

## **STUDENTS' CLASS PARTICIPATION IN ENGLISH ORIENTED EDUCATION/ TRAINING PROGRAMS: THE EGYPTIAN CASE**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper is an endeavor to contribute to probe the different variables affecting Egyptian Students' presentations and oral participation skills in English oriented educational/ training programs, and represents a modest effort to develop some recommendations that might help such students. The researcher wishes they could help in such arena, one to those responsible for the education/ training process, and the other one to those participating in such programs, whether in the presenter seat, or the audience one. The researcher used the explanatory design to focus on the question WHY and to identify any causal links between the factors or variables that pertain to the research problem. Quantitative data is first gathered and then supported by qualitative data to help explain the quantitative results. Data collection was conducted from 80 students from different English oriented programs. A triangulation of data collection methods is used for this research, consisting of a collection of survey sheets, observations during the presentations and interviews with the students and educators. Findings of the research revealed different factors that affect students' abilities, decreasing their self- confidence level and increasing their anxiety. Among all factors, negative reactions of the audience played the worst role. This paper could contribute in future researches in different Arab countries, taking into consideration the local variables that could differ from one society to another.*

*Keywords: Presentation skills, Anxiety, Perception, Class Participation, Egypt*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Chalk and talk. This has been simply the traditional Egyptian style of education for long decades. Such decades resulted in difficulties with some students when they are asked to talk in front of an audience, to make it even worse, they are asked to use a second language to do this. This research is a study of Egyptian students with experience of frustrations and anxiety

and lack of confidence, and they try to hide such feeling as some sort of a defense mechanism. Some of them even believe that learning English is the most difficult obstacle to overcome during their studies, especially in the theoretical oriented majors. This problem could be so hard that some students prefer to postpone their studies for some years, and sometimes forever. In addition, such problem could have a devastating impact on how beneficial such programs could be to some students, and what the type of uses they might have in their practical life.

In some educational programs in Egypt, speaking English is a requirement for admission and proceeding in their studies, and most English oriented programs requires a specific TOEFL score for them to be admitted. Some of the modest level students are not able to meet this requirement, and their poor performance in such programs, whether educational or training represented a problem that attracted the researcher's attention since the number of such programs is increasing to the extent that it is almost a requirement for job seekers to master English if they are willing to find decent jobs, and of course to be successful in them.

When students apply for postgraduate studies in Egypt for example, usually they are asked for a specific score level on TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language), the higher the score they have in English, the more they think they can master the study. As soon as students begin the education program, they find that the TOEFL score is far away from being effective, especially when it comes to answering orally or conducting presentations in front of others.

As a professor, and as a student before, the researcher noticed that most of the Egyptian students learn English during their study life as a destination, not as a means. They often disregard the fact that leaning a new language is not the end of the ride, but actually the beginning of it. The more languages one learns, the more horizons. This is obviously reflected on the performance of most of them when placed in practical situations that necessitates the usage of such languages orally, such as a presentation, conversation, or oral answers.

When these students go to classes and get indulged in real speaking and presenting situations, they usually do not feel comfortable talking in front of others, not only because English is their second language, but because such feeling gets to their self - confidence core, and no matter how skillful they are in the material, some of them feels shy to express himself/herself.

The situation gets even harder when students apply for theoretical majors, such as business management, marketing, or HR management. Such majors requires extensive interaction in classes and the use of conversational and presentation skills all over the study period. According to (Gregersen& Horwitz, 2002), conversations and interactions are limited when negative evaluation is feared, to make it even worse, Egyptians in general are well known

for their sense of humor. Students usually use such sense of humor in reacting to their colleagues when they present or answer orally. Such phenomenon negatively impacts the presenter's self-confidence and represent a barrier for enhancing his/ her skills and performance.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

While Heilinheimo and Shute (1986) found language skills and social interactions were the most difficult problem for Chinese students due to English being their second language, and (Zhou, Bauer, Erb, 2004) specified 5 reasons for poor performance of students while presenting and communicating, which are 1) Chinese culture and personal prior knowledge, 2) Chinese teaching style, 3) Foreign accents, 4) Perfectionism, 5) Better in reading & writing than listening and speaking, we find that in the Egyptian case, reasons are attribute to the following factors, some of them go in line with findings of the mentioned researches, and some others belong to in particular to the culture prevailing in the Egyptian society.

