

Anxiety in EFL Classrooms at the Tertiary Level: Insights into Causes and Remedies from Learners' Viewpoints

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Abstract:

This study explores the causes of anxiety in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom and how learners respond to it, focusing on student perspectives. A questionnaire was distributed to 48 Master's students at the University of Mohamed Seddik Ben Yahia in Jijel. The results indicate that a significant number of students experience anxiety in EFL settings. The primary sources of this anxiety include fear of making mistakes and a lack of self-confidence. To manage their anxiety, students commonly rely on strategies such as self-encouragement and rehearsal.

Keywords: *EFL classroom anxiety; causes of anxiety; anxiety coping strategies.*

1. Introduction

In the foreign language classroom, the learner has not only to master the taught knowledge and skills of the target language, but also to converse in this new language. Therefore, oral participation is a key principle of any foreign language teaching classroom. The learner has to participate actively to develop his/her conversational capacities and facilitate the process of language acquisition. However, communicating in a foreign language classroom is not to be taken for granted as it causes difficulties to many students, and one of the biggest challenges to oral involvement among English foreign language (EFL) learners is anxiety.

Basically, anxiety could be considered as a feeling of discomfort, embarrassment, and nervousness in a social setting. This psychological and behavioral experience is commonly called shyness. However, the term anxiety seems more precise to use than shyness since the latter could be

broader and may well refer to a constant psychological character that encompasses other personality traits such as nervousness, inhibition, hesitancy, and awkwardness (Leitenberg, 2013, p. 29). Additionally, Spielberg (1985) further divided anxiety into trait and state anxiety. Trait anxiety refers to constant worry in social situations such as speech anxiety, communication anxiety, and other life matters; while state anxiety is specific to a given occasion. An individual could be just uncomfortable for giving a speech in English, but relaxed in other social situations.

Leitenberg (2013) defined social anxiety as “the feeling of apprehension, self-consciousness, and emotional distress in anticipated or actual evaluative situations” (p. 1). This definition can be transposed to the foreign language classroom in which the learner feels anxious for taking part in an evaluated oral performance (considering all the learner participation as assessed either formally or informally); and, also, entailed in this characterization of anxiety is that this feeling could be experienced during class time or during the performance of an oral classroom act. With a focus on the Algerian higher education Master EFL students, this study explores the frequency of anxiety among these target students and investigates both the underlying causes of anxiety and the coping strategies from the perspectives the learners.

Anxiety could have negative impact on classroom participation and the learner language development. Learners’ reticence is problematic for teachers’ language communicative intents. Tsui (1985) noted that the learner unwillingness to participate reduces the student talk and inevitably leads to increase in the teacher talk, and thereby thwarting the communicative objectives of the language classroom (in Tsui, 1995). Lack of oral involvement deprives the learner from both practicing the conversational skills they already know and further developing their language proficiency (Elis, 1999; Brown, 2006). In other words, classroom reticence reduces the development of communicative skills and language acquisition.

On the other hand, some writers consider the learner low level of proficiency as a contributive factor to students’ reticence (e.g., Toth, 2011). Therefore, the learner low level of proficiency in the target language could be one of the major reasons of why EFL learners feel hesitant to take part in oral classroom discourse. However, this cause might be just the tip of the

iceberg because there are definitely a range of factors that underlie the complex construct of anxiety.

Apart from the learner low level of proficiency, there are other causes of the learner foreign language classroom anxiety. Previous work on this topic has raised a set of contributing factors to the learner anxiety. For example, Liu (2006) listed the following factors: “low English proficiency, lack of practice, difficulty of the task, lack of confidence, fear of making mistakes, and incomprehensible input” (pp. 22-23). Rafada (2017) unveiled somehow different causes of nervousness in the Saudi Arabia’s context as compared to Liu’s Chinese context. He found that EFL learners are affected by the teacher’s role in managing the student anxiety, lack of vocabulary, weakness of the educational system, examination pressure, and peer competition. Consequently, it could be argued that the causes of anxiety could vary from context to another, making generalizations and building up solutions a local issue.

Moreover, and interestingly enough, Özütürk and Hürsen (2013) reported that the level of anxiety in Turkish universities is very low. They argued that the teaching enterprise including the organization of the courses, the teacher behavior, and the courses levels and activities are sufficient enough to prevent high levels of the student anxiety (p.1902). However, this finding might not be the case everywhere, and this study further motivates the need to investigate whether anxiety in oral classes is very low in other universities.

