the learners don't feel happy to experience it. In the same way, item 9 said: "I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in my English class" with a high mean of 1.35 showing that learners feel fear when they want to answer the type of questions for which they are not ready. This is one of the main sources of fear for them.

Table 1

Descriptive Data on Each Item

Item	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Item1	50	1.00	5.00	3.09	1.10
Item2	50	1.00	5.00	2.86	1.13
Item3	50	1.00	5.00	2.02	1.32
Item4	50	1.00	5.00	1.95	1.02
Item5	50	1.00	5.00	2.71	1.26
Item6	50	1.00	5.00	3.43	1.16
Item7	50	1.00	5.00	2.66	1.26
Item8	50	1.00	5.00	1.07	1.15
Item9	50	1.00	5.00	1.35	1.28
Item10	50	1.00	5.00	3.19	0.94

Item11	50	1.00	5.00	2.88	1.18
Item12	50	1.00	5.00	2.47	1.13
Item13	50	1.00	5.00	2.65	1.21
Item14	50	1.00	5.00	2.72	1.11
Item15	50	1.00	5.00	3.25	1.27
Item16	50	1.00	5.00	2.31	1.26
Item17	50	1.00	5.00	2.90	1.17
Item18	50	1.00	5.00	2.61	1.15
Item19	50	1.00	5.00	2.81	1.37
Item20	50	1.00	5.00	2.65	1.17
Item21	50	1.00	5.00	2.98	1.17
Item22	50	1.00	5.00	2.85	1.22
Item23	50	1.00	5.00	2.87	1.27
Item24	50	1.00	5.00	2.62	1.15
Item25	50	1.00	5.00	2.41	1.10
Item26	50	1.00	5.00	2.63	1.15
Item27	50	1.00	5.00	2.63	1.05
Item28	50	1.00	5.00	2.55	1.04
Item29	50	1.00	5.00	2.83	1.10
Item30	50	1.00	5.00	2.75	1.33
Item31	50	1.00	5.00	2.54	1.07
Item32	50	1.00	5.00	3.12	1.23

As seen in Table 2, the mean scores and standard deviations for items within each performance anxiety, including test anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and communication apprehension were calculated.

Table 2

Mean Scores and Standard Deviations for Items Within Each Performance Anxiety

Performance anxiety	Item within each performance anxiety	Mean score	Standard deviation
Test anxiety	3, 5, 6, 8, 10, 11, 15, 16, 19, 20, 21, 24, 25, 27	2.82	0.8719
Fear of negative evaluation	2, 7, 12, 18, 22, 30, 32	1.76	1.0887
Communication apprehension	1, 4, 9, 13, 14, 17, 23, 26, 28, 29, 31	2.71	0.9982

In this regard, test anxiety revealed a mean score of 2.82, fear of negative evaluation showed a mean score of 1.76, and communication apprehension showed 2.71 of mean score, as follows.

Table 3

Mean Scores and Standard Deviations for Items Within Test Anxiety

Item number	Mean score	Standard deviation
3	2.79	0.884
5	2.71	2.554
6	3.43	1.255
8	3.08	0.996
10	3.19	1.253
11	2.88	2.001

15	3.25	1.379
16	2.31	0.894
19	2.81	1.798
20	2.65	2.841
21	2.98	0.894
24	2.62	0.912
25	2.41	1.884
27	2.63	0.441

The low means of negative evaluation, according to the data in Table 4, tells us that the majority of the learners feel anxious regarding the tests that are taken or the questions asked by the teacher, which may lead to teachers' judgment. These types of questions can be regarded as a form of evaluation, which may lead to fear of being active participants. In other words, the learners may prefer to resort to avoidance and escape from participating in class activities.

Table 4

Mean Scores and Standard Deviations for Items Within Fear of Negative Evaluation

Item Number	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
2	2.86	1.13
7	2.66	1.26
12	2.47	1.13
18	2.61	1.15
22	2.85	1.22
30	2.75	1.33
32	3.12	1.23

Within communication apprehension, item number 1 received the highest score of 3.09 (table 5). The item stated: "I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my foreign language class". Similar to item number 32, item number 1 was the only item within communication apprehension that received a mean score higher than 3 but was still within moderate anxiety.