### *a- The Egyptian Traditional Education Style:*

According to (OECD report, 2010) Education in Egypt in general can be classified as narrow and rigid, and to some degree curriculums are tied to a singular view provided by the lecturer. They focus on content and dominate the development of critical thinking and analytical skills (P 205-206). According to (Loveluck, 2012) qualified teachers are not enough hired and the deterioration of public education placed substantial pressure over the school facilities. School facilities are that digested with students that most of them work one shifts, mostly two per day, especially out of the main cities in the suburbs. All this was reflected in the public education poor ratios of teacher—student, getting down to 1:5.

Education depends heavily on “dictation” instead of “demand”. Students are not trained on expressing themselves freely in general. That is why they encounter difficult times during presentations in general, especially when they involve the use of a second language (OECD report, 2010). According to (Kannan, 2009) when talking about the Indian educational system, which might go for the Egyptian one, errors in grammar are a common phenomenon in the Egyptian students when the study English to the extent that it is rare for them to produce one sentence without them. This is due to the fact that they only care about the exams, not about the language. Instead of urging students to employ their analytical skills, they are urged to depend on memorization instead. In this context, they memorize lessons only to put them in the answer sheet, and they almost forget about them once they are out of the exam room.

*b- English as a second language in schools.*

Acquiring skills in the second language in the Egyptian higher education institutions is very limited, despite the submission of several programs in foreign languages, especially English and French, in a range of universities. However, in the vast majority of academic programs and institutions do not constitute the acquisition of a second language at a basic level of proficiency part of the curriculum.

Dulay et al (1982) define interference as the automatic transfer, due to habit, of the surface structure of the first language onto the surface of the target language. Lott (1983: 256) defines interference as 'errors in the learner's use of the foreign language that can be traced back to the mother tongue'.

A study was conducted by (Flowerdew, Miller, 1992) revealed a broad, rich picture of the perceptions, problems and strategies of students struggling to get to grips with a new situation, that of listening to lectures in a second language. The key finding is that listening to a lecture monologue is an extremely difficult task, for which second language students may well be inadequately prepared.

It appears to be much more difficult for an adult to learn a second language system that is as well learned as the first language. Typically, a person learns a second language partly in terms of the kinds of meanings already learned in the first language (Carroll, 1964; Albert & Obler, 1978 and Larson-Freeman & Long, 1991). Beebe (1988) suggests that in learning a second language, L1 responses are grafted on to L2 responses, and both are made to a common set of meaning responses. Other things being equal, the learner is less fluent in L2, and the kinds of expressions he/she uses in L2 bear telltale traces of the structure of L1.

*c- Egyptian Sense of Humor.*

All over the Egyptian history, and since the pharaohs' era, Egyptians are known for their sense of humor. As stated argued by institution (El Amrani, 2011a), Egyptians were not allowed to practice law under the roman rule as their humor was feared to dilute the seriousness of the legal institution. As was found in ancient Egyptian monuments, whether tombs or temples, visual pharaonic humor has been found, along with texts and letters containing similar evidences (Houlihan, 2001).

For Egyptians, jokes have historically marked their relationships with their oppressive rulers since the time of the pharaohs. Ancient Egyptians were so well known for their wit and humor that they were reportedly banned from practicing law under Roman law because the Romans feared that the Egyptian humor would dilute the gravitas of the legal institution (El Amrani, 2011a). Evidence of humor can be found in ancient texts and letters, while visual pharaonic humor has been found in tomb and temple decorations (Houlihan, 2001).

As (Goodman, 2006) explained it “People love to laugh, so humor can be a powerful tool for presenters. It can start presentations off on the right foot, provide needed pick-me-ups as you roll along, and send your audience off with a smile. It’s also a great way to keep their attention, because once a presenter has established that she’s got a good sense of humor (and isn’t afraid to use it), everyone will listen more closely for the next good line (p-45). But in our case, the picture is upside down. It is ironic how such innocent feature of the Egyptian society could lead to such negative impact when such sense of humor is used by the audience to underestimate the presenter or oral communicator, decreasing his/her self- confidence and esteem, making the difficult time he/she is experiencing more difficult.

