The Role of Teachers' Nonverbal Behavior in Alleviating Listening Comprehension Test Anxiety

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Abstract

This study was to analyze whether there was any relationship between test anxiety and EFL students' test performance. Another purpose of this study was to see if use of supportive nonverbal behavior could play any role in alleviating anxiety in EFL students' test performance. One hundred and twenty students of English as a foreign language at intermediate level of Iran Language Institute participated in this study. The listening comprehension test scores were correlated with test anxiety scores (TAS) which resulted in a statistically significant negative correlation. This result is a good evidence of the negative impact of anxiety on listening comprehension test performance. Another test was run after a three week NVB treatment to see the role of supportive nonverbal behavior on learners. The paired sample t-test showed a significant progress in the second listening comprehension test scores, and therefore, a positive influence on the participants' performance. This treatment could alleviate their anxiety, and consequently, improve their scores. Thus, English teachers are recommended to reduce test anxiety by creating a friendly atmosphere in class through use of supportive nonverbal behaviors.

Keywords: nonverbal behavior (NVB), test anxiety scale (TAS), test performance

INTRODUCTION

In current researches in EFL, there has been great attention to the psychological effects of test-takers' characteristics on test task performances. One of these characteristics is anxiety which is suggested to be an important factor in second language acquisition by Na (2007) and Wei (2007). It is generally classified into three types: Trait, state and situation-specific anxiety. Trait anxiety as an aspect of personality, is a relatively stable tendency to exhibit anxiety in a large variety of circumstances Phillips (1992). State anxiety is an apprehension experienced at a particular moment in time as a response to definite situation. Lastly, situation-specific anxiety is related to apprehension aroused at specific situations and events (Ellis, 1994). Language anxiety is a kind of state anxiety (Brown, 2000); and a well-known type of state anxiety is test anxiety (Phillips, 1992). According to Hordwitz and Cope (1986) language anxiety is distinct from general anxiety and has three varieties:

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1. Communicative apprehension occurs when learners have immature communication skills though they have mature ideas and thoughts.
2. Fear of negative evaluation occurs when L2 learners feel they are not able to make the positive social impression. It is an apprehension about others' evaluation, avoidance of evaluative situations, and the expectation.
3. Test anxiety is an apprehension over academic evaluation. It is a conscious or unconscious fear of failing in test situations. (Horwitz &Young, 1991).

In the EFL literature, there are several studies which show the relationship between foreign language anxiety and one or more language skills (e.g. Cheng, Horwitz, & Schallert, 1999; Elkhafaifi, 2005; Matsuda & Gobel 2001; Mills, Pajares, & Herron, 2006; Saito, Garza, & Horwitz, 1999). However few studies are done regarding test anxiety and these skills (In'nami, 2006; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989). Besides, what is missing is that we know what the problem is but don't know what we can do to alleviate test anxiety.

The role of instructor is crucial in this regard. Horwitz et al, (1986) reported that anxiety is induced when instructors correct students' errors in a nonsupportive manner. They also found that, the students consistently reported anxiety over responding incorrectly, being incorrect in front of their peers, or sounding inept although they recognized the importance of being corrected.

Finally, in Bensoussan's study (2012) the students reported that they would like teachers to make two additions to the course: adding bonus exercises for extra points and giving more practice tests. He offered recommendations for anxiety alleviation. And a Remedial Class of advanced reading comprehension in English as a Foreign Language was presented as an example of one way to apply those theories and recommendations.

This study's focus of attention was on listening skill rather than the other skills. Since compared to other skills, listening seems to foster anxiety; in other skills the learners have access to something written on paper as for listening skill they have to trust their own memory, cognition and interpretation. Thus the number of studies conducted on this issue is quite insufficient. However, recently there has been some promising research like that of Horwitz and Young (1991) who found that anxiety has a negative influence on listening comprehension. They believed that anxiety due to comprehension problem is compounded by unrealistic teacher expectations.

In another study of foreign language listening anxiety, Kim (2000) found a negative relationship between foreign language learning anxiety and listening proficiency in university level English learners in Korea. Sadighi, Sahragard and Jafari (2009) also found a significant negative correlation between Iranian EFL learners' foreign language class anxiety and their listening comprehension.

NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

Non-verbal communication has been defined as communication and sending messages without use of words. It (NVC) hints at sending and receiving wordless messages by

means of facial expression, eye contact, gesture, posture, touch, distance, tone of voice, etc., (Knapp & Hall, 2002). To reveal the importance of nonverbal communication, that is enough to pay attention to children whose speaking begin by producing gestures concurrently with speech to help them express themselves (Iverson & Goldin-Meadow; 2005). For speakers, gestures facilitate retrieval of words from memory and reduce cognitive burden. For listeners, they can facilitate comprehension of a spoken message (e.g., Cassell, McNeill, & McCullough, 1999) and convey thoughts not present in speech.