In the Algerian EFL context, many studies (Maatar, 2011; Melouah, 2013; Tadjouri, 2017) revealed that anxiety has mainly a debilitating effect on the student performance in oral activities. Melouah (2013) found that the fear of interaction, error correction, language proficiency, and low self-confidence and self-esteem are the major causes of classroom nervousness. Likewise, (Tadjouri, 2017) indicated that the lack of linguistic competence, lack of preparation, fear of being the centre of attention, comparing oneself with others, being obliged to study the language, direct questions of teachers, the teacher correction of errors, lack of motivation, and laughing on mistakes all have debilitating effect on the learner performance. Furthermore, classroom activities, teacher behaviors and characteristics, and tests equally affect the

learner behavior in oral activities (Maatar, 2011). As can be seen from these research findings, the causes of anxiety are varied and they are mostly related to the student psychological profile, the teacher and peer behavior, and the type of tasks.

With regard to anxiety coping strategies in dealing with communication apprehensiveness, it is suggested, for instance, to guarantee a convivial and friendly atmosphere in the classroom (Maatar, 2011; Melouah, 2013; Tadjouri, 2017), avoiding unconstructive error correction (Maatar, 2011; Melouah, 2013), and incorporating games and group work (Maatar, 2011; Melouah, 2013). However, these cited Algerian research studies focused, for instance, on the frequency and levels of anxiety (using Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale), the teachers' views and skills in managing this affective factor, and the nature of anxiety. Therefore, the need to explore the major causes and coping strategies from the perspectives of the learner motivated this study.

This study explores the contributing factors to learners' anxiety and its potential solutions from the perspectives of EFL learners. It poses the following research questions.

1. To what extent do higher education EFL learners experience anxiety in oral classroom activities?
2. What are the EFL learners' perceived causes of classroom anxiety?
3. What are the EFL learners' perceived solutions for overcoming it?

As a first step, it is deemed more appropriate to establish empirically whether the target students experience anxiety before delving into the causes and the coping strategies. If it is found that a significant number of the students experience anxiety, then it is worth and feasible to explore from the perspective of learners the causes of classroom anxiety in the view of addressing them adequately. By uncovering the reasons of anxiety, teachers could be sensitized to the causes of EFL learners' apprehension and find ways to attend to this phenomenon. After that, the study will look for possible solutions that some learners silently hone. Consequently, the study is based on the assumption that EFL students are aware of the causes of anxiety and are using specific strategies to overcome it.

2. Methods

This section includes the sampled population, research paradigm, data analysis, procedures of questionnaire implementation, and limitations of the study.

2.1. Sample

The population of this inquiry is the EFL Master students at the University of Mohamed Seddik Ben Yahia, Jijel, Algeria. The sample consisted of 48 out of 130 students. Two groups out of four were randomly chosen to inform the research questions; however, because of the frequent dropouts and absences, the target groups did not reach half of the whole population. The student-participants were normally advanced students who studied English as their specialty for five year, but their level of proficiency in English could range from advanced, to upper intermediate, and to intermediate.

2.2. Research Paradigm

This study employed a qualitative questionnaire which included the following questions.

1. To what extent do you think that you are anxious in performing oral activities in the classroom?
2. What do you think are the major causes of speaking classroom anxiety?
3. What do you suggest to reduce speaking classroom anxiety?

The use of the qualitative questions was meant to explore the students' own perceptions with regard to speaking anxiety without influencing them through the use of pre-determined causes and solutions. Thus, the qualitative paradigm is, specifically, aimed to unveil individuals' perceptions and understanding of the topic (Bell, 2010). However, as Bell (2010) argued quantitative methods could be used to interpret data; hence, the data obtained from qualitative research tool were analyzed and presented qualitatively to sort out statistically the most common causes and solutions and compare them to other studies. According to Nunan (1992) and Bell (2010), the combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods allows drawing on the strengths of both them.

2.3. Questionnaire administration

The questionnaire was administered inside the classroom after a regular workshop of didactics in January, 2020. The students were given enough time to fill out the questionnaire at their ease and only hand it in to the teacher once completed.

2.4. Data analysis

The data collected from the questionnaire in the form of prose was analytically read to identify the sub-topics highlighted in each of the research questions. Then, the students' answers were fitted into categories or sub-topics and their frequency is calculated.