#### *d- Lack of Perfectionism*

Most Egyptian students are not that serious when learning English as a second language in different stages of schools. This is the main reason when such students join the university in English- oriented programs or in their practical lives during English- oriented training programs, such students, or employees in career paths, do not show perfectionism in English. Even when their level in English is satisfactory, there are still some problems they face difficulties to get rid of. One of such problems is the accent, and another problem is to translate in his/her mind from Arabic to English before speaking, and no wonder if you find some Arabic words are included in an English conversation that is supposed to be Arabic free.

According to Brophy (1999), “Readers who are familiar with the literature of foreign language anxiety are likely to notice a number of parallels from it to these descriptions of perfectionism. It is important to note that as for anxious language learners, the success of perfectionists is often impeded because they spend their energy avoiding mistakes rather than focusing on learning. Not only do they refrain from classroom participation, but they also indulge their work habit” (p. 112).

### **Research hypotheses**

Null - there was no performance difference if the students felt anxious, or frustrated when speaking English as second language in front of class.

Alternative - there was performance difference if the students felt anxious or frustrated when speaking English as a second language in front of class.

Null -Communication-anxious individuals who were speaking a second language and fear negative evaluation initiate same amount of conversation and interaction as those who are not communication anxious.

Alternative -Communication-anxious individuals who were speaking second language and fear negative evaluation initiate less or minimal conversation and interaction.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Questions

Among the different variables affecting self-confidence and increasing anxiety of Egyptian students, when orally answering or presenting in English oriented education or training programs, what is the variable that affects more? How do the attitudes of the audience affect Egyptian students during presentations? And how students' perception towards such attitudes affect their oral and presentation skills? What educators can do to ease such effect on students? Are their effective strategies that could help? How does something innocent such as "sense of humor" could have an evil effect on others?

### Design

Most of these students think that pronunciation, unfamiliar wording, heavy accents and anxiety because of speaking a second language play substantial roles in their communication and presentation problems.

Table 1: Sample Structure

Item	Category	No.	%
1- Gender	Male	30	57.5
	Female	22	42.5
2- Age	20-29	12	23
	30-39	26	50
	40+	14	27
3- Number of Years Studied English	6 Years	8	15.3
	8 Years	18	34.6
	10 Years	16	30.7
	12 Years	10	19.2

### Procedure

For the observation and interview study, the researcher selected a mixture of English oriented programs' students, such as "Six Sigma Green Belt" training program, Effective Management" training program, and Cairo University "MBA" educational program. The mixture included more than 80 students, males and females. Participants vary in background education, and topics of interest, which are all related to business management. All of them completed at least 6 years of

English study and scored more than 470 in the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language). Students were asked to fill out the survey sheet. The researcher considered that the more variety of students to participate, the more reliable the output will be. As long as the interviews are concerned, and because of the limitations of the procedures, some students were asked specific questions in the issues concerned, along with some of the educators as well to get the feedback from both sides.

The research procedures included three parts: making and collecting the survey sheet (stated above), observation during presentations and classes, and interviews with the students. The data was then entered into Excel to make data analysis and charts.

The survey sheet contains thirteen questions that were used to collect the data from the students' point of view about how English as a second language affects them in class participation. The questions were scored on a five point Likert scale (i.e., 5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = neutral, 2 = disagree, 1 = strongly disagree) and also contained multiple choice questions. The researcher used this style of questionnaire to reduce the time that students have to face in providing information. To ensure the reliability of the survey, the researcher prepared the anonymous survey. The researcher also let the students fill out the survey at their convenience without supervision.

The purpose of the interviews with students was to obtain the information about the students' experiences of participation in front of the class and their learning strategies to overcome the deficiency of their speaking skills, and with educators to obtain information about their notes of the issue and how they could do to help and support such students.

The purpose of class observation was for the researcher to notice English speaking skills of students during presentations in the classroom and to closely watch the students' performance and behaviors related to anxiety level due to English being a second language.

