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Motivation and Anxiety of Iranian Intermediate EFL Students as Predictors of Progress in Task-Based Speaking Courses

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: Task-based speaking courses have gained prominence in language education as an effective approach to enhancing communication skills and learner engagement. By focusing on tasks and interactions, these courses not only promote language proficiency but also foster collaboration among students. The present study was to find whether motivation and anxiety predicted the Iranian EFL learners' progress in task-based speaking courses.

Methods: A descriptive correlational design was adopted for this study, and a total number of 120 intermediate Iranian EFL learners of Safir-e-Andisheh Language Institute of Isfahan in 2023-2024 were selected by convenience sampling following the administration of the Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT; Allan, 2004). Afterward, a ten-session task-based speaking training was conducted using the speaking tasks presented in American English File-Book 2 (Latham-Koenig et al., 2020). The data were collected using the Motivation in Foreign-Language Learning Questionnaire (Dörnyei, 1990), the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS; Horwitz et al., 1986), and a speaking test (Latham-Koenig et al., 2020). A speaking assessment rubric (Anh et al., 2022), comprising vocabulary, grammar, intonation, pronunciation, and fluency, was used to assess speaking on a scale of 1-10. The obtained data were analyzed by standard multiple regression.

Results: The findings revealed that interest in foreign languages, pragmatic benefits, and English for professional reputation predicted the speaking progress of EFL learners; furthermore, communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation significantly predicted the speaking progress of EFL learners.

Conclusion: In conclusion, the study highlights the significant role of both motivation and anxiety in predicting the progress of Iranian EFL learners in task-based speaking courses. By understanding these factors, educators can better design programs that enhance learner engagement and improve speaking proficiency.

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Introduction

Although speaking is the paramount skill to be acquired in the process of mastering the English language, it simultaneously represents the most formidable challenge for EFL learners (Zhang & Liu, 2018). Febriyanti (2011) posited that the development of speaking proficiency is arduous due to potential deficiencies in students' motivation, self-efficacy, and exposure to the language. Furthermore, Bashir et al. (2011) elucidated that the act of speaking presents considerable difficulties for students, as they often require extended periods to contemplate the content of their verbal expressions. Furthermore, Harmer (2007) asserted that certain students experience reluctance and anxiety when tasked with articulating their thoughts in the presence of peers.

In light of the challenges delineated above, one efficacious pedagogical approach to mitigate these issues is Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT). This methodology is imperative as TBLT emphasizes the significance of meaning while concurrently acknowledging linguistic form, thereby accentuating the organic process by which learners engage with and acquire the language through meaning-making activities. Consequently, TBLT serves to address the deficiencies inherent in structural approaches, which predominantly focus on systematic instruction, intentional learning, and the objectification of language (Ellis et al., 2020).

Many studies have been conducted on task-based language teaching to improve EFL learners' speaking. For instance, Nurhadi et al. (2024) investigated the effects of using tasks and TBLT on the speaking performance of EFL learners using a qualitative method. The empirical evidence indicated that TBLT significantly enhances the effectiveness of classroom dynamics, augments students' engagement, and facilitates the advancement of speaking proficiency by immersing learners in authentic communicative tasks. Also, Díaz et al. (2023) studied the impact of TBLT on EFL learners' speaking proficiency and motivation. Findings demonstrated the positive perceptions of EFL learners regarding speaking tasks and activities, accentuating the effectiveness of tasks in enhancing motivation and communication skills.

The significance of speaking skills in English as a Foreign Language has become increasingly prominent, especially for Iranian learners. Speaking ability is crucial for effective communication, enabling students to express their thoughts and engage in meaningful conversations (Suban, 2021). For Iranian EFL learners, proficiency in spoken English opens up various academic and professional opportunities both domestically and globally (Hashemifardnia et al., 2021). Improving speaking skills enhances learners' self-confidence and motivation, which are key factors that contribute to successful language acquisition. Furthermore, in today's interconnected world, the ability to communicate in English is essential for accessing international resources and networks, thereby enriching learners' educational experiences and cultural understanding (Kansil et al., 2022).

