INVESTIGATING ONLINE SPEAKING ANXIETY FACTORS AMONG L2 LEARNERS IN INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXTS DURING COVID- 19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

This study set out to investigate online speaking anxiety factors among institute L2 learners during the Covid-19 pandemic. It also investigated whether there is any significant difference between females and males' anxiety or not. The participants comprised 50 male and female L2 learners in Shiraz language institutes, aged 14 to 27, with varying English proficiency levels selected through non- probability sampling of the convenience type. Mc Croskey questionnaire was used for data collection. The collected data were analyzed and interpreted by the researcher using SPSS software (version 24) along with the assessment of data normality. Based on the results of the research, factors such as lack of readiness, personality, fear of speaking in class, fear of negative evaluation, and getting tense and nervous cause speaking anxiety among institute L2 learners during the Covid-19 pandemic. Notably, a significant gender difference was observed only in the components "Fear of negative evaluation" and" Lack of readiness". Understanding online speaking anxiety factors is crucial for both instructors, L2 learners and syllabus designers, as emphasized in this study.
Keywords: online learning, speaking anxiety, Covid -19 pandemic

Introduction and Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted numerous aspects of life, with the education sector experiencing some of the most significant disruptions. The sudden shift from traditional face-to-face learning to online platforms was necessitated by the global health crisis, fundamentally altering the dynamics of teaching and learning. This rapid transition presented a host of challenges and opportunities, particularly in language learning, where speaking skills are essential. As students and institutions navigated this shift,

new issues emerged, especially in developing countries where technological infrastructure and digital literacy were insufficiently developed.

The importance of understanding how online learning affects students' speaking anxiety, particularly in the context of learning English as a second language (L2), cannot be overstated. Speaking is a critical component of language acquisition, often inducing the highest levels of anxiety among learners. The pandemic-driven move to online learning introduced both advantages and disadvantages, significantly impacting students' ability to practice and develop their speaking skills. Over the past two decades, e-learning has gradually gained traction. However, the global pandemic accelerated its adoption at an unprecedented rate, compelling educational institutions worldwide to embrace online learning tools and platforms to ensure the continuity of education amidst lockdowns and social distancing measures. This sudden transition, however, posed significant challenges, particularly in regions with limited access to the necessary technology and a lack of digital literacy among both students and educators. Foreign language speaking anxiety is a well-documented psychological challenge that affects learners across various educational settings, including schools, universities, and language institutes.

Effective communication is a cornerstone of interpersonal relationships within any community, and several factors contribute to the anxiety L2 learners experience while speaking. These factors include low self-confidence, fear of judgment, previous negative experiences, inadequate preparation, and dissatisfaction with one's abilities (Address et al., 2022; Nur & Baa, 2022). Ellis (2006) categorizes speaking anxiety into three distinct types: trait anxiety, state anxiety, and situation-specific anxiety. The COVID-19 pandemic brought with it a host of unprecedented challenges, fundamentally altering the global education system. The rapid spread and severity of the virus led to the declaration of a pandemic and the implementation of social distancing measures as a means of curbing the virus's spread (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020). These measures resulted in the closure of educational institutions, turning them into silent zones devoid of the usual hustle and bustle of student activity. As a result, academic training became inaccessible to many learners and educators, who were left to grapple with the realities of a rapidly changing world.

The use of technologies such as computers, laptops, and mobile phones became essential for continuing education. While online learning offered certain advantages, such as flexibility, convenience, and time savings, it also presented significant challenges. These included the lack of public interaction, the need for self-motivation and effective time management, and a heavy reliance on technology and internet connectivity (Nkonge & Gueldenzoph, 2006). The transition to online learning was particularly challenging for L2 learners, who were suddenly thrust into a new and unfamiliar mode of instruction. Teaching and learning activities that were traditionally conducted in face-to-face classroom settings,