For the observation, and due to the participation in such education/ training programs, the researcher attended classes and observed students giving presentations and oral discussions. The purpose of this such presentations and discussions was to interact in classes and respond to assignment requirements of the educators. The length of the observation periods differed according to circumstances.

## **ANALYSIS AND EMPERICAL FINDINGS**

In order to achieve the objectives of the study and to answer the research questions, the researcher used a triangulation of data collection methods consisting of a collection of survey sheets, observations during the presentations, and interviews with the students and educators

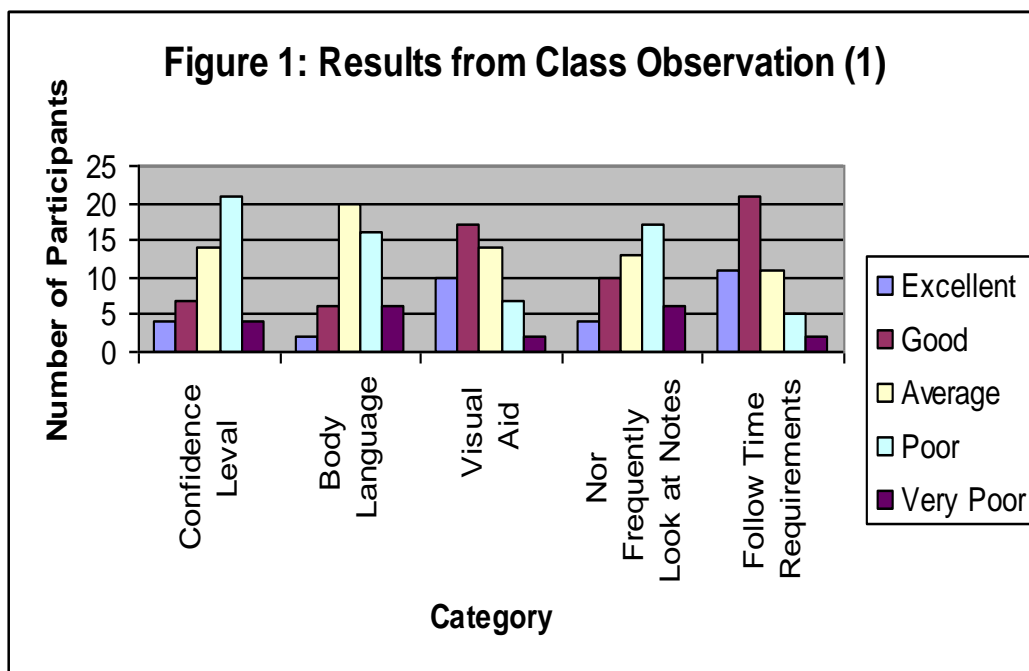
The following tables show the results obtained by the researcher from observing the sample individuals during class participation and presentations. Throughout the observation of the class, the researcher wrote down notes and collected data about the students' performance and audience different reactions.

### First: Class Observation

Table 2: Results from Class Observation (1)

	Confidence Level	Body Language	Visual Aid	Not Frequently Looks at Notes	Follow Time Requirements
Excellent	4	2	10	4	11
Good	7	6	17	10	21
Average	14	20	14	13	11
Poor	21	16	7	17	5
Very Poor	4	6	2	6	2

Figure 1: Results from Class Observation (1)