Table 5

Mean Scores for Items Within Communication Apprehension

Item number	Mean score	Standard Deviation
1	3.09	0.899
4	2.17	1.554
9	1.35	0.887
13	2.65	0.996
14	2.72	1.244
17	2.90	1.001
23	2.87	1.344
26	2.63	1.884
28	2.55	2.55
29	2.83	1.25
31	2.54	1.996

As it can be observed by looking at the mean score of each item, none of the items received mean scores that would suggest very low levels or very high levels of anxiety. For the first research question, the result from the present study suggests that there indeed are learners who experience foreign language speaking anxiety in the speaking classrooms, and that the levels are moderate. Furthermore, the results suggest that among the three performance anxieties presented by Horwitz et al. (1986), test anxiety is most pronounced among the participant sample.

Finally, Table 6 presents the data of the ANOVA Test that Indicates the degree of meaningfulness among the three variables of test anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and communication apprehension. The $p\text{-value} = 0.001 < 0.05$ indicates that there is a meaningful difference between the three variables responsible for the learners' fear. In other words, it can be claimed that the effect of the three variables is not the same and each of them has its own distinct impact in leading to fear.

Table 6

ANOVA Test of Variability

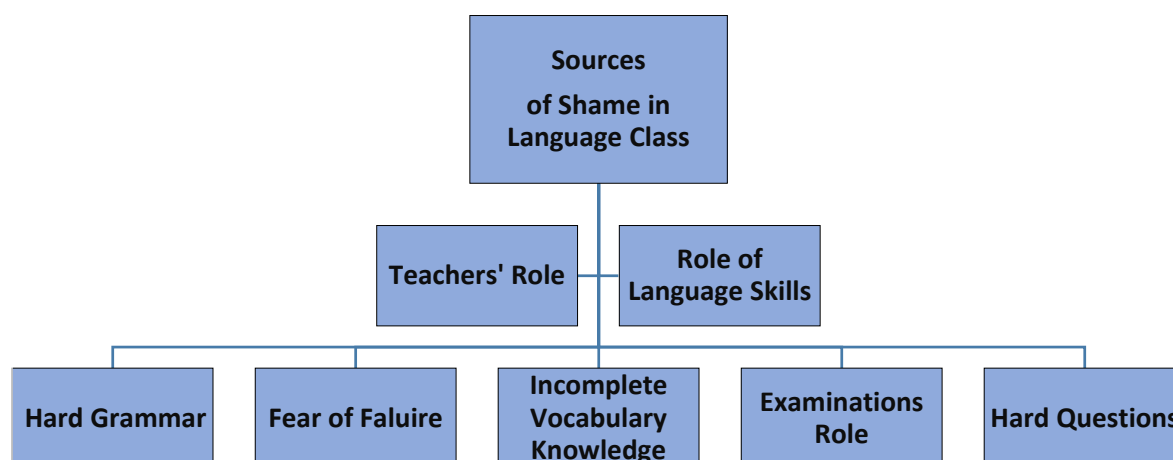
Factors	Mean scores	Priority	Chi-square	N	DF	P-Value
Test anxiety	2.82	3rd	56.87	50	3	0.001
Fear of negative evaluation	1.76	1st				
Communication apprehension	2.71	2nd				

5.2. Addressing Research Question Two

Concerning the second research question 'What could be the most important sources that would lead to your shame in the language class? The following themes were identified through thematic analysis of interview data. For a better grasp of the emerged themes, they are depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Emerged Themes Revealing Sources of Shame in Language Class



A. Teachers' role

In the words of participant 8 (P8): when the teacher controls my responses and activities, I feel shy.

In the words of participant P11 and 12: As the teacher looks at me waiting for a response, I feel nervous.

P16 and 18 claimed: teacher has to be more patient when asking questions.

P19: teachers' questions are not clear to me and I feel shy in such a situation.

P21, 22, 19, 21, 24, 28, 29: teachers' criticisms make me feel shy.

P14, 17,18,19, 25, 31,34: The teacher does not answer our questions clearly, or we don't understand them.