2.5. Limitation of the study

The main limitation of the study is the use of the questionnaire as the only research tool. An interview could have followed to understand deeply some of the issues highlighted in the responses to the questionnaire (Nunan, 1992), but the researcher's aim was more focused on unveiling unfamiliar causes and solutions of anxiety from the perspectives of the learner rather than seeking a deeper understanding of the topics of anxiety. Therefore, it was deemed redundant to supplement the questionnaire with an interview.

3. Findings and discussions

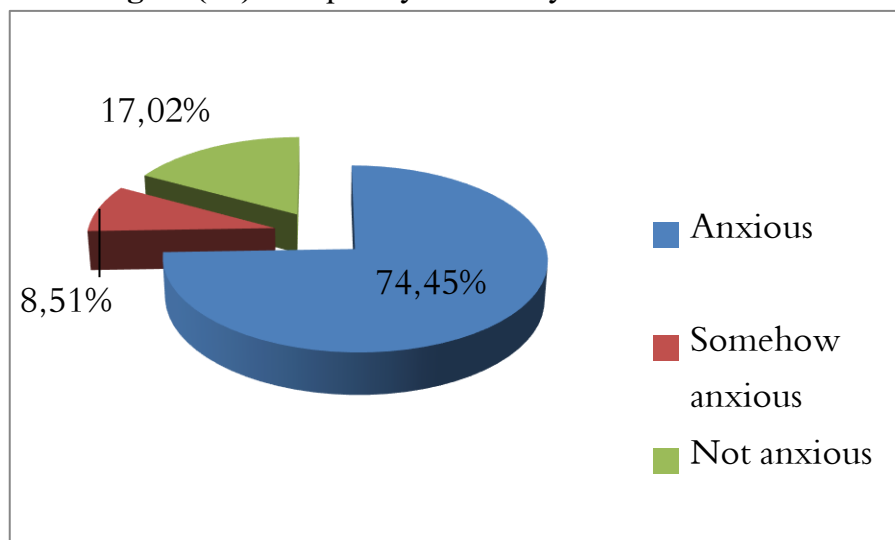
This section presents and interprets the results of the questionnaire in relation the research questions.

3.1. Anxiety level

The findings of the questionnaire shown in Figure 1 reveal that the majority of the students are anxious and some students used words such as 'irresistible', 'killing', 'boring', 'fearful', and 'intimidating to describe their public talk. The vast majority of the respondents reported that they suffer from trait anxiety, but a significant number argued that their anxiety is narrowly linked to the nature of foreign language learning. Moreover, the students did not mention any positive effect of anxiety on their communication skills (as in Liu, 2006; Tanveer, 2007; Rafada, 2017). The students of this study were not asked directly to talk on the potential positive effect of anxiety on the students' speaking; but if they felt it facilitative, they could have reported its facilitative impact. The positive characterization of anxiety is unconvincing or limited; as one teacher reported in Liu's (2006)

study, anxiety does not seem to have any apparent positive effect.