Morrel-Samuels and Krauss (1992) found that a gesture functions as a facilitator to what a speaker intends to say. In narration, gestures are synchronized with speech and are conveyed right before or simultaneously with a lexical item. They facilitate negotiation of meaning and help speakers to recall lexical items faster (Hadar, Wenkert-Olenik, Krauss, & Soroket, 1998).

Japanese and Korean ESL learners also benefited from auditory-visual input versus auditory-only in perceptual training of sounds such as /r/ and /l/, especially in the more phonologically challenging areas based on their L1: /r/ and /l/ in final position for Korean participants and in initial position for Japanese (Hardison, 2003, 2005c).

Also, Lazaraton (2004) analyzed the use of gestures by an ESL teacher teaching intermediate-level grammar in an intensive English program. Based on the variety and quantity of gestures, and the teacher's subsequent reflections, Lazaraton concluded that the data pointed to the ''potential significance of gestural input to L2 learners'' (p. 106). Later, Perry (2001) came to the conclusion that the process of listening becomes more active when accompanied by visual motions, and the nonverbal aspect of speech is an integral part of the whole communication process (cited in Sueyoshi & Hardison, 2005).

Also, Sueyoshi and Hardison (2005) investigated the contribution of gestures and facial cues to second-language learners' listening comprehension of a videotaped lecture by a native speaker of English. Results of a multiple-choice comprehension task revealed significantly better scores with visual cues for both proficiency levels. For the higher level, the audio-visual face condition produced the highest scores; for the lower level, AV-gesture-face showed the best results. Questionnaire responses revealed positive attitudes toward visual cues, demonstrating their effective-ness as components of face-to-face interactions.

All of these as well as other studies reveal the importance of nonverbal behavior which is frequently ignored in ELT. However, the author couldn't find any study investigating the role of nonverbal behavior on test taker's characteristics, specifically test anxiety. Thus, this study is an attempt to fill this gap.

There are two research questions in this study:

- Is there any relationship between test anxiety and EFL students' test performance?
- Can use of supportive nonverbal behavior play any role in alleviating anxiety in EFL students' test performance?

METHODOLOGY

Participants

A total of 120 students of English as a foreign language at Iran Language Institute (ILI), Isfahan Branch participated in this study. The students were all at the same level of intermediate and were taught by the same teacher, used the same textbook, and took the same listening comprehension tests. The age of the participants ranged from 14 to 45. Teaching in ILI for a long time, the researcher was completely aware of the regulations and books, she knew the teacher, and also was aware that the real level of language learners studying there is very close to the level title; that is why this institute was chosen for the research. The important point is that the students were told orally to answer TAS based on tests of any subjects in general; not just based on an English class test.

Instrumentation

1- The questionnaire used in this study is called Test Anxiety Scale (TAS) developed by Sarason (1975). The TAS, as a 37-item Likert-type test, is based on the theory and evidence that test anxiety is composed of test-relevant and test-irrelevant thinking.

The original answers to the questionnaire were dichotomous; however, In'nami (2006) changed them to a five-point scale (1= strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neither agree nor disagree; 4 = agree; 5 = strongly agree). He said he did it because five-point scales are interval scales and more likely to provide normally distributed data. Besides, five-point scales increase the accuracy of responses compared to two-point scales (In'nami, 2006). Also, for the negatively worded statements, items number 3, 15, 26, 27, 29 & 33, the order of scoring was reversed, and the students with greater anxiety received a higher score (In'nami, 2006).

Since In'nami (2006) analyzed the responses to the TAS first by exploratory factor analysis and then by confirmatory factor analysis, he came to the conclusion that it is a valid scale.

The questionnaire was then translated into the students' native language (Persian) to avoid any confusion and misunderstanding. Since any translation might miss some meaning, in case there was any need the English equivalents were also added.

2- Due to the time limitations of this institute and the fact that their listening comprehensions are meticulously chosen for each level, the author preferred to choose the very listening comprehensions dedicated by the institute for the same level. Each of the listening tests consisted of 30 multiple-choice items, 10 were based on short conversations and the other 20 based on two passages.

Procedure

These are the stages of the study procedures:

1-In order to make sure of the students linguistic homogeneity, a 100-item language proficiency test including four parts (listening comprehension, grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension) was administered to them which led to choosing 130 among 146 of the learners.