with rich interactions between teachers and students, were replaced by virtual meetings on various online platforms. This shift created a sense of uncertainty and stress among students, particularly when it came to speaking in front of a virtual audience. As noted by Address et al. (2022), students often felt anxious, distracted, and stressed when required to speak in online learning environments, particularly during the pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic was an overwhelming and stressful situation that affected people worldwide. As the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) pointed out, the outbreak of COVID-19 caused widespread fear and anxiety, which could be overwhelming and lead to strong emotional responses in both adults and children (Singh & Singh, 2020). In this stressful and critical context, students who were accustomed to traditional face-to-face learning had to adapt to a new and unfamiliar mode of online instruction. This shift required them to stay at home and learn their lessons using digital tools such as mobile phones and computers. As Ajlouni (2021) observed, the unpredictable and unfavorable circumstances of the pandemic led educational institutions to adopt various technological resources to support L2 learners in their learning process. In the initial days of online learning during the pandemic, both instructors and learners experienced a great deal of anxiety and uncertainty. However, they quickly adapted to the new methods of instruction, although not without significant challenges. Students encountered difficulties across various learning skills, including listening, reading, writing, and speaking, largely due to the absence of traditional face-to-face interactions. Despite such challenges, there has been relatively little research on the specific factors contributing to speaking anxiety in online learning contexts during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly among university and high school students.

This study aims to address this gap by investigating the factors contributing to online speaking anxiety among L2 learners during the COVID-19 pandemic. It focuses on understanding the specific causes of speaking anxiety in online settings and whether there are significant differences between the anxiety levels of male and female students. The study employs the survey design, using quantitative data from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). This design allows for a comprehensive understanding of the factors contributing to speaking anxiety in online learning environments and provides insights into potential gender differences. The findings of this study have important implications for educators, highlighting the need for targeted interventions to reduce speaking anxiety and support L2 learners in online environments, both during and beyond the pandemic.

In summary, the COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally altered the landscape of education, particularly in the realm of language learning. The rapid transition to online learning has brought to the fore new challenges, particularly in terms of speaking anxiety among L2 learners. This study seeks to explore the factors contributing to this anxiety, providing

valuable insights that can inform teaching practices and support students in navigating the challenges of online learning during and beyond the pandemic. The following research questions were addressed in the present study:

RQ1. What factors caused a greater amount of anxiety among L2 learners in institutional contexts during online courses?

RQ2. Is there a significant difference between males and females` anxiety?

Method

Survey research design was employed for this study, utilizing the quantitative method for data collection and analysis. It followed a mild experimental design without manipulation of independent variables. The study was conducted at Shiraz, Iran between 2020 and 2021. The study aimed to explore online speaking anxiety factors among institute L2 learners. Non-probability convenience sampling method was used prior to data collection. Participants included 25 females and 25 males from various English language institutes in Shiraz, including university students residing in dormitories. All participants were native Persian speakers learning English, aged 14 to 27 years. They represented different academic levels, from guidance school to university, and varied educational fields such as medicine, nursing, agriculture engineering, and Persian literature.

Proficiency level in English ranged from basic to advanced among the participants. We used a questionnaire comprising 34 multiple-choice items adapted from McCroskey's work. It was peer-validated with a Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient of 0.80, the questionnaire was then modified into a Likert scale format, offering options such as "strongly agree," "agree," "neutral," "disagree," and "strongly disagree." It collected personal information in one section and investigated speaking tensions and challenges in online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic in another. Available in both English and Persian, the questionnaire was distributed directly to participants in class, taking approximately 5 to 10 minutes to complete. Data collection took place across various language institutes in Shiraz. The researcher distributed questionnaires during classes, targeting students with varying proficiency levels in English. Participants received instructions on questionnaire completion and the research objectives. A total of 50 participants from different English language institutes participated, answering questions honestly within a specified timeframe. Data collection lasted 7 days, primarily during evening classes. Quantitative data analysis utilized SPSS software, employing descriptive statistics, percentages, frequencies, and inferential statistics such as the t-test model to identify online speaking anxiety factors among institute L2 learners during the Covid-19 pandemic. This analytical approach facilitates straightforward data interpretation and comprehension.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

The study included a sample of 50 participants, evenly divided between 25 males and 25 females. The gender distribution within the sample is presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Gender distribution in the studied sample

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Male	25	50.0	50.0	50.0
Female	25	50.0	50.0	100.0
Total	50	100.0	100.0	

Anxiety Scores in Language Classes

The study examined the anxiety levels of students in language classes, with particular attention to gender differences. The highest anxiety score was associated with the statement, "I do poorer on speeches because I am anxious," which had an average score of 4.14 and a standard deviation of 1.10. For female participants, several anxiety-related statements were found to be significant (p-value < 0.05), indicating higher levels of anxiety in these areas. These statements included: "Right after giving a speech, I feel that I have had a pleasant experience.", "I get anxious if someone asks me something about my topic that I do not know.", "I breathe faster just before starting a speech.", "I do poorer on speeches because I am anxious.", "During an important speech, I experience a feeling of helplessness building up inside me." Similarly, for male participants, significant anxiety was found in statements such as: "My thoughts become confused and jumbled when I am giving a speech.", "I breathe faster just before starting a speech.", "During an important speech, I experience a feeling of helplessness building up inside me."

