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Iraqi EFL Students' Interactional Competence and Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety: A Correlational Study

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Abstract

Despite demonstrating satisfactory oral proficiency, many Iraqi learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) encounter considerable difficulty in managing authentic conversational interaction, suggesting a gap between oral proficiency and interactional competence. This correlational study investigates the interactional competence of Iraqi EFL university students and examines its relationship with foreign language classroom anxiety. Oral proficiency was assessed using the rubric developed by Marek and Wu (2011). The sample consisted of 30 Iraqi EFL students (15 males and 15 females). Participants' levels of foreign language classroom anxiety were measured using the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz and Cope (1986). Subsequently, interactional competence was assessed using Galaczi and Taylor's (2020) framework through a series of researcher-designed conversational tasks. The findings revealed that, despite demonstrating satisfactory oral proficiency, the participants exhibited substantial deficiencies in interactional competence. Statistical analysis further indicated a strong relationship between lower levels of interactional competence and higher levels of foreign language classroom anxiety. The findings highlight the importance of incorporating interactional competence into Iraqi EFL instruction and addressing classroom anxiety as a factor that may hinder learners' ability to participate effectively in spoken interaction

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الكفاءة التفاعلية للطلبة العراقيين الدارسين للغة الانكليزية بوصفها لغة أجنبية

وعلاقتها بالقلق الصفّي: دراسة ترابطية

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الملخص

معلومات الارشفة

على الرغم من امتلاك العديد من الطلبة العراقيين الدارسين للغة الإنجليزية بوصفها لغةً أجنبيةً مستوىً مُرضياً من الكفاءة الشفهية، فإنهم يواجهون صعوبات ملحوظة في إدارة التفاعل الحوارى الحقيقى، مما يشير إلى وجود فجوة بين الكفاءة الشفهية والكفاءة التفاعلية. وتهدف هذه الدراسة الترابطية إلى تقصي مستوى الكفاءة التفاعلية لدى طلبة الجامعات العراقيين الدارسين للغة الإنجليزية بوصفها لغةً أجنبية، والكشف عن طبيعة العلاقة بينها وبين القلق الصفّي في تعلم اللغة الأجنبية.

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الكفاءة التفاعلية، القلق الصفّي في تعلم اللغة الأجنبية، الكفاءة الشفهية، المهام الحوارية، الطلبة العراقيون الدارسون للغة الإنجليزية بوصفها لغةً أجنبية

معلومات الاتصال

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ولتحقيق أهداف الدراسة، جرى تقويم الكفاءة الشفهية باستخدام سلم التقدير الذي أعده Marek و Wu (2011) وتألفت عينة الدراسة من (30) طالباً وطالبة من طلبة أقسام اللغة الإنجليزية في الجامعات العراقية، بواقع (15) طالباً و (15) طالبة. كما قيس مستوى القلق الصفّي لدى أفراد العينة باستخدام مقياس القلق الصفّي في تعلم اللغة الأجنبية (Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale) الذي وضعه Horwitz و Cope (1986). بعد ذلك، قُوِّمت الكفاءة التفاعلية في ضوء نموذج Galaczi و Taylor (2020) من خلال مجموعة من المهام الحوارية التي صممها الباحث.

أظهرت نتائج الدراسة أن أفراد العينة، على الرغم من تمتعهم بمستوى مُرضٍ من الكفاءة الشفهية، أبدوا ضعفاً واضحاً في الكفاءة التفاعلية. كما بينت نتائج التحليل الإحصائي وجود علاقة قوية بين انخفاض مستوى الكفاءة التفاعلية

وارتفاع مستوى القلق الصفّي في تعلم اللغة الأجنبية. وتؤكد هذه النتائج أهمية تضمين الكفاءة التفاعلية بوصفها هدفًا رئيسًا في برامج تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية في الجامعات العراقية، إلى جانب تبني ممارسات تدريسية تسهم في الحد من القلق الصفّي لما له من أثر في قدرة الطلبة على المشاركة الفاعلة في التفاعل الشفهي

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Statement of the problem:

Teaching listening-and-speaking (conversation) to seniors at the University of Mosul, College of Education for Humanities, Department of English for three years now allowed an opportunity for insightful critical observation of students' performance. It has been noticed that top achievers, the top of their classes, have always kept to themselves. Most show no actual participation, engagement, or interaction in conversational activities. So far, no big surprises. As is known, there is a huge difference between "Use" and "Usage", "Linguistic competence" and "Communicative competence", "Langue and Parole", as you are pleased to call the dichotomy. *Students can be top achievers, yet they might lack conversational skills.*

By the end of the first semester, 2024-2025, all students are subjected to an oral proficiency test as part of the listening-and-speaking academic course assessment. Surprisingly, these "toppers" came on top. They showed high levels of oral proficiency. So, "What seems to be the problem?" is the problem this study has set to solve. Critical reflection on the observations made suggests two main potential and valid possibilities; the students either lack the competency to interact or they are just too anxious.