2- After that the TAS questionnaire was administered to five classes of students with the average number of twenty five in each class. Total number of language learners were 130 among whom 10 were omitted due to their incomplete answers.

3- The listening comprehension test of the same level was then given to them.

4- To see the effect of supportive nonverbal behavior on the amount of test anxiety, students received a three week nonverbal behavior treatment.

5- Immediately after the treatment, the intermediate language learners sat for a post-treatment listening comprehension test. The attempt was made to find out whether nonverbal behavior has got any role in reducing anxiety. By supportive nonverbal behavior the researchers mean techniques like these used by the teacher: nodding and smiling as a sign of satisfaction, reassuring pat on the learners' back, raising eyebrows as a sign of admiration, nodding when listening, and having eye contact with the students when talking. Some of these techniques used in ELT are mentioned in Najarzadegan and Dabaghi (2015).

Data Analysis

The raw scores of the subjects from the proficiency test, test anxiety scale and listening comprehension tests were computed and compiled for data analysis. To answer the first research question, a correlation coefficient between the students' test anxiety scores and test performance was calculated by Pearson's formula. To answer the second research question regarding the effectiveness of the teacher's use of nonverbal behavior in the results of the second-stage listening comprehension, a t-test was run.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The internal reliability of the TAS questionnaire using Cronbach alpha was α=0.91 which is high enough. Table 1 shows the number of the students who chose each choice of each item in the TAS. This table is to provide the reader with the information about the areas which are more anxiety-provoking for the students.

Table 1. Test Anxiety Scale (TAS)

NUMBER OF THE STUDENTS WHO OPTED FOR EACH CHOICE OF EACH ITEM IN THE TAS SA=STRONGLY AGREE, A=AGREE, N=NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE, D=DISAGREE, AND SD=STRONGLY DISAGREE

Items	SA	A	N	D	SD
1. I find myself thinking of how much brighter the other students are than I am.	4	20	31	46	19
2. If I were to take an intelligence test, I would worry a great deal before taking it.	3	25	29	31	32
3. If I knew I was going to take an intelligence test, I would feel confident and relaxed, beforehand.	18	43	33	16	10
4. While taking an important examination I perspire a great deal.	5	14	41	37	23

5. During course examination I find myself thinking of things unrelated to the actual course material.	6	18	29	32	35
6. I get to feel very panicky when I have to take a surprise exam.	19	48	21	12	20
7. During tests I find myself thinking of the consequences of failing.	15	39	26	26	14
8. After important tests I am frequently so tense that my stomach gets upset.	9	11	27	32	41
9. I freeze up on things like intelligence tests and final exams.	3	7	29	29	52
10. Getting a good grade on one test does not seem to increase my confidence on the second.	14	16	33	24	33
11. I sometimes feel my heart beating very fast during important tests.	30	41	31	7	11
12. After taking a test I always feel I could have done better than I actually did.	21	71	9	8	11
13. I usually get depressed after taking a test.	8	29	21	27	35
14. I have an uneasy, upset feeling before taking a final examination.	28	36	26	22	8
15. When taking a test my emotional feelings do not interfere with my performance.	18	44	35	19	4
16. During a course examination I frequently get so nervous that I forget facts I really know.	9	27	32	36	16
17. I seem to defeat myself while working on important tests.	7	18	30	41	24
18. The harder I work at taking a test or studying for one, the more confused I get.	2	14	28	49	27
19. As soon as an exam is over I try to stop worrying about it, but I just cannot	11	31	24	36	18
20. During exams I sometimes wonder if I'll ever get through college.	6	27	32	25	30
21.I would rather write a paper than take an examination for my grade in a course;	14	31	25	24	26
22. I wish examinations did not bother me so much.	8	36	21	21	34
23. I think I could do much better on tests if I could take them alone and not feel pressured by a time limit.	37	35	16	21	11
24. Thinking about the grade I may get in a course interferes with my studying and my performance on tests.	12	41	24	24	19
25. If examinations could be done away with I think I would actually learn more.	21	34	22	16	27
26. On exams I take the attitude "If I do not know it now there's no point worrying about it."	13	28	22	23	34
27. I really do not see why some people get so upset about tests.	21	23	37	29	10
28. Thoughts of doing poorly interfere with my performance on tests.	18	37	20	31	14
29. I do not study any harder for final exams than for the rest of my course work.	4	10	16	31	59
30. Even when I'm well prepared for a test, I feel very anxious about it.	14	43	18	28	17
31. I do not enjoy eating before an important test.	7	26	24	38	25
32. Before an important examination I find my hands or arms trembling.	19	18	23	51	9
33. I seldom feel the need for "cramming" before an exam.	7	21	23	41	28
34. The university ought to recognize that some students are more nervous than others about tests and that this affects their performance.	37	48	11	15	9
35. It seems to me that examination periods ought not to be made the tense situations which they are.	26	49	37	7	1
36. I start feeling very uneasy just before getting a test paper back.	15	38	30	26	11
37. I dread courses where the professors have the habit of giving "pop" quizzes.	25	37	31	22	5