Moreover, fostering speaking skills among Iranian EFL learners is vital for their personal and social development. The ability to participate in discussions and express opinions not only

aids learners in academic settings but also prepares them for real-world interactions where English is a lingua franca (Azizi et al., 2022). According to a study by Bakhshayesh et al. (2023), developing strong speaking skills promotes critical thinking and interpersonal skills, which are essential in both professional and social contexts. This focus on speaking can lead to enhanced language retention, as verbal practice encourages greater engagement with the language. Additionally, promoting a speaking-centered curriculum can help mitigate anxiety and encourage active participation, thereby creating a more dynamic learning environment for Iranian EFL learners (Mobini et al., 2024).

However, as stated by Khatoony and Rahmani (2020), the speaking problems and weaknesses of Iranian EFL learners originate from problems in linguistic variables such as grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and intonation; psycholinguistic variables like anxiety, self-confidence, and shyness, and also sociolinguistics variables such as culture, identity or sense of agency, etc. Moreover, affective variables such as insufficient motivation can put the learners in trouble. Therefore, it is required to conduct a more in-depth investigation on motivation and anxiety-related issues of Iranian EFL learners in speaking classes, which are further discussed below.

Brown (2014, p.158) defined motivation as "a star player in the cast of characters assigned to EFL learning scenarios around the world." Ghorbandordinejad (2014) posited that motivation exerts a pronounced impact on a learner's capacity to employ linguistic skills. Motivation plays a pivotal role in determining the proficiency with which a learner engages in writing, reading, speaking, and comprehension of the language. Well-motivated students show a high level of performance in English-speaking classes. In this sense, some students may improve their speaking skills because they are simply interested in speaking English and want to communicate in the target language. Other learners, for instance, may practice their speaking skills for the sake of getting good grades or passing a course (Aleidan, 2024).

In light of the critical importance of motivation in the context of English speaking, Masrom et al. (2015) conducted a study to explore the interplay between motivation and task engagement in language production, concluding that learners exhibiting higher motivation and engagement with task-oriented training demonstrated a greater propensity for producing lexically intricate language compared to their less motivated counterparts. Furthermore, Munirah and Muhsin (2015) documented that the implementation of a task-based pedagogical approach significantly enhanced students' speaking accuracy. The researchers additionally indicated that the incorporation of task-based methodologies in speaking instruction not only motivated students to engage in the learning process but also bolstered their self-efficacy.

Anxiety is another psychological factor that affects the speaking performance of EFL learners. Foreign language anxiety is defined as "the subjective feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language contexts, including speaking, listening and learning" (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993, p. 284). EFL students commonly state that speaking in L2 is the most anxiety-provoking experience andL2 speaking is named as the

most anxiety-inducing skill in foreign language classes. As stated by Young (1990), speaking activities that necessitate either in front of class presentation or on-the-spot performance cause the highest anxiety from students' viewpoint.

Bao and Du (2015) articulated that task-based language teaching can cultivate a conducive and secure educational environment for learners, which may alleviate their anxiety while concurrently fostering their confidence. This pedagogical framework possesses the potential to incorporate various instructional implications derived from empirical research findings regarding learners' anxiety, specifically in relation to the facilitative roles of collaborative group work, small-group activities as opposed to whole-class interactions, minimized error corrections, allocated preparation time prior to speaking engagements, and the principles of cooperative learning.

In general, despite the growing interest in task-based speaking courses and their impact on language learning, there remains a notable gap in the literature specifically addressing how motivational and anxiety factors influence Iranian EFL learners within this instructional framework. While previous studies have examined various aspects of task-based language teaching, few have investigated the nuanced relationship between learners' motivation—such as interest in foreign languages and perceived pragmatic benefits—and their anxieties, including communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation, as predictors of success in speaking tasks. This research aimed to fill this gap by providing empirical evidence on these psychological dimensions, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play in task-based speaking courses for EFL learners in Iran. Therefore, the present study was to find whether Iranian intermediate EFL students' motivation and anxiety predict their progress in task-based speaking courses.

Methods

Research design

A descriptive correlational design was adopted for this study as the researcher did not influence the variables, and no treatment was given to the participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). In fact, the degree of relationship among the variables was the major concern here. In this study, the Iranian intermediate EFL learners' language anxiety and motivation were considered the predictor variables, and their improvement in speaking in a task-based course was considered the predicted variable.