Aim of the study:

The study aims at, first, investigating the correlation between Iraqi EFL learners' levels of language anxiety and their interactional competence. Second, investigating if the correlation is gender related i.e. which gender shows higher classroom anxiety levels.

Questions of the study:

To achieve its aim, the study proposes certain questions to be answered as follows:

1. What is the current level of students' oral proficiency?
2. What is the current level of students' language anxiety?
3. What is the current level of students' interactional competence?
4. Is there a correlation between students' language anxiety levels and their interactional competence?
5. Which gender shows higher classroom anxiety levels?
- 6.

Literature review:

Before delving into the procedures, shedding light on the theoretical assumptions of both concepts of language anxiety and interactional competence is in order. They are to be tackled next separately and briefly:

Language anxiety:

Anxiety has been approached from a psychological point of view. Many psychologists viewed it as associated with unstable feelings such as frustration, worrying, and self-doubt. Its impact on language learning is well-established by a body of empirical and theoretical studies; Schovel (1978); McIntyre and Gardner (1994); Passer and Smith (2003); Brown (2000). Nevertheless, it is of significance to differentiate between "trait" anxiety and "situation-specific" anxiety. Trait anxiety is rather permanent and inherent; while situation-specific anxiety is triggered by a specific and temporary situation (Brown, 2000). People's level of anxiety here is tested in terms of well-established situations such as public speaking and communicating using a foreign language.

The latter is the concern of the study at hand. Horwitz and Cope (1986) categorize three components of language anxiety as follows: (a) Communication apprehension, (b) test anxiety, and (c) fear of negative evaluation.

Interactional competence:

Interactional competence (IC) has emerged as a main focus of language learning and teaching. A plethora of research has made it a multidisciplinary field of inquiry, for instance, (Pekarek Doehler, 2018, 2019, Waring, 2018, 2019 Galaczi & Taylor, 2018, 2020; Roevers & Kasper, 2018), and many others. Studies like these resulted in different conceptualizations of IC as a concept and many models have been

formulated to approach this competency, for instance, Celce-Murcia (2008), Young's (2011), Galaczi and Taylor's (2020).

IC was first introduced by Kramsch (1986) as the joint ability of learners to construct meaning and how meaning is organized by the interlocutors (p.367). In his model of IC, Young (2008) defines it in terms of what he calls "resources" as the relation between applying linguistic and interactional resources (p.100). In the simple words of Kasper and Ross (2013); it is "the competence to participate in interaction" (p. 9).

No matter how the definition is coined, phrased, and /or approached, it is important to recognize how it is different from the general communicative competency and a *part* of it. A crucial difference lurks in IC's focus on intersubjectivity and co-construction. *IC is a shared effort rather than an individual characteristic.*

As an aim for language teaching and assessment, empirical studies set out to construct components of IC. Literature on this endeavor yielded many forms of interactional ability described in some kind of organizational mechanisms of interaction. The study at hand adopts Galaczi and Taylors' (2020) model of IC. It constructs IC as having the ability to interact in terms of (1) Turn Management, (2) Topic Management, (3) Breakdown Repair, (4) Interactive Listening, and (5) Non-verbal behavior.

Procedure:

The Department of English contains six fourth-year classes; 4 in the morning studies and 2 in the evening studies. The first 5 top students of each are selected to be subjected to this investigation. The group of 30, 15 male and 15 female, has undergone an oral proficiency test to evaluate the current level of their speaking skills. Group discussion technique is adopted in the test; each group includes the five toppers of each class males or females. Marek, M. W., & Wu, W. (2011) rubric has been adopted (see Appendix A). The discussions are recorded for later analysis and grading according to the above rubric. The proficiency test would serve as a threshold to the rest of the experiment. In other words, toppers who show a low level of oral proficiency are to be excluded.