Table 2. Mean and standard deviation of anxiety components in the studied sample and the results of the one sample t-test to check the condition of females and males' anxiety

no	Items	Mean	Std. Deviation	Sig. in female	Sig. in male
1.	While preparing for giving a speech I feel tense and nervous.	3.14	.926	.101	.148
2.	I feel tense when I see the words "speech" and "public speech" on a course outline when studying.	3.04	.807	.170	.110

3.	My thoughts become confused and jumbled when I am giving a speech.	2.84	.842	.382	.000
4.	Right after giving a speech, I feel that I have had a pleasant experience.	2.66	.872	.015	.166
5.	I get anxious when I think about a speech coming up.	2.98	.979	.476	.478
6.	I have no fear of giving a speech.	2.94	.913	.207	.503
7.	Although I am nervous just before starting a speech, I soon settle down after starting and feel calm and comfortable.	2.98	.937	.009	.038
8.	I look forward to giving a speech.	3.64	1.083	.228	.174
9.	When the instructor announces a speaking assignment in class, I can feel myself getting tense.	3.22	.996	.478	.013
10.	My hands tremble when I am giving a speech.	3.06	1.168	.364	.200
11.	I feel relaxed while giving a speech.	2.94	1.058	.059	.298
12.	In enjoy preparing for a speech.	2.98	1.078	.588	.714
13.	I am in constant fear of forgetting what I prepared to say.	2.92	1.066	1.000	.461
14.	I get anxious if someone asks me something about my topic that I do not know.	2.80	.969	.000	.380
15.	I face the prospect of giving a speech with confidence.	3.66	1.206	.233	.271
16.	I feel that I am in complete possession of myself while giving a speech.	3.00	.904	.356	.405
17.	My mind is clear when giving a speech.	3.30	1.111	.444	.078
18.	I do not dread giving a speech.	3.36	1.083	.247	.049
19.	I perspire just before starting a speech.	3.62	.830	.000	.009
20.	My heart beats very fast just as I start a speech.	3.18	1.044	.183	.714
21.	I experience considerable anxiety while sitting in the room just before my speech starts.	3.56	.951	.832	.000
22.	Certain parts of my body feel very tense and rigid while giving a speech.	3.34	1.118	.265	.078

23.	Realizing that only a little time remains in a speech makes me very tense and anxious.	3.48	1.035	.004	.106
24.	While giving a speech I know I can control my feelings of tension and stress.	3.60	1.125	.016	.112
25.	I breathe faster just before starting a speech.	3.94	1.168	.000	.001
26.	I feel comfortable and relaxed in the hour or so just before giving a speech.	3.70	1.344	.014	.119
27.	I do poorer on speeches because I am anxious.	4.14	1.107	.000	.000
28.	I feel anxious when the teacher announces the date of a speaking assignment.	3.80	1.212	.153	.124
29.	When I make a mistake while giving a speech, I find it hard to concentrate on the parts that follow.	3.62	1.193	.024	.012
30.	During an important speech I experience a feeling of helplessness building up inside me.	3.74	1.192	.037	.001
31.	I have trouble falling asleep the night before a speech.	2.8800	1.39445	.120	.356
32.	My heart beats very fast while I present a speech.	3.0800	1.36785	.649	.892
33.	I feel anxious while waiting to give my speech.	3.1600	1.40495	1.000	.294
34.	While giving a speech I get so nervous I forget facts I really know.	2.6200	1.30759	.000	.582