Participants

The participants of the study included 120 intermediate Iranian male (N= 41) and female (N= 79) EFL learners selected by convenience sampling from those studying English at Safir-e-Andisheh Language Institute in Isfahan, Iran. The reason for the inclusion of 120 learners was that 120 intermediate-level learners were studying English in this institute at that time. The sample size for regression analysis is about 10 for each predictor variable (Stevens, 1996). The

motivation variable in the current study consists of nine factors, which is equal to a sample size of 90 people, yet 120 people were ultimately selected. The Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT) was administered to select intermediate-level learners. The participants' ages ranged between 18 and 24, and they were native Persian speakers. None of the participants had experience living or studying in an English-speaking country.

Materials and Instruments

Speaking tasks. As the routine procedure of Safir-e-Andisheh Language Institute, EFL learners always receive ten sessions of task-based speaking instruction, including both problem-solving and information gap task types. The tasks are from American English File-Book 2, suitable for intermediate-level English learners (Latham-Koenig et al., 2020). The speaking tasks included topics such as jobs, finding addresses, personality factors, describing appearance, etc. The reason for the inclusion of the task in the language institute curriculum is to enhance the speaking skill of EFL learners.

Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT; Allan, 2004). The OQPT was administered to a selected group of intermediate EFL learners. The OQPT serves as a multifaceted instrument for the assessment of English language proficiency, consisting of 60 multiple-choice items that evaluate vocabulary (30 items) and grammar (30 items). Learners are categorized based on the scores they achieved: 0 to 10 : beginners; ; 11 to 17 :breakthrough learners; 18 to 29: elementary; 30 to 39: pre-intermediate; 40 to 47: intermediate; 48 to 54: advanced learners , ; and 55 to 60: proficient learners. The reliability of the test, estimated via Cronbach's alpha, was .79.

Motivation in Foreign-Language Learning Questionnaire (Dörnyei, 1990). It was a 30-item questionnaire to assess foreign language learning motivation. The questionnaire comprises nine sub-scales of interest in foreign languages, attitude toward learning languages, broadening the view, obligation for learning English, attitude toward Anglo-Saxon world, pragmatic benefits, English for workplace, English for professional reputation, and new challenge and bridge to a culture. The responses are rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging between 1(strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The reliability of the questionnaire, estimated via Cronbach's alpha, was .82.

Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS; Horwitz et al., 1986). This 33-item scale evaluates the extent to which students feel anxious in a foreign language classroom. FLCAS comprises the three sub-scales of communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. The responses are rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging between 1(strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The reliability of the questionnaire, estimated via Cronbach's alpha, was .78.

Speaking test. A prompt (a role-play task) was given to pairs, who were required to do the task in 20 minutes. The prompt was as follows: "Imagine that you are a suspect in the robbery, and

your partner is your alibi. You have five minutes to invent a story about where you were and what you did yesterday afternoon. The other students will then question you while your partner leaves the room. Then, you will leave the room, and they will question your partner. If your answers to their questions are the same, you can go free; if they are different, you'll be 'doing time' in prison." The prompt was taken from American English File-Book 2 for intermediate-level English learners (Latham-Koenig et al., 2020). The reliability of the speaking post-test, estimated by Cronbach's alpha, was .8. It is noteworthy that the total score of the speaking test was 10.

Speaking assessment rubric. A speaking assessment rubric was developed based on the previous literature to evaluate the speaking proficiency of the participants (e.g., Anh et al., 2022). This rubric assesses five key criteria: vocabulary, grammar, intonation, pronunciation, and fluency. Each criterion was rated on a scale of 1 to 2, with descriptors for each score level providing clarity on performance expectations.

Procedure

After administering the OQPT and selecting the participants, the researcher explained every step of doing the task that was necessary to know before starting the administration of the tasks. For instance, the researcher explained the purpose of doing the tasks, and then each student was requested to sit with a partner facing to each other. It was necessary for interlocutors to know how much time they had to close the conversation, so they were informed about the 20-minute time limit for each task.