Next, Horwitz and Cope's (1986) scale is utilized to assess the samples' levels of language anxiety (see Appendix B). For the sake of statistical treatment, the scale is modified into 1-5 in correspondence to the original scale from "totally disagree" to "totally agree". Some items in the scale are reversed. In other words, they are phrased negatively. Hence, the scoring should be reversed accordingly, the negatively phrased

items include: 2, 5, 8, 11, 14, 18, 22, 28, and 32. However, the final calculation implies that high scores mean high levels of anxiety. Adopting Galaczi and Taylors' (2020) model of interactional competence, a test is constructed utilizing conversational tasks (see Appendix C for a sample and the process of applying the tasks).

Then the sample is regrouped into 5s *randomly* and differently from the proficiency test. The aim is to get the students out of their comfort zone (interacting with their classmates). Students are not really familiar with other students from different other classes. Again, the execution of the tasks is recorded for later rating except for Non-verbal behavior which was rated on the spot. Rating and grading of both oral proficiency test and IC test were carried out by a triangle of raters; I myself and two other colleagues who are specialized in teaching EFL. Appropriate statistical means are applied to elicit data and assess for significant correlation.

Models adopted:

1. Language anxiety classroom scale by Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M. B., & Cope, J. (1986) which includes.
 - Communication apprehension
 - Test anxiety
 - Fear of negative evaluation
2. Galaczi and Taylors (2020) model of interactional competence which includes:
 - Turn-management; starting, maintaining, ending, pausing, latching and interrupting;
 - Topic-management: initiating, extending, shifting, closing.
 - Breakdown: joint utterance creation, self/other repair and recasts.
 - Interactive Listening: backchannelling, comprehension check and continuers
 - Intersubjectivity: mutual understanding and feelings.
 - Non-verbal behavior; posture, eye-contact, and facial expressions

Discussion of the results:

As stated earlier, the study proposes some questions to be answered in order to achieve its aim. The questions are next answered in accordance with the statistical treatment (see Appendix D) as follows:

1. What is the current level of students' oral proficiency?

The results indicate that the sample students show a high level of oral proficiency. That came a bit surprising. Though the students showed the same high level of proficiency when they were put to the test as part of the listening-and-speaking

academic course assessment, the procedure didn't involve group discussion which requires some interactional skills. This might be due to the fact that in this test students feel comfortable with their colleagues, the same class for the past three years and still.

2. What is the current level of students' language anxiety?

According to the students' self-reported responses to the anxiety scale, statistics indicate high levels of anxiety. The scale includes three main categories; communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Based on my observation, the three categories are interrelated in a manner that one cyclically leads to the other. Yet, the most notable one is the fear of negative evaluation by peers especially for female students. The statistics indicates that the results are consistent with the observations made.

3. What is the current level of students' interactional competence?

To put interactional skills into real time assessment, students were taken out of their comfort zones, the groups are reshuffled and extended interactional tasks are utilized. Unlike oral proficiency test, the IC test requires more than just grammar and vocabulary. Unfortunately, results indicate that our top students show a serious lack in their interactional skills. The lack is so prominent when it comes to topic management and interactive listening skills.

4. Is there any correlation between students' language anxiety levels and their interactional competence?

Indicators from statistic correlation show a strong negative correlational relationship between students' language anxiety and their interactional performance.

5. Which gender shows higher classroom anxiety levels?

Statistic treatment of the collected data shows minor differences in anxiety levels as far as gender is concerned. Female students occasionally exhibited higher levels of anxiety to interact.

General remarks:

Unfortunately, language learning in Iraqi EFL settings will always be void of its main function; "communication". We don't teach for communication; we don't learn to communicate. The high levels of language anxiety shown by our senior students in the department is an undeniable proof. Results show, simply stated, that these students, though are top achievers and been learning and studying English almost all their academic lives, are not accustomed to communicate using English. They will always feel anxious to engage in interactions unless some radical measures are taken. Amongst many other justifications, the most crucial one is the improper application of

the communicative language teaching which is a direct consequence of “Test-Driven Language Learning and Teaching”.

Providing interactional classroom environments at early stages is a must. Institutional and policy curricula designers should follow up the practical implementation of the communicative language teaching approach prescribed for Iraqi textbooks. Students at the department of English/ College of Education are to be teachers of English who lack interactional skills. Holding teacher training programs focusing on both enhancing teachers’ communicative competence and teaching it is crucial.

Finally, the role of cultural and social norms has been anticipated as well as validated. Many female students showed some higher levels of anxiety and have been unmotivated and reluctant to engage in interactional activities.

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