P5,7,8,11,12,16,17,21,31,38,39: The teacher speaks too fast when asking questions.

P3,4,7,9,12,13,14,17,25,29,33: The teacher looks at me critically and thus I really feel shy.

B. Examinations role

P4, 5, 13, 16,17,22,24,28,32,36,38: I feel shy when I can't answer test questions.

P1,2,4,6,7,8,11,12,14,18,20,22,23,29,31,38,41,45,48: my low test scores are the major source of shyness.

C. Incomplete vocabulary knowledge

P3,4,6,8,11,18,22,26,31,35,40,42: when speaking I can't remember the related vocabularies and this makes me feel shy in front of others.

D. Hard grammar

P2,3,7,8,9,11,12,15,24,28,31,37,41,43,45: poor grammar knowledge is one of the sources of my shyness since I can't speak correctly.

E. Fear of failure

P1,2,6,7,10,12,17,23,25,26,28,31,35,41,42,44,45: I really feel shy if I fail any test or can't perform well in front of class or the teacher.

F. Hard questions

P2,3,5,6,9,10,13,16,19,20,24,25,30,31,34,42,43,47: when I can't answer hard questions asked by the teacher, I really feel shy in front of others.

G. Role of language skills

P3,5,7,11,16,22,29,32: I feel nervous and shy when speaking rather than writing or reading. Speaking is the most difficult task for me.

P3,6,8,9,12,14,20,22: Lack of interest towards speaking

P5,6,8,9,11,12,15,19,32,41,45,48: I don't like speaking because it provokes shyness for me. I have little practice in speaking.

P3,6,8,9,12,14,20,22,28,31,34,41: not enough practice is provided for me so I feel anxious and distressed to speak.

Among the participants who were interviewed, various insights were shared on the factors contributing to their sense of shame. The most significant factors identified were the role of instruction and

the behavior of teachers. In fact, the learners felt that teaching procedures that are determined and practiced by the teacher play a great role in producing and increasing shame among the learners

6. Discussion

In this study, we investigated the levels of speaking anxiety among Iranian EFL learners, exploring its contributing factors and examining the role of emotions such as fear and shame in shaping learners' experiences. We collected data through a questionnaire measuring speaking anxiety and conducted interviews to gain deeper insights into learners' emotional responses. Our aim was to identify key factors influencing speaking anxiety and to examine how they relate to learners' motivation, preparation time, and classroom experiences.

The findings indicate that while the overall mean score for speaking anxiety was moderate (2.77), individual differences were significant. Some learners exhibited high levels of anxiety, while others displayed minimal apprehension. Notably, cognitive interference, lack of preparation, and external classroom dynamics contributed to increased anxiety. Additionally, the study highlighted the strong influence of shame, particularly stemming from peer comparisons, teacher feedback, and assessment methods. These findings suggest that speaking anxiety is not a uniform experience but rather a multifaceted phenomenon influenced by various internal and external factors.

When compared to previous studies, our findings align with existing literature that underscores the complexity of foreign language anxiety. Similar to MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) and Dörnyei and Ushioda (2013), our study confirms that language anxiety manifests differently across individuals, emphasizing the need to account for learner variability. The prevalence of moderate to high anxiety aligns with studies by Horwitz (1986) and Daud et al. (2021), who also found that many foreign language learners experience anxiety, particularly in speaking tasks. Additionally, our results support Soyoofoa and Jokar's (2014) findings that Iranian EFL learners frequently face speaking anxiety, reinforcing the importance of addressing this issue in instructional settings.

One notable similarity with previous research is the strong link between anxiety and preparation time. As observed in studies by Brooks and Wilson (2015) and Hanifa (2018), learners who were given sufficient preparation time before speaking demonstrated lower anxiety levels. Our findings further corroborate this, showing that insufficient preparation was a major contributor to anxiety, reinforcing the idea that structured preparation can mitigate the cognitive load associated with spontaneous speaking tasks (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991).