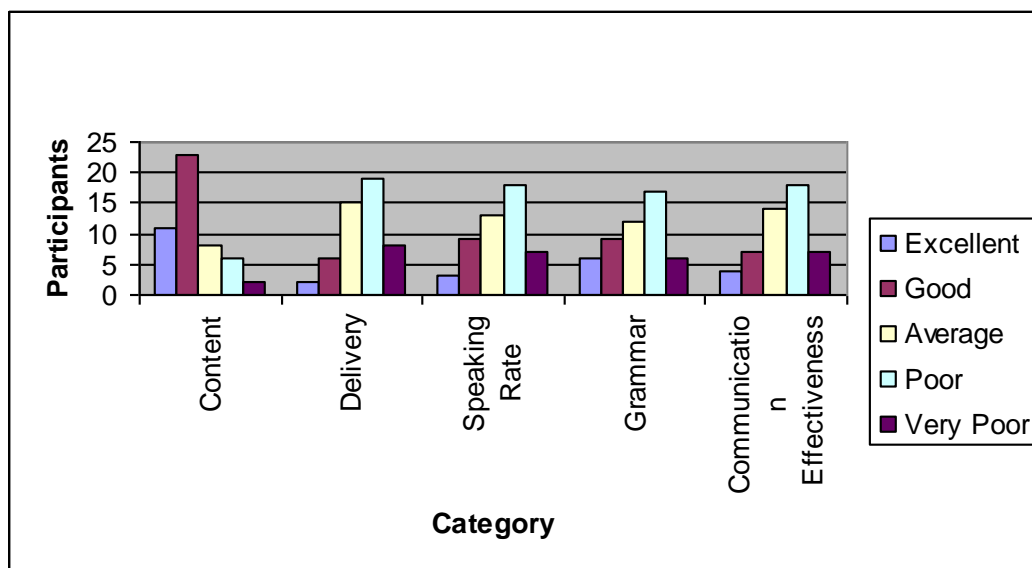
Content		Delivery		Speaking Rate		Grammar		Communication Effectiveness	
Mean	10.00	Mean	10.00	Mean	10.00	Mean	10.00	Mean	10.00
St. Dev.	7.38	St. Dev.	7.62	St. Dev.	5.87	St. Dev.	5.24	St. Dev.	7.28
Con.		Con.		Con.		Con.		Con.	
Lev(95.0%)	9.17	Lev(95.0%)	9.46	Lev(95.0%)	7.29	Lev(95.0%)	6.51	Lev(95.0%)	9.04

Table (2) shows that although at confidence level 95%, the standard deviation extends from 5.24 to 7.62 with a mean of 10, which means a great difference in the participants' observed features, we find that the Average classification has the greatest percentage of all 5 areas with 30%, 45%, 29%, 30% and 23% respectively of the sample observed.

Table 3: Results from Class Observation (2)

	Content	Delivery	Speaking Rate	Grammar	Communication Effectiveness
Excellent	11	2	3	6	4
Good	23	6	9	9	7
Average	8	15	13	12	14
Poor	6	19	18	17	18
Very Poor	2	8	7	6	7

Figure 2: Results from Class Observation (2)



	Content	Delivery	Speaking Rate	Grammar	Communication Effectiveness
Mean	10	Mean	10	Mean	10
St. Dev.	7.97	St. Dev.	6.89	St. Dev.	5.74
Con.		Con.		Con.	
Lev(95.0%)	9.89	Lev(95.0%)	8.56	Lev(95.0%)	5.76

Table (3) reveals that although at confidence level 95%, the standard deviation extends from 5.464 to 7.97 with a mean of 10, which means a great difference in the participants' observed

features, we find that the Average classification has the greatest percentage of all 5 areas with 15%, 40%, 38%, 39% and 39% respectively of the sample observed.

## Second: Survey

Analysis of the survey question resulted in the following findings:

Table 4: Effect of Listeners' attitudes and perceptions

	5(High)	4	3	2	1(Low)	Mean	St. Dev.
Feeling better with Less No. of People	28	10	5	2	7	10.4	10.26
Listeners' Perception of Your Skills	5	8	19	17	3	10.4	7.82
Effect of Listeners' Attitude	10	23	17	2	0	10.4	9.76
Difference in Performance	15	24	12	1	0	10.4	10.06