Overall Anxiety Score

The overall anxiety score for the language class had a mean of 3.262 (SD = 0.424), suggesting a moderate level of anxiety among participants. The normality of the data distribution was confirmed using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test (p-value = 0.096), indicating that parametric statistical methods could be appropriately applied to the data.
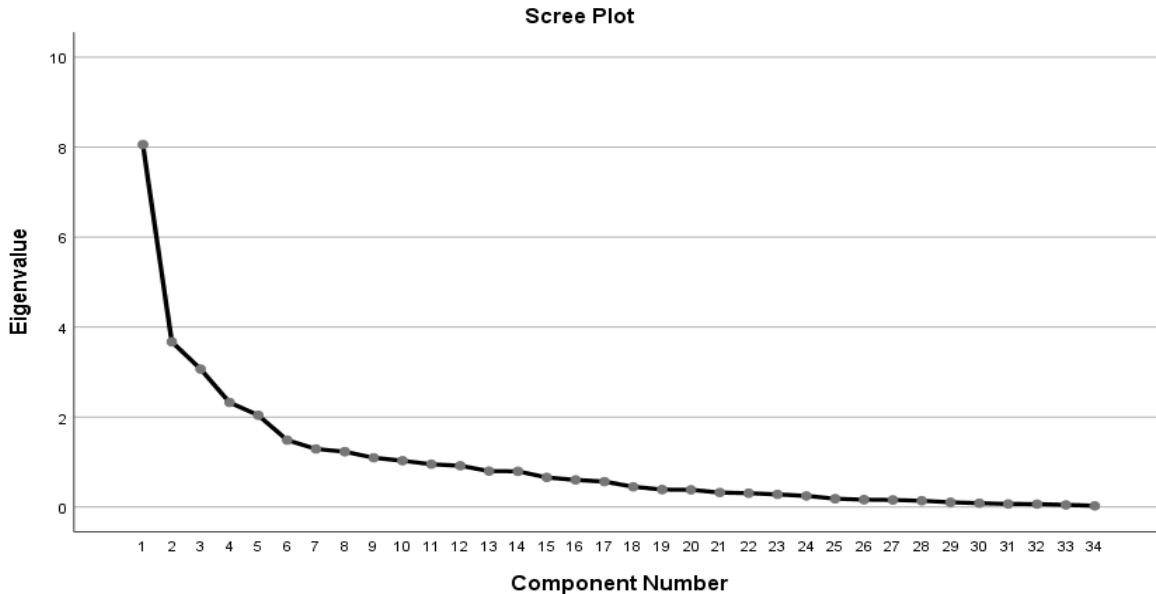
Factor Analysis and Scree Test:

A factor analysis revealed five factors contributing to language class anxiety:

1. Getting tense and nervous
2. Fear of negative evaluation
3. Fear of speaking in class

4. Personality

5. Lack of readiness

Figure 1.

Comparison of the Factors Involved

In table 3, as shown below, (Total Variance Explained), the rows of this table show the number of factors created with this test. These factors are arranged according to their role in explaining the variance of the set of variables. According to the mentioned table, the first factor was able to explain 23.69% of the variance in the set of variables, while the second factor explained about 10.8% and the third factor explained 9.02% of the variance created in all the variables. slow After varimax rotation, the results are presented in the table below. Experience shows that if the correlation coefficient between the variable and the created factor is greater than 0.5, the said variable is included in that group.

Table 3. explained variance and eigenvalues

	Eigenvalue	Percentage of variance	Cumulative percentage
1	9.057	23.698	**23.698**
2	5.172	10.801	**34.499**
3	3.567	9.020	**43.519**
4	2.825	6.839	**50.358**
5	1.040	5.999	**56.357**

6	.978	4.374	**60.730**
7	.790	3.795	**64.525**
8	.730	3.618	**68.144**
9	.595	3.222	**71.366**
10	.529	3.026	**74.392**
11	.951	2.797	**77.189**
12	.918	2.701	**79.890**
13	.798	2.348	**82.237**
14	.793	2.331	**84.569**
15	.657	1.934	**86.503**
16	.603	1.773	**88.275**
17	.564	1.660	**89.935**
18	.450	1.324	**91.259**
19	.388	1.140	**92.399**
20	.382	1.123	**93.523**
21	.322	.948	**94.471**
22	.308	.906	**95.376**
23	.281	.825	**96.202**
24	.246	.725	**96.926**
25	.186	.546	**97.473**
26	.164	.482	**97.955**
27	.157	.462	**98.417**
28	.140	.411	**98.827**
29	.105	.310	**99.137**
30	.085	.249	**99.386**
31	.068	.201	**99.588**
32	.065	.192	**99.779**
33	.048	.141	**99.920**
34	.027	.080	**100.000**

Gender Comparison in Anxiety Scores

An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare the anxiety scores between male and female participants. The results showed no significant difference in overall anxiety scores between males (M = 3.305, SD = 0.333) and females (M = 3.122, SD = 0.329), with a p-value of 0.056. However, significant gender differences were observed in components Fear of negative evaluation, and Lack of readiness.