This study investigates the relationship between test anxiety and the students' score in listening comprehension test, and then explores the effectiveness of the tester's NVB

treatment on a post-treatment listening comprehension test. To address the first research question, the results of 120 intermediate participants in listening comprehension test were correlated with their scores in TAS. The result was a negative correlation (r=-.437) which was significant at the level of .000. This result is a good evidence of the negative impact of anxiety on listening comprehension test performance. That is, those subjects who reported lower anxiety in the TAS received higher scores in listening test, and those who felt highly anxious received lower scores. Some of the previous studies revealed contrasting results. While Horwitz (1986) reported a negative relationship between test anxiety and test performance, In'nami (2006) found no significant relationship between them. However, in Chastain (1975) and some others the relationship was positive.

To answer the second research question, the subjects underwent a supportive NVB treatment to see if it can reduce their anxiety for the next listening comprehension test. Immediately after the treatment, the second listening comprehension test was administered to them to find out the effectiveness of the treatment in their results. A t-test was then conducted by *Online SPSS Calculator* and the result indicated a significant progress in the second listening comprehension test scores, and therefore, revealed that the three-week treatment had a positive influence on the participants' progress in the second listening comprehension test. This treatment could alleviate their anxiety, and consequently, improve their scores (see Table 2).

Table 2. The results of paired samples T-Test on the Listening Test

Descriptive Statistics			
	Mean	Standard Deviation	N
Pre test	53.06	18.5379	120
Post test	59.59	18.2757	120
Descriptive Statistics Dependent Sample t-Test			
t-Statistic	-2.5085	Result	
Degrees of Freedom	198	Reject the null hypothesis.	
Critical Value	1.6449	Conclusion	
95% Confidence Interval	[-7.0108, 20.0708]	Pretest is significantly different from posttest, t (198) = -2.5085, p < .05. We are 95% confident that the mean difference lies between -7.0108 and 20.0708.	

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Participants of Williams and Andrade (2008) attributed their language anxiety to language teachers and other people. They came to the conclusion that language teachers can have a very influential role in reducing students' anxiety. To this end, teachers' nonverbal behavior can be highly helpful. These supportive NVB's can enhance class atmosphere as well as increasing students' self-assurance. As soon as they feel self-confident and comfortable on the exam day, they would be able to get good grades as a

result of stress reduction. A smile on the teacher's face, a reassuring pat on the student's back and an eye contact full of kindness would be of real help for stress reduction. On the other hand even one none-supportive NVB can easily ruin one's performance on a test. Imagine a teacher frowning at a student for no good reason. The student's mind would then be involved with this specific facial expression during the test administration.

NVB can be used during the term as well as test administration day to clearly and easily explain the test framework and instructions. This can be done specifically through hand gesture and facial expressions. Reducing anxiety is specifically important for listening tasks. The participants often complain about the speed of text, even when they listen to the questions in normal speed. It is, therefore, concluded that many anxious test sitters take normal speed as "fast", and feel tense as they lag behind the words they listen to. Their anxiety is even doubled when they are not supposed to have a chance to listen once more.

Another NVB, proxemics, what Menninen and Kujanpaa (2002, p.3) call "spatial behavior" is the physical distance we place between ourselves and others (Helmer and Eddy, 2003, p.43). This one can also be a nonsupportive behavior as well as a supportive one. While giving a test, a student may find it embarrassing to have a teacher getting very close to his desk or sometimes reading what (s)he is writing. That might seem as a territory invasion to him/her and therefore brings anxiety. By the same token, oculesics which is having eye contact with others, might not be as helpful for the students on the exam day as during the term. Since on that day, repeated eye contact accompanied by other nonverbal behaviors, may render a different meaning i.e. cheating.

Thus, a low-stress testing environment gives the test takers a chance to concentrate much better on test items rather than being distracted by self-deprecating worry and fear of evaluation. Test givers are recommended to encourage a relaxed testing atmosphere through giving supportive nonverbal behavior as well as urging them to overcome their negative feelings verbally. Besides, further studies are needed to be conducted in this field related to the effect of both supportive and nonsupportive nonverbal behavior on other skills as reading, writing, and speaking. Due to some limitations, gender is not considered as a moderator variable in the present study; other studies can also be done considering this variable.

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