The institute holds the ten treatment sessions for speaking tasks in intermediate-level English classes where EFL learners are taught the American English File book series. As mentioned above, the topics of speaking tasks, i.e., jobs, finding addresses, personality factors, and describing appearance, were selected from American English File-Book 2. Regarding the classroom procedure, after the end of the treatment, the speaking test task (role-play) was given to students in pairs, and they were allotted 20 minutes to complete the tasks. Their voices were recorded to be analyzed by three trained raters with experience in rating speaking performance. For the purpose of the present study, the Motivation in Foreign-Language Learning Questionnaire and Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale were administered to the participants following the end of the speaking test.

Data analysis

The speaking test performance of EFL learners was assessed using a speaking assessment rubric comprised of vocabulary, grammar, intonation, pronunciation, and fluency by three trained raters. The inter-rater reliability was calculated using Cohen's Kappa to ensure the raters' agreement, resulting in a Kappa value of 0.84, indicating strong agreement between raters. Furthermore, the data obtained from motivation and anxiety questionnaires were analyzed by standard multiple regression.

Results

The first research question of the study was whether Iranian intermediate EFL students' motivation predicted their progress in task-based speaking courses. To analyze the question, a standard multiple regression was run to compare the nine sub-scales of motivation, namely interest in foreign languages, attitude toward learning languages, broadening the view, obligation for learning English, attitude toward Anglo-Saxon world, pragmatic benefits, English for workplace, English for professional reputation, and new challenge and bridge to a culture with the speaking score of EFL learners.

A number of multiple regression assumptions were checked prior to conducting the analysis which are reported as follows. The multicollinearity assumption was checked and the results revealed that the variables of the present phase are not highly correlated due to the appropriate extent of Tolerance and VIF values (Anxiety: Tolerance = .35 > .10, and VIF = 3.05 < 10; motivation: Tolerance = .37 > .10, and VIF = 4.02 < 10). Outliers were also checked by inspecting the Mahalanobis distances. According to Pallant (2020), for two independent variables, the critical value is 13.82. The findings of this analysis revealed the value of 8.14 (SD=1.58); therefore, no outliers were detected. Finally, the Durbin-Watson analysis value (1.71) was between the two critical values of 1.5 < d < 2.5. Therefore, there was no first order linear auto-correlation in the present multiple linear regression data. The results of Kolmogorov-Smirnov statistic also confirmed normality in the data as the significance level values of the variables ranged between.11 and.43.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Speaking Progress and Motivation Sub-scales

	Mean	SD	N
Speaking	6.62	2.08	120
interest in foreign languages	10.75	3.69	120
attitude toward learning languages	22.91	3.38	120
broadening the view	10.76	3.92	120
obligation for learning English	7.11	2.53	120
attitude toward Anglo-Saxon world	14.44	5.1	120
pragmatic benefits	11.66	3.44	120
English for workplace	10.78	3.9	120
English for professional reputation	7.25	2.41	120
new challenge and bridge to a culture	10.57	3.7	120

In terms of motivation sub-scales, EFL learners who participated in this study obtained the highest score in attitude toward learning languages (M= 22.91, SD=3.38) and the lowest in the obligation for learning English (M= 7.11, SD= 2.53) while the mean of speaking scores was 6.62.

Table 2. Model Summary for Predicting Speaking Progress by Motivation Sub-scales

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate

1	.8	.64	.61	1.28

As seen in Table 2, the R square of the model is .64, denoting that motivation sub-scales predicted 64% of the changes in the speaking progress of EFL learners.

Table 3. Analysis of Variance Results for Predicting Speaking Progress by Motivation Sub-scales

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	335.79	9	37.31	22.5	.00
Residual	182.33	110	1.65		
Total	518.12	119			

The model as a whole was statistically significant (F (9, 110) = 22.5, p< .05) (Table 3). In other words, the motivation sub-scales (i.e., interest in foreign languages, attitude toward learning languages, broadening the view, the obligation for learning English, attitude toward the Anglo-Saxon world, pragmatic benefits, English for the workplace, English for professional reputation, and new challenge and bridge to a culture) could significantly predict speaking progress of EFL learners. Standardized and unstandardized coefficients of the components of motivation are presented in the following table (Table 4).