However, our study also diverges from some prior research. While many studies focus primarily on anxiety, we found that shame plays an equally critical role in shaping learners' willingness to speak. The role of shame, as emphasized by Mynard and Carlsen (2017) and Lewis (2013), was evident in our findings, particularly in relation to teacher feedback and peer comparisons. Unlike some previous studies that primarily attribute anxiety to linguistic competence, our research highlights the emotional toll of negative self-perception, further underscoring the need for supportive and encouraging classroom environments. Additionally, while Yang et al. (2024) emphasized the role of high-stakes exams in fostering anxiety, our study reveals that learners experience a compounded effect when anxiety and shame interact, making the learning experience even more challenging.

These findings have important pedagogical implications. First, they highlight the need for language educators to consider individual differences in anxiety levels and provide tailored support to

learners who struggle with speaking apprehension. Second, they emphasize the importance of preparation time in reducing anxiety, suggesting that structured speaking activities should include sufficient time for learners to organize their thoughts. Third, the findings draw attention to the detrimental effects of shame, which calls for more constructive feedback practices and a shift away from punitive assessment methods. By fostering a low-anxiety, supportive learning environment, educators can help learners build confidence and develop their speaking skills more effectively.

Despite these insights, the study has limitations. The sample size was relatively small, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the study focused on Iranian EFL learners, meaning the results may not fully apply to learners from different linguistic or cultural backgrounds. Future research should explore these issues in larger and more diverse populations, examining how cultural and institutional factors influence the relationship between anxiety, shame, and language learning. Further studies could also investigate intervention strategies that help mitigate anxiety and create more positive learning experiences for students.

In conclusion, this study provides valuable insights into the complex interplay of anxiety, fear, and shame in language learning. While anxiety remains a significant challenge for Iranian EFL learners, our findings underscore the importance of preparation time, supportive teaching methods, and assessment practices in shaping learners' emotional responses. Addressing these factors in language instruction can contribute to a more positive and effective learning experience, ultimately helping learners develop greater confidence and proficiency in spoken English.

7. Conclusions and Implications

7.1. The Factors Affecting Speaking Anxiety

Language learning entails performing orally in a foreign language classroom, which could potentially be an anxiety-provoking situation for many language learners. Horwitz et al. (1986) have therefore presented the performance anxieties that are relevant in a language learning context. To them, foreign language-speaking anxiety does not stem from one singular root but derives from many possible causes. Hanifa (2018) introduced different factors that affect foreign language-speaking anxiety in terms of cognitive factors, affective factors, and performance factors. To him, cognitive factors involve the learners' thinking processes. This might include factors such as retrieving vocabulary and the ability to structure sentences grammatically correctly. This notion is compatible with the results of this study when the participants claimed that lack of vocabulary knowledge and their limited grammar knowledge leads to their shyness and fear. Additionally, when a learner communicates with others in the target language, the cognitive factors partly encompass the learner's background knowledge as the prior knowledge a learner has about a certain topic affects language production in the moment. The learner might face issues in producing appropriate language if they have little or no knowledge of the required topic. Furthermore, if a learner receives input that is beyond their level of comprehension, they may experience elevated levels of anxiety as they do not understand what is being spoken to them and therefore do not know how to respond (Hanifa, 2018). This is supported by Teimouri et al.'s (2017) study on foreign language speaking anxiety and factors that affect speaking anxiety. They concluded that learners who do not possess enough topical knowledge when speaking in a foreign language setting might experience high levels of speaking anxiety which in turn can result in avoidance behavior.

On the other hand, the achievements of this study showed that test anxiety is another important factor of anxiety evoking. Test anxiety involves a learner's experience of anxiety in scenarios where

their abilities are being tested and was the form of anxiety that most participants in Horwitz et al.'s (1986) study struggled with. The learner might have too high demands for their own performance and expect perfection, and therefore a fear of failure can promote a sense of anxiety. In such a situation, the language learner experiences severe anxiety prior to an oral presentation. He might feel of being very upset and shy. However, there has been discussions as to whether test anxiety is relevant for the language learning setting or not. MacIntyre and Gregersen (2012) found that test anxiety is a general anxiety issue and not related to communicative anxiety in the foreign language classroom. Contrary to this belief, Horwitz et al. (1986) claim that it indeed is relevant for foreign language learning as evaluating learners' performance is an ongoing process in the foreign language classroom.