Fig N⁰ (01): Frequency of anxiety in EFL classroom

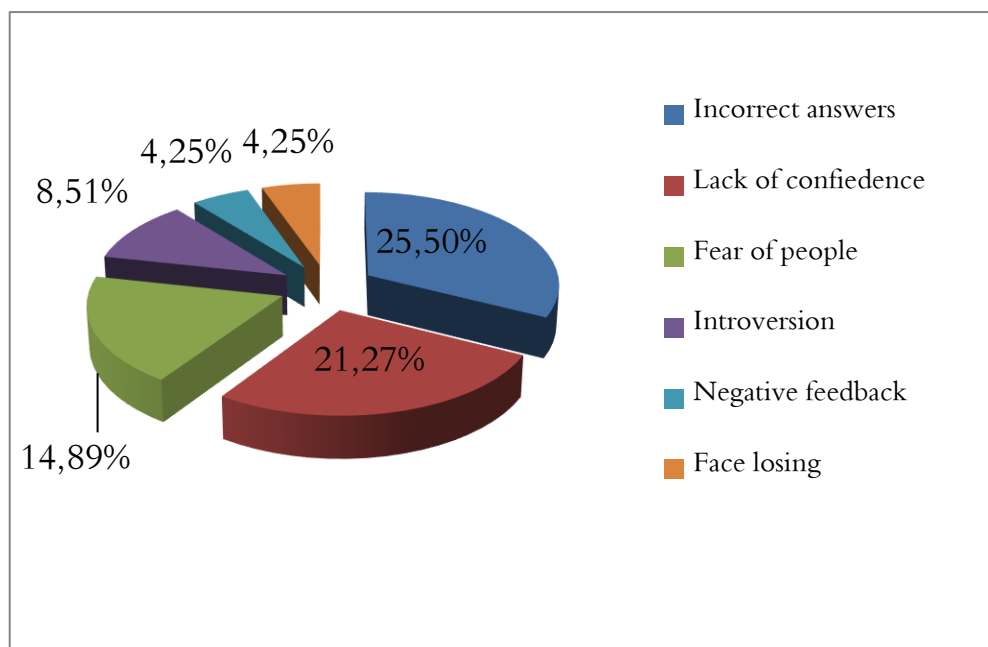


Previous studies in the Algerian EFL context equally reported that even University students still experience anxiety. Tadjouri (2017) indicated that almost half of her second-year EFL university students experienced anxiety; likewise, Melouah (2013) revealed that most of her undergraduate students suffer from debilitating anxiety. It could be, then, deduced that Algerian university students still experience anxiety.

3.2. Major causes of anxiety

As shown in Figure 2, the top major causes of anxiety among the participants are respectively fear of incorrect answers (25.5%), lack of self-confidence (21.27%), and fear of others (14.89%). For instance, one student wrote, “I’m a shy person. I fear making mistakes, especially when I’m not prepared to talk”. Another student added, “I don’t like to talk until I feel pretty sure the answer is correct”. Making mistakes in a foreign language is inevitable and a fundamental step in the journey towards language proficiency (Corder, 1967), but EFL students usually consider this reality as a source of embarrassment and a threat to their self-image (Ansari, 2015; Liu, 2006; Tanveer, 2007; Williams & Andrade, 2008).

Fig N⁰ (02): Causes of anxiety



This factor of fear of mistakes ranked as the top cause of the students' communication apprehension reveals the low level of the students even though they are postgraduates. Usually, the more proficient the students become, the less anxious they feel (Liu, 2006); but in the Algerian universities it seems that the students are still challenged by their incapacity to communicate effectively in English (Maater, 2011).

With regard to self-confidence, 21.27 % of the student-participants confessed their lack of self-confidence. Previous studies both in the Algerian EFL context and elsewhere support strongly this finding (e.g., Liu. 2006; Melouah, 2013; & Ansari, 2015).

Concerning the third top cause of communication apprehension (i.e., fear of others), it is also widely-cited in the literature of the field (Ansari, 2015; Tadjroui, 2017). The students identified a number of situations in which they feel intimidated by others (such as talking in front of strangers, elder people [e.g., the teacher], and large groups of people). In a similar vein, Liu (2006) and Kenneth and Andrad (2008) reported that students usually feel uncomfortable talking in front of unfamiliar faces.

Moreover, the students-participants reported introversion (8.51%),

negative feedback (4.25%), and face losing (4.25%) as significant sources of classroom anxiety. One student said, “I’m naturally calm. I don’t want to say things others know and I don’t want to take risks and appear stupid”. Introversion is rarely cited in the literature as a source of anxiety; yet, according to McCroskey and Bond (1984) quietness can turn to anxiety and unwillingness to communicate (cited in Tanveer, 2007, p. 12). Indeed, Liu’s (2006) study showed that introversion (personality feature) as one of the main causes of anxiety, and Maatar’s (2011) inquiry indicated that introverts are more inclined to be anxious than extroverts.

Conversely, the fear of negative feedback is abundantly cited in the literature of foreign language anxiety (e.g., Liu, 2006; Melouah, 2013; Rafada, 2017). In the present study, the students reported that they are afraid to be judged either by their peers or certain teachers who take the liberty of harshly suppressing incorrect answers. One female student said, “I’m afraid if I make mistakes, my mates will have negative thoughts about me”.

The last main contributing factor to students’ anxiety is fear of face losing. One student stated:

When the teacher unexpectedly asks me to talk, I instantly blush, lose my voice, and tremble. My heart speeds up. I hate how I lose face and how others look at me. This is really too awkward.

As indicated in the student feedback above, sometimes people scare of the physiological effects of panicking. Consequently, they do not participate in oral activities. Usually the factor of losing face is cited as a consequence of anxiety (e.g., Tadjouri, 2017); yet, it also constitutes a fret that discourages students from participation in the classroom (Liu, 2006).