Table 4. Coefficients of Motivation Sub-scales Predicting Speaking Progress

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
Model	**B**	**Std. Error**	**Beta**	**T**	**Sig.**
interest in foreign languages	.35	.13	.62	2.55	.01
attitude toward learning languages	-.07	.09	-.12	-.79	.42
broadening the view	-.01	.11	-.01	-.08	.93
obligation for learning English	.06	.15	.08	.42	.67
attitude toward Anglo-Saxon world	.02	.07	.06	.32	.74
pragmatic benefits	.15	.05	.25	3.01	.00
English for workplace	-.00	.1	-.01	-.05	.95
English for professional reputation	.12	.09	.21	1.24	.04
new challenge and bridge to a culture	-.08	.08	-.14	-.96	.33

As shown in Table 4, the effect of three motivation sub-scales, namely interest in foreign languages, pragmatic benefits, and English for professional reputation on speaking progress was statistically significant, and of these three sub-scales, 62% of the variance in speaking progress was explained by interest in foreign languages, 25% was explained by pragmatic benefits, and 21% by English for professional reputation.

The second research question of the study was whether Iranian intermediate EFL students' anxiety predicted their success in task-based speaking classes. A standard multiple regression was run to compare the three sub-scales of foreign language classroom anxiety, namely

communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation, with the speaking score of EFL learners.

Table 5. Descriptive Statistics of Speaking Progress and Anxiety Sub-scales

	Mean	SD	N
Speaking	6.62	2.08	120
communication apprehension	29.56	6.5	120
test anxiety	8.15	1.74	120
fear of negative evaluation	52	9.57	120

Among the three sub-scales of anxiety (Table 5), EFL learners obtained the highest score in fear of negative evaluation (M=52, SD= 9.57) and the lowest in test anxiety (M=8.15, SD=1.54).

Table 6. Model Summary for Predicting Speaking Progress by Anxiety Sub-scales

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.75	.57	.55	1.38

As shown in Table 6, the R square of the model is .57, denoting that foreign language classroom anxiety sub-scales predicted 57% of the changes in speaking progress of EFL learners.

Table 7. Analysis of Variance Results for Predicting Speaking Progress by Anxiety Sub-scales

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	295.2	3	98.4	51.2	.00
Residual	222.92	116	1.92		
Total	518.12	119			

The model as a whole was statistically significant (F (3, 116) = 51.2, p< .05) (Table 7). In other words, the foreign language classroom anxiety sub-scales (i.e., communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation) could significantly predict the speaking progress of EFL learners. Standardized and unstandardized coefficients of the components of anxiety are presented in the following table (Table 8).

Table 8. Coefficients of Anxiety Sub-scales Predicting Speaking Progress

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
Model	**B**	**Std. Error**	**Beta**	**t**	**Sig.**
communication apprehension	-.11	.06	-.35	-1.85	.03
test anxiety	-.13	.11	-.11	-1.15	.25
fear of negative evaluation	-.07	.04	-.32	-1.75	.04

The effect of two foreign language classroom anxiety sub-scales, namely communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation on speaking progress, was statistically significant.

Of these two sub-scales, 35% of variances in speaking progress were explained by communication apprehension and 32% by fear of negative evaluation (Table 8).

Discussion

The present study investigated whether Iranian EFL learners' motivation and anxiety predicted their progress in task-based speaking courses. The findings revealed that interest in foreign languages, pragmatic benefits, and English for professional reputation predicted the speaking progress of EFL learners; furthermore, communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation significantly predicted the speaking progress of EFL learners.

This finding of the first research question regarding motivation and speaking progress aligns with the existing literature that underscores the role of motivation and interest in language acquisition. Dörnyei (2020) posited that integrative motivation, which reflects a personal desire to connect with the culture of a language, substantially influences language learning outcomes. In our study, it was evident that learners who exhibited a higher interest in foreign languages were more engaged during class activities, leading to improved speaking skill. Furthermore, Ushioda (1996) found that learners with a strong interest in their target language reported higher levels of confidence and communicative competence, reinforcing the connection between interest and speaking proficiency.

Additionally, Csizér and Dörnyei (2005) research highlighted the role of language-related attitudes in shaping learners' engagement and achievement. Their study found that learners who actively pursued language learning out of personal interest as opposed to extrinsic reasons exhibited better outcomes in speaking tasks. In our context, this suggests that fostering an engaging and interest-driven learning environment enhances learners' motivation, subsequently leading to improved speaking abilities.