Table 4. Test results of t-test to compare the average of females and males in each component of anxiety in the studied sample

	sex	Mean	Std. Deviation	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means		
				F	Sig.	t	df	**Sig(2-tailed)**
Getting tense and nervous	male	3.3818	.58799	3.205	.080	1.069	48	.109
	female	3.7855	.43747					
Fear of negative evaluation	male	2.8514	.69971	1.089	.302	3.661	48	.001
	female	3.5200	.58682					
Fear of speaking in class	male	3.4533	.66930	2.715	.106	0.526	48	.215
	female	3.3200	.53645					
Personality	male	3.3333	.60858	.694	.409	0.866	48	.368
	female	3.3867	.70205					
Lack of readiness	male	3.6400	.59442	3.681	.061	3.540	48	.001
	female	3.1280	.41183					

These results suggest that while the overall anxiety levels do not differ significantly between genders, females experience higher anxiety related to negative evaluations in language classes.

Discussion

This study aimed to investigate online speaking anxiety factors among institute L2 learners during the Covid-19 pandemic. Additionally, it sought to determine if there is a significant difference between females' and males' anxiety or not. Following data analysis, the researcher concluded that various factors contribute to speaking anxiety among institute L2 learners, including personality, lack of readiness, fear of speaking in class, getting tense and nervous, and fear of negative evaluation. Sari et al. (2023) conducted a study entitled "An Analysis of Students' Speaking Anxiety in Virtual Learning Classroom During Covid-19," focusing on anxiety factors during virtual learning. The study involved 30 students from the English education department at Syiah Kuala University, revealing factors such as grammatical errors, lack of self-confidence, and limited vocabulary contributing to students' anxiety. Most of students were found to experience moderate levels of speaking anxiety,

aligning with the findings of the present study. The result of Sari et al. (2023) coincides with Nur and Baa (2022) who conducted a study entitled "Students Speaking Anxiety during Online Learning: Casual Factors and Strategies to Overcome Them ". The purpose of this study was to reveal the causal factors of the student's speaking anxiety and strategies to overcome them during online learning in an Islamic senior secondary school setting. Four students of the mentioned school participated in the study. After analysis, the researcher concluded that students' speaking anxiety during online learning was classified into external and internal factors. The external factors like lack of preparation, limited vocabulary, friends, classmates, teachers' teaching style, and the internal factors consisted of shyness, lack of confidence, fear of making mistakes, and feeling insecure. Sadighi and Dastpak (2017) performed research to investigate resources in foreign language speaking anxiety of Iranian EFL language learners. The study revealed that the most important factors that cause feelings of anxiety in language learners during the process of learning include fear of making a mistake, lack of word knowledge, and fear of negative evaluation. The last factor is also found in our study. Another study with the title of "exploring the level and primary cause of public speaking anxiety among English department students "was conducted by Sugiyati and Indriani (2021) to determine the basic reasons for public speaking anxiety in EFL students. It showed many students believed that their fear of negative evaluation cause to creates anxiety during the process of speaking and prevents them from having good performances which is same as our findings. Kim and Frick (2011) conducted a study entitled "changes in students' motivation during online learning ". The result of this research shows that the most important factors that cause to students' tendencies, or their attrition and avoidance of E- learning is their motivation during process of E- learning. This factor was not a significant one in or study. Another result of the current research was that gender did not play an important role in determining the level of institute L2 learners' anxiety in online classes during the Covid-19 pandemic. Several studies, such as Hwa and Jaya (2014) research on "The Impact of Gender on Speaking Anxiety among Malaysian Tertiary ESL Learners," involving 237 undergraduate students, reported that female tertiary ESL students displayed higher speaking anxiety levels than males. However, contrasting results were found in other studies emphasizing the diversity of findings on the impact of gender on language learners' anxiety levels (Mohtasham & Farnia, 2017; Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2013).

Conclusion

Anxiety, characterized by feelings of affliction, fear, or agitation, can range from mild to severe, and it is a sentiment experienced by everyone in various aspects of their lives. According to the findings of this study, several factors contribute to anxiety among both female and male institute L2 learners during English speaking in online classes. These factors encompass "Getting tense and nervous", "Fear of negative evaluation", "Fear of speaking in

class", "Personality", and "Lack of readiness". Amid the Covid-19 pandemic, the transition from face-to-face classes, involving direct interaction between instructors and students, to online classes, conducted through diverse technologies such as laptops, mobile phones, and computers, has given rise to psychological challenges for students, instructors, and families. Furthermore, this study concluded that there is a significant difference between females and males in the components "Fear of negative evaluation" and "Lack of readiness." Specifically, females tend to experience more anxiety than males, particularly driven by the fear of negative evaluation.

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