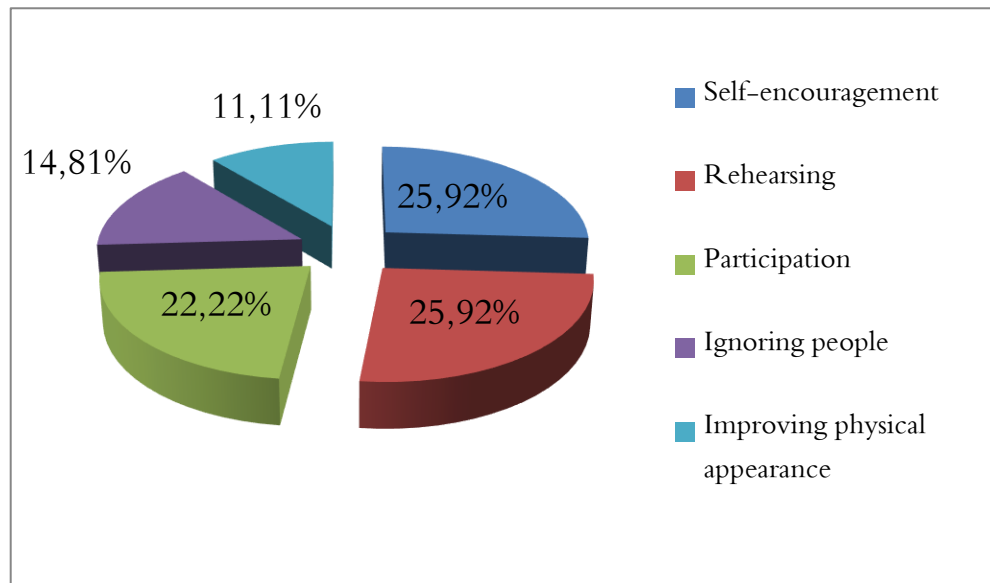
Other less significant factors that contribute to students’ anxiety unveiled in this study include intimidation by more able students, exposure to new learning, peer-competition, lack of vocabulary, fear of inaudible answers, lack of preparation, and character of the teacher. All these reasons testify that the causes of anxiety are innumerable and they vary from one student to another and from one context to another.

3.3. Learner anxiety coping strategies

Besides investigating the causes of anxiety, the current study equally delved into the strategies used by the Master students at the University of

Mohamed Seddik Ben Yahia used to manage anxiety. The findings displayed in Figure 3 indicate that the students employ self-encouragement, rehearsing, participation, ignoring people, and dressing up to handle apprehensive situations.

Fig N⁰ (03): Learner anxiety coping strategies



Self-encouragement is the leading strategy used by the students to manage their anxiety. One student said “I always say positive thing in my mind to be able to talk in public”. Another student stated, “I prepare myself and present carefully and convince myself that it is easy and I motivate myself”. Self-talk and encouragement is a common strategy used by EFL learners to speak in class (Maater, 2011; Tadjouri, 2017).

The second top strategy used by the learners to get rid of anxiety is rehearsing. The latter could refer to planning the talk ahead of time or repeating silently a correct answer for participating in a discussion or answering the teacher’s questions. One female student stated, “I always prepare my presentations and practice them aloud in the presence of my sisters at home”. However, strikingly enough, most of the reviewed preceding studies (Liu, 2006; Tanveer, 2007; Kenneth & Andrad, 2008; Maater, 2011; Melouah, 2013; Ansari, 2015; Tadjouri, 2017; Rafada, 2017) did not report the use of this adaptation strategy. However, Foss, and Reitzel (1988) pointed out that planned and practiced scripts (not necessarily memorized) lessens

anxiety and allows the prior practice of “facial expression, hand movements, eye contact, and so on” (p. 449). Therefore, rehearsal, as this informant who rehearses presentations before the actual performance, seems an effective strategy to overcome a sudden anxiety.

The third coping mechanism employed by the students is self-forced participation. The participants in this study indicated that they force themselves to take part in speaking activities. One student said, “I raise my hand before thinking to kill hesitation and let things go”. Another student invited teachers to force students participate by asking questions to introverts. Coercing participation may not be effective as the students can feel uncomfortable (Kenneth & Andrade, 2008; Ansari, 2015), but as long as it is done by learners themselves it could be a good practice to get used to public talk. The literature of anxiety seems unfamiliar with this strategy. Future research on it could reveal its efficiency as a coping strategy to get rid of speaking anxiety.

The fourth major response strategy to speaking anxiety is neglect of others, that is, ignoring what others think of the speaker and getting rid of the negative thoughts. One averagely anxious student stated, “I simply smile and try to forget what the audience thinks of me”. Another anxious female student said,

I try to get rid of bad friends, imaging myself at home and talk. Simply, I stop giving much importance to people and say to myself that there is no competition and there is nothing to lose when answering.