Figure 3: Effect of Listeners' Attitudes and Perception

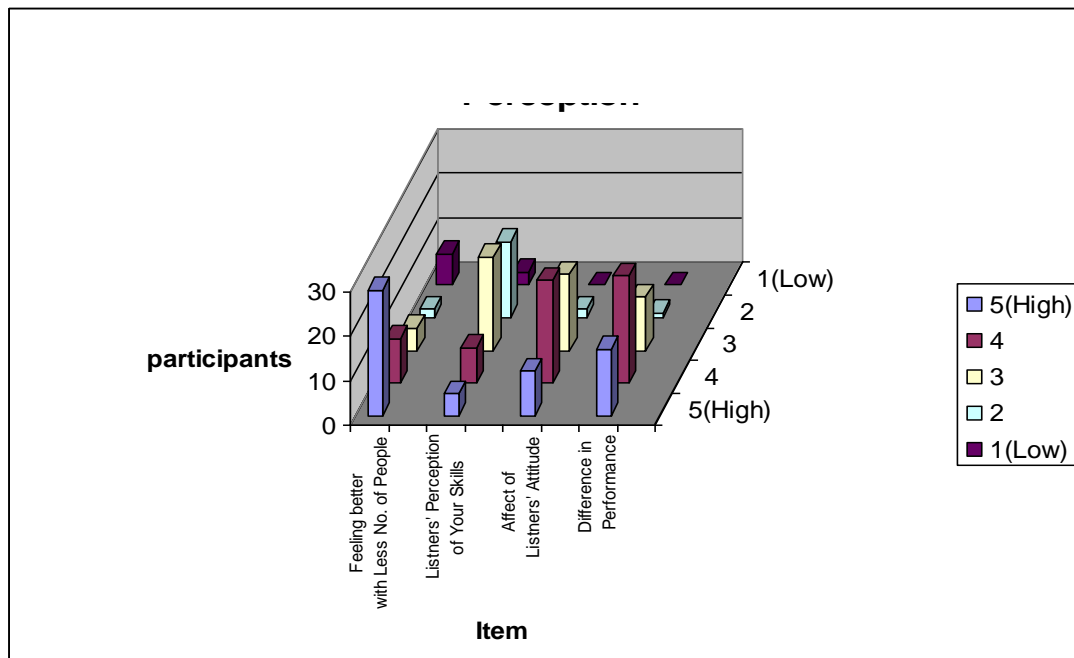


Table (4) that at confidence level 95%, the standard deviation extends from 7.82 to 10.26 with a mean of 10.4, which means a great difference in the participants' observed features.

Table 5: Students' Anxiety Levels

	5(High)	4	3	2	1(Low)	Mean	St. Dev.
Anxiety Level	14	16	16	6	0	10.4	7.12
Most Difficult Eng. Problem	2	26	8	6	0	10.4	10.3
Effect of Listeners' Attitude	10	23	17	2	0	10.4	9.7

It can be seen from table (5) that at confidence level 95%, the standard deviation extends from 7.12 to 10.3 with a mean of 10.4, which means a great difference in the participants' observed features.