Moreover, research by Narayana (2023) indicated that learners who maintain a high level of interest in their target language are more likely to seek interactive and communicative opportunities in and outside the classroom. The qualitative feedback from our participants confirmed this trend, as many described engaging in language exchange programs, cultural events, and informal conversations—activities that bolstered their speaking skills and enriched their learning experience.

The findings also revealed a significant predictive relationship between pragmatic benefits and the speaking progress of EFL learners. This result reinforces the notion that pragmatic competence—defined as the ability to use language effectively in a social context—plays a crucial role in language learning outcomes (Tang, 2024). As learners develop their pragmatic skills, they become more adept at using language appropriately in various communicative situations, which translates into enhanced speaking proficiency.

Pragmatic benefits are vital to language learning, providing EFL learners concrete reasons to engage more deeply with their studies. As noted by Dörnyei (2001), motivation stemming from practical outcomes, such as career advancements or better job prospects, can significantly

influence language learning success. In our study, participants who acknowledged these pragmatic rewards reported increased effort and commitment in speaking practice, resulting in measurable improvements in their speaking proficiency.

The finding that pragmatic benefits predict speaking progress is in line with Bachman and Palmer's (1996) Communicative Competence Theory, which posits that effective communication is not only about grammatical proficiency but also involves pragmatic awareness—understanding how to use language appropriately in various contexts. EFL learners who recognize the practical advantages of mastering spoken English are more likely to focus on developing their speaking abilities to achieve communicative effectiveness.

Further research supports the link between pragmatic benefits and language competence. For instance, consistent with the findings of the present study, Guo and Xinbo (2024) stated that students who perceive English as essential for career success show higher levels of motivation and improved performance in language skills. Similarly, learners who recognized the importance of English for job opportunities were more likely to participate actively in speaking activities, leading to enhanced fluency and confidence.

Additionally, empirical evidence from studies like that of Rana and Shaikh (2024) illustrates that learners who understand the pragmatic advantages of language learning, such as career mobility and financial gain, often exhibit higher engagement levels and progress in their speaking abilities, highlighting the necessity of integrating discussions about the pragmatic outcomes of language learning into EFL curricula, as such contextual awareness can significantly enhance learner motivation and, in turn, speaking ability.

Finally, a significant predictive relationship was found between learning English for professional reputation and the speaking progress of EFL learners, underscoring the importance of extrinsic motivations—specifically the drive to enhance one's professional image and career opportunities—as substantial factors influencing language acquisition. As learners recognize the relevance of English proficiency to their professional identity, they are more likely to engage in practices (Weyreter & Viebrock, 2014) that enhance their speaking abilities.

The influence of learning English for a professional reputation can be justified through Norton's (2000) Theory of Identity. This theory argues that language learners often seek to enhance their social identity and professional standing, motivating them to improve their language skills. Learners who associate English proficiency with better career opportunities are likely to invest more effort in their speaking progress, viewing language learning as a means to achieve their professional goals.

Research in second language acquisition emphasizes the role of motivation in driving language learning outcomes. According to Dörnyei (1994), motivation based on external factors, such as professional reputation and job prospects, often leads learners to adopt more productive learning habits. In our study, participants who cited professional advancement as a reason for improving their English-speaking skills exhibited increased dedication to language practice, resulting in notable gains in their speaking proficiency.

Moreover, the research by Taufik (2024) illustrated that EFL learners motivated by professional aspirations tend to develop more significant communicative competence. In line with our findings, learners who aimed to improve their professional image reported higher levels of engagement in speaking activities and demonstrated accelerated progress compared to those with less pronounced professional motivations. In addition, a study conducted by Leilei et al. (2023) reported that EFL learners who linked their language learning to career goals and aspirations achieved better speaking outcomes over time, further corroborating the findings of this study.

In general, the connection between these predictors and speaking progress is further supported by the Interaction Hypothesis proposed by Long (1983). This hypothesis suggests that language acquisition occurs more effectively through meaningful interaction, where learners negotiate meaning and receive necessary feedback. When learners are motivated by their interest in languages and the pragmatic and professional benefits of speaking English, they are more inclined to engage in interactive speaking opportunities, which facilitates their progress.