As could be noted in the above student comment, not only the teacher exercises pressure on the speaker, but also his/her peers and some peers seem to have the habit of intimidating the speaker. Consequently, the teacher should make students aware of the effect of their behavior on performing students.

The last main strategy adopted by the learners to address anxiety is dressing up. A significant number of the informants (11.11%) of this inquiry thought that dressing up might make them feel good about themselves and boast their self-worth. This seems another hidden strategy that EFL students make use of to feel more comfortable and increase their self-confidence. Some female girls reported that they use makeup to look more beautiful and

avoid suspicion of negative talk about their physical look.

Apart from the above most accepted anxiety coping strategies, the student -participants reported a set of other less used solutions for overcoming classroom speaking anxiety. They are as follows: teacher solicits for participation, working with more able students, teacher encouragements, teacher physical proximity, faking openness and hiding anxiety, and creating a friendly and convivial atmosphere. Most of these suggestions hover round the teacher's responsibility in contributing to the treatment of classroom anxiety. Other scholars agree on these techniques; for example, Rafada (2017) recommended for teachers to encourage learners to participate and pointed out that the teacher's role could either increase or decrease anxiety. Likewise, Tanveer (2007) argued that a symmetrical relationship between the teacher and the learner could alleviate classroom anxiety. All in all, it could be said that the teacher plays a major role in managing and alleviating EFL classroom speaking anxiety.

4. Conclusion and implications

In the light of the results that stemmed from this study, several conclusions can be made and many recommendations can be put forward for anxiety in the Algerian higher education EFL classes. The questionnaire showed that the majority of the EFL students are anxious when performing speaking activities and this impacts negatively their willingness to take part in oral activities and practice the foreign language. Consequently, teachers must be made aware of the existence of anxiety in their higher education classes and among advanced English language proficiency students. The use of statements like "I feel dying" is plain evidence that the level of anxiety sometimes provokes extreme emotional reactions.

The major causes of anxiety in these higher education classes are fear of incorrect answers, lack of confidence, fear of people, introversion, fear of negative feedback, and face-losing. Additionally, there are other less noted causes (such as intimidation by more able students, exposure to new learning, peer-competition, limited vocabulary, fear of inaudible answers, lack of preparation, and character of the teacher) that could be too significant. The reasons of communication apprehension are numerous and they vary from one student to another, but they should be adequately addressed to make the

students more involved in speaking activities and allow them develop their oral proficiency.

Concerning the students' anxiety coping strategies, it seems that some students work on some effective strategies in their attempts to overcome fear of public speaking. For example, they suggested self-encouragement, rehearsing, ignoring others, teacher encouragements, and creating a friendly atmosphere. However, some students seem to use some desperate strategies such faking openness and hiding anxiety, self-forced participation, and dressing up. Consequently, teachers should make their students aware of the fact that anxiety is a reality in EFL classes and they should be informed that students sometimes use ineffective strategies to handle this problem.

Furthermore, teachers should use more deep-seated strategies to help anxious students who are suffering in silence. This could even involve a paradigm shift and working on a model of teaching that could assist anxious students become more active and less threatened in performing speaking activities. The use of humanistic teaching methods that could include the use of music, humor, and developing a good rapport with the students could be of great help to anxious students.

The students themselves invited their teachers to help them do away with anxiety and encourage oral participation and some students signaled that the teachers themselves are sometimes a source of anxiety. Negative feedback and incorrect answers were shown to be at the heart of half of the participants' feeling of anxiety. Naturally, these factors show that the teachers are not doing enough to limit classroom anxiety. Even if the negative feedback is generated by the peers, it is the teacher's responsibility to direct the behavior of the audience when students speak or present. Consequently, teachers should give positive feedback, guarantee a convivial and friendly atmosphere, and discourage students from laughing and commenting negatively at the oral performance of their peers.

Finally, this inquiry established that anxiety in the Algerian higher education EFL Master classes is a reality and that it should be addressed adequately to allow the students participate more in oral activities. The participants have unveiled certain new strategies such as self-forced participation, teacher proximity, and dressing up, but these strategies do not

seem very effective. As many students pointed out, it is partly the responsibility of the teacher to alleviate the feeling of anxiety in their EFL classrooms. Further studies could delve into the strategies used by teachers to make students less anxious and more willing to participate and evaluate their effectiveness.

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