Another source of fear in this study was fear of negative evaluation by the teacher. It could be connected to oral presentations when the objective is evaluation. While test anxiety is limited to a test-taking situation, fear of negative evaluation occurs in any situation where one is being evaluated by others, such as in an interview, during an oral presentation, or while speaking aloud in the classroom. Essentially, a learner might experience a sense of anxiety when he or she fears their speaking abilities will be evaluated negatively. Lastly, communication apprehension is related to a pupil's fear and shyness of communicating with other people, whether that be in groups or public. It also includes situations where the learner listens to a spoken message (Horwitz et al., 1986).

7.2. Factors Affecting Learners' Shy

The factors refer to different sources in terms of the role of teacher, classmates, evaluation, judgment, lack of the necessary skill and ability to perform and finally lack of enough practice that can lead to the learners' losing their self-confidence. During the interview, the participants claimed that one major factor for their shy is the way the teacher treats the situation. The teacher can blame the learners for their disabilities or criticize them for their poor performance. These are the more important sources of shyness among the learners. All the eleven cases stated below are instances of the situations where the learners lose their confidence and this naturally leads to their shy.

7.3. Implications of the Study

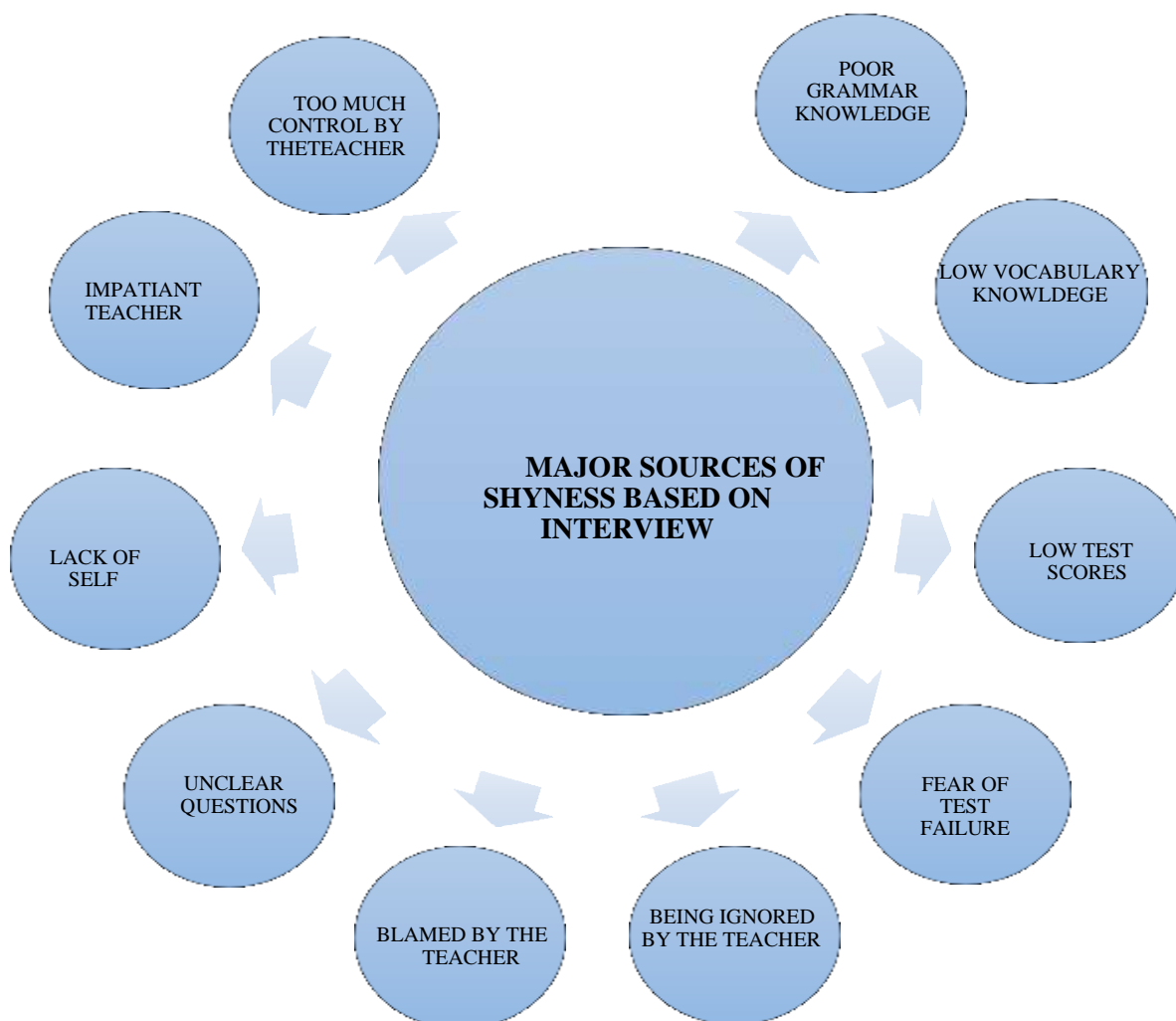
Teacher can consider the problem of fear and shy from several perspectives. Theoretically they can practice changes in their teaching approach by selecting the most appropriate and suitable teaching methods that can meet the needs of their learners both linguistically and psychologically. In other words, a suitable change in the teaching procedures may enhance learners' participation, confidence and motivation. It is recommended that teachers be so selective in their teaching method and procedures.