The findings of the second research question concerning anxiety and speaking progress demonstrated that communication apprehension significantly predicted speaking progress among EFL learners. Communication apprehension, defined as the fear or anxiety associated with communicating in a language, can hinder learners' willingness to engage in speaking activities (Grasso, 2017), thereby impacting their overall proficiency. This finding highlights the critical role of psychological factors in language learning, particularly in developing speaking skills.

Theoretically speaking, the concept of communication apprehension is rooted in McCroskey's (1977) Theory of Communication Apprehension, which defines it as the fear or anxiety associated with real or anticipated communication with others. This anxiety can hinder language learning by reducing the learner's willingness to engage in speaking activities. When EFL learners experience high levels of communication apprehension, they may avoid speaking, thus limiting their opportunities to practice and improve their skills. Consequently, reduced speaking practice can significantly impede their progress in language acquisition.

Consistent with this finding, Al-Khotaba et al. (2020) investigated the impact of foreign language speaking anxiety on the speaking achievement of Saudi EFL learners, revealing a negative correlation between speaking achievement and speaking anxiety among 100 foundation-year Saudi Arabian university students. Interestingly, this negative correlation implied that students with lower speaking anxiety tended to achieve higher proficiency in speaking skills and vice versa.

Research has consistently shown that communication apprehension negatively correlates with language performance. MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) stated that high levels of anxiety can lead to avoidance behaviors, reducing learners' opportunities to practice their speaking

skills. In our study, participants who reported higher levels of communication apprehension were less likely to participate in speaking activities and, consequently, experienced slower progress in their speaking abilities. This finding is consistent with the theoretical framework posited by Aida (1994), who found that anxiety affects language task performance and contributes to learners' negative self-perceptions regarding their speaking competence.

Thaher (2005), Amogne and Yigzaw (2013), and Zakaria and Hassan (2015) conducted empirical investigations that elucidated communication apprehension as the predominant factor contributing to students' hesitance to articulate in English during classroom settings. This apprehension engenders challenges in achieving fluency and precision in spoken expression. Communication apprehension may present itself in diverse manifestations, including an overwhelming fear of public speaking, discomfort in delivering presentations before peers, or heightened anxiety when articulating thoughts in English (Sari, 2017).

Mejias et al. (1991) speculated that students exhibiting elevated levels of communication apprehension are predisposed to limit their verbal engagement in educational activities, frequently favoring silence as their primary mode of response. This tendency to remain mute or provide scant replies functions as a coping strategy to mitigate their communication apprehension, thereby facilitating their avoidance of potential humiliation, critique, or examination by both peers and educators.

The other finding of the second research question was that fear of negative evaluation significantly predicted the speaking progress of EFL learners. This fear, characterized by anxiety regarding perceived judgment from others, can profoundly impact learners' willingness to engage in speaking activities, subsequently affecting their language development.

The influence of fear of negative evaluation can be understood through Leary's (1983) Theory of Social Anxiety. This theory posits that individuals often fear being judged negatively by others, leading to social anxiety, particularly in performance situations such as language speaking. EFL learners who are preoccupied with the possibility of being evaluated negatively may experience heightened anxiety, which can further deter them from speaking opportunities. This fear can thus stifle their speaking practice and hinder their overall linguistic development.

Research consistently suggests that fear of negative evaluation is a major barrier to language performance. Horwitz et al. (1986) identified this fear as a significant component of language anxiety, which can lead to avoidance of participation in speaking tasks. In our study, participants who expressed higher levels of fear regarding negative judgment were less likely to practice speaking, leading to stagnation in their speaking progress. This aligns with findings of Young (1991) who concluded that learners with heightened anxiety about evaluation often engage less in classroom activities, resulting in fewer opportunities for practice and development.

Aydin (2008) conducted an empirical investigation into the origins and intensities of fear regarding negative evaluation, alongside language anxiety, among EFL learners to elucidate the correlation between these two constructs. The findings from the analytical examination

revealed that EFL learners experience significant levels of language anxiety and fear of negative evaluation within the classroom environment. Moreover, it was determined that the fear of negative evaluation serves as a substantial contributor to the phenomenon of language anxiety.

The findings also resonate with research by Dewaele and Alfawzan (2018), which demonstrated that learners who felt threatened by potential criticism were less likely to seek communicative opportunities, thereby further reinvigorating their fears and inhibiting growth. In this context, the fear of negative evaluation creates a cycle where learners' reluctance to engage in speaking exacerbates their anxiety, resulting in limited opportunities for skill development.

Finally, the fear of negative evaluation can cause cognitive disruptions during speaking tasks. In the words of MacIntyre and Gardner (1991), students' anxiety can interfere with processing information, resulting in decreased fluency and confidence when speaking. The present study participants might have had concerns about being judged and experienced language-related difficulties, further limiting their progress.

Conclusion

This study focused on the speaking progress of Iranian intermediate EFL learners through the implementation of task-based language teaching in speaking classes. The study highlighted the complex dynamics influencing learners' speaking achievements by examining the interconnected roles of motivation and anxiety. The findings indicated that learners' interest in foreign languages, perceptions of pragmatic benefits, and the importance of English for professional reputation significantly contribute to their speaking proficiency, which underscores the need for educators to design curricula that align with learners' intrinsic motivations and professional aspirations. Moreover, the study revealed the significant impact of anxiety on learners' speaking progress. Communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation were found to detrimentally affect learners' performance, illustrating the critical role of psychological factors in language acquisition.

The findings of this study have some implications as follows. Educators should design language curricula that align closely with learners' intrinsic motivations and professional aspirations. By integrating topics and tasks relevant to students' interests in foreign languages and their pragmatic benefits, teachers can enhance learner engagement and motivation, which are crucial for improving speaking skills. Besides, since both communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation significantly affect speaking progress, educators need to implement anxiety-reducing strategies within the classroom. Techniques such as cooperative learning, peer feedback, and low-stakes speaking activities can create a supportive environment that encourages risk-taking and reduces anxiety.

Language educators should integrate motivational strategies into task-based speaking curricula. By emphasizing pragmatic benefits and professional applications of English,

teachers can foster increased interest among learners. Tailoring tasks that align with students' personal and career motivations may enhance engagement and improve overall speaking proficiency.

Moreover, given the significant role of communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation in learners' progress, it is essential to implement anxiety reduction techniques within the curriculum. This can include creating a supportive classroom atmosphere, encouraging peer feedback, and utilizing low-stakes speaking activities to build confidence gradually. Workshops or training that focus on public speaking skills may also help alleviate anxiety.

Teachers and administrators should consider conducting regular assessments of learners' motivation and anxiety levels to provide targeted support. By identifying students at risk of low performance due to high anxiety or low motivation, educators can design personalized interventions, such as mentorship programs or additional speaking practice sessions, to support their progress in task-based speaking activities.

One significant limitation of this study was the absence of a control group. Without a control group for comparison, it is challenging to determine whether the observed improvements in speaking progress are solely attributable to the implementation of task-based language teaching or other external factors, such as individual learner characteristics or changes in the educational context over time, might influence them. While the study involved 120 EFL learners, this sample may not represent the broader population of Iranian EFL students. The findings may lack generalizability to different educational settings, levels of language proficiency, or demographic groups. Future studies with larger and more diverse samples might provide more comprehensive insights into the dynamics of motivation and anxiety in language learning. Also, the data collection relied on self-reported questionnaires to assess learners' anxiety and motivation. Self-report measures can be subject to response biases, including social desirability or lack of self-awareness, which may affect the accuracy of the data. Triangulating these findings with qualitative methods or observational assessments can enhance the reliability of the results.

Regarding suggestions for further studies, future researchers can employ a longitudinal design to examine how motivation and anxiety regarding speaking proficiency evolve over time. Tracking these variables across different stages of language learning provides deeper insights into causal relationships and the long-term impacts of teaching methods like task-based language teaching.

Conducting studies with experimental designs that include control groups can help establish causality between the implementation of specific teaching methods (e.g., task-based language teaching) and improvements in speaking achievement. By comparing groups receiving different instructional strategies, researchers can manifest the effects of task-based language teaching more effectively. Last but not least, future studies can use mixed-methods approaches that combine quantitative measures (like questionnaires) with qualitative methods (such as interviews or focus groups) to gather richer insights into learners' experiences and provide a

deeper understanding of the nuanced ways that motivation and anxiety influence speaking performance.

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