Teachers can employ certain strategies to enhance confidence among their learners so as to overcome their students' fear and shyness. To lower down the fear of speaking, teacher can employ a number of strategies that could be helpful for the learners. One recommendation is encouraging collaboration with peers when having an oral presentation that can help reduce anxiety level, as presenting alone can be experienced as quite intimidating. Furthermore, the teacher can propose certain set of planning as important step to include in order to ensure the learners an opportunity to feel more comfortable and confident with both fluency and accuracy when speaking. Brooks and Wilson (2015) conducted a study on benefits and challenges with utilizing presentations in classrooms with English as a foreign language and discovered that providing the learners with time to practice before speaking was beneficial in terms of anxiety levels. By removing the opportunity for practicing the language before

presenting, the learners might become more apprehensive when speaking (Hanifa, 2018). So, providing enough opportunity for the learners to act in the speaking situations is a very useful strategy that can lead to lowering fear and controlling it. Another suggestion for the teacher is that they should refrain from evaluating their learners negatively. Learners with fear of negative evaluation can be seen avoiding contributions in discussions or conversations, and only offering small nods in agreement. In other words, the teacher can treat the learners with encouragement and not criticism (Isaee & Barjesteh, 2023). This would increase collaboration and active participation of the learners. Another suggestion for a teacher is that they have to do their best to improve their students' motivation. When being motivated, the learners will naturally overcome the factors that could lead to their anxiety and shyness.

Figure 2

EFL Learners' Perceptions on the Sources of Shyness in the Speaking Class



The EFL learners to overcome their shy in the language class need to follow a certain set of procedures. As the first step, they have to trust their own abilities and potential. In this way, they can achieve the required self-confidence. Moreover, they have to look for different learning techniques that would develop their language knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. In their interview, one of the participants claimed that he did not know different strategies that could facilitate learning for him. They

need to be supported by the teacher to develop their self-regulation. Moreover, learners have to be helped to identify their personal intelligence. They have to identify their strengths using self-regulation strategies, confidence and motivation. This can increase their ability in learning English.

This study contributes to the field of second language acquisition by providing a deeper understanding of the psychological barriers—particularly fear and shame—that influence speaking anxiety among Iranian EFL learners. While previous research has explored speaking anxiety in general, this study highlights the specific cultural and contextual factors that shape learners' experiences. By identifying the key sources of fear, such as teacher evaluation, peer judgment, and test anxiety, this research offers practical insights for educators to create more supportive learning environments. Additionally, this study emphasizes the importance of adopting pedagogical strategies that not only address linguistic competence but also foster students' confidence and motivation. Future research could further explore the role of cultural norms in shaping language anxiety and investigate intervention strategies that effectively reduce fear and shyness in EFL learners.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors have conducted the study, collected data, analyzed and interpreted the data, and written up the manuscript.

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Competing Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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