Figure 4: Anxiety Level Distribution in Sample

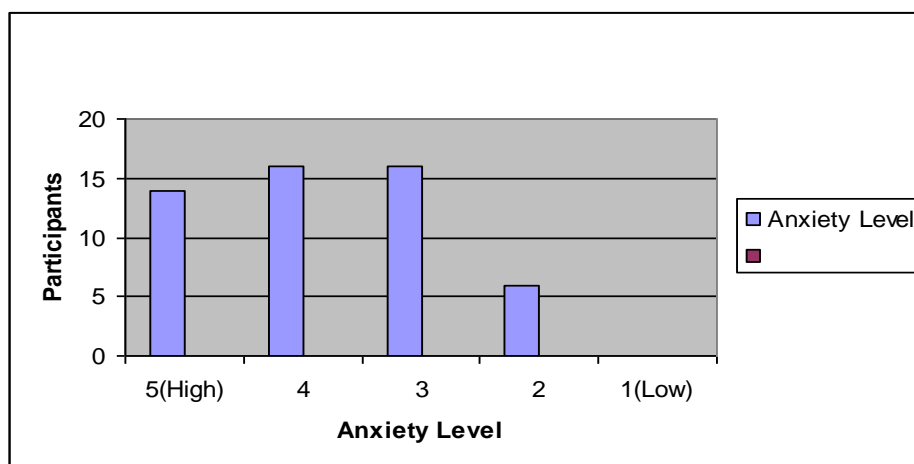


Figure 5: Effect of Listeners' Attitude on Students

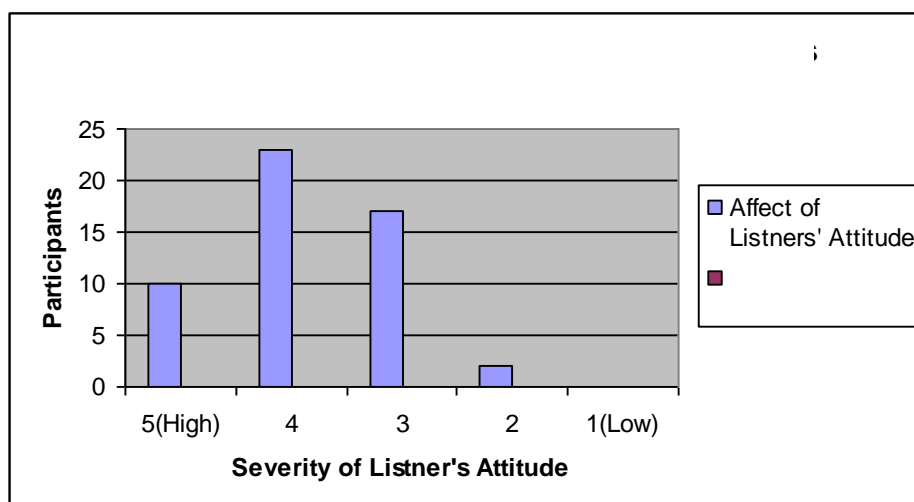


Table 6: Response to different reasons of anxiety

Reasons For Anxiety	Fear for not Being Perfect	Fear for Negative Evaluation	Personal Performance
Response	5	34	13

Figure 6: Different Reasons of Anxiety

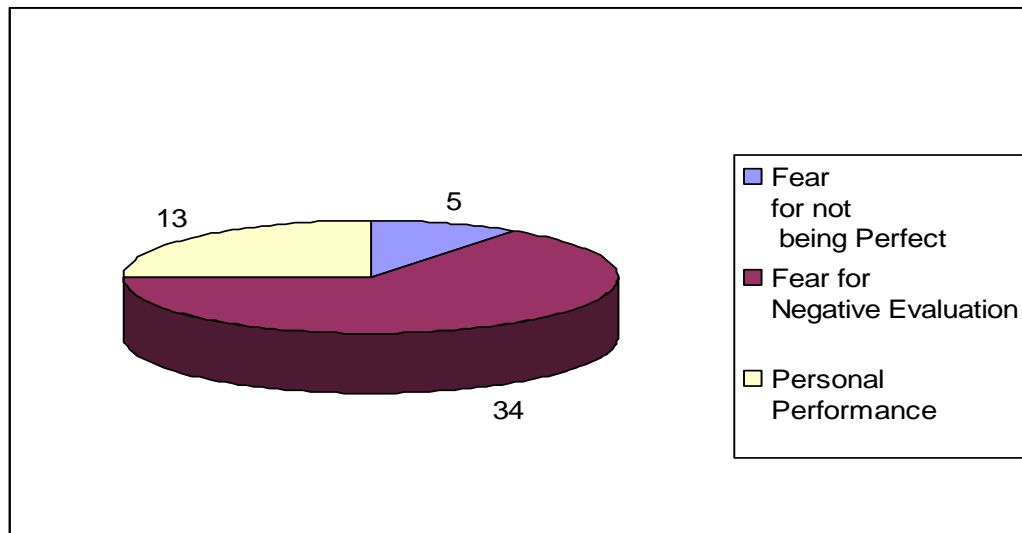


Table (6) shows that at confidence level 95%, the standard deviation is 14.9 with a mean of 17.3, which means a great difference in the participants' reason of anxiety.

### Third: Interview

Interviews conducted with both, students and educators revealed the following results:

Table 7: Description of why students feel anxious in class participation

Interview Question	Key Word	Number of Participants
What is the most difficult part that makes you feel anxious during class participation?	Content	7
	Fear of Negative Evaluation	16
	Pronunciation	9
	Grammar	3
	Accents	10
	Personality	5

Figure 7: Description of why students feel anxiety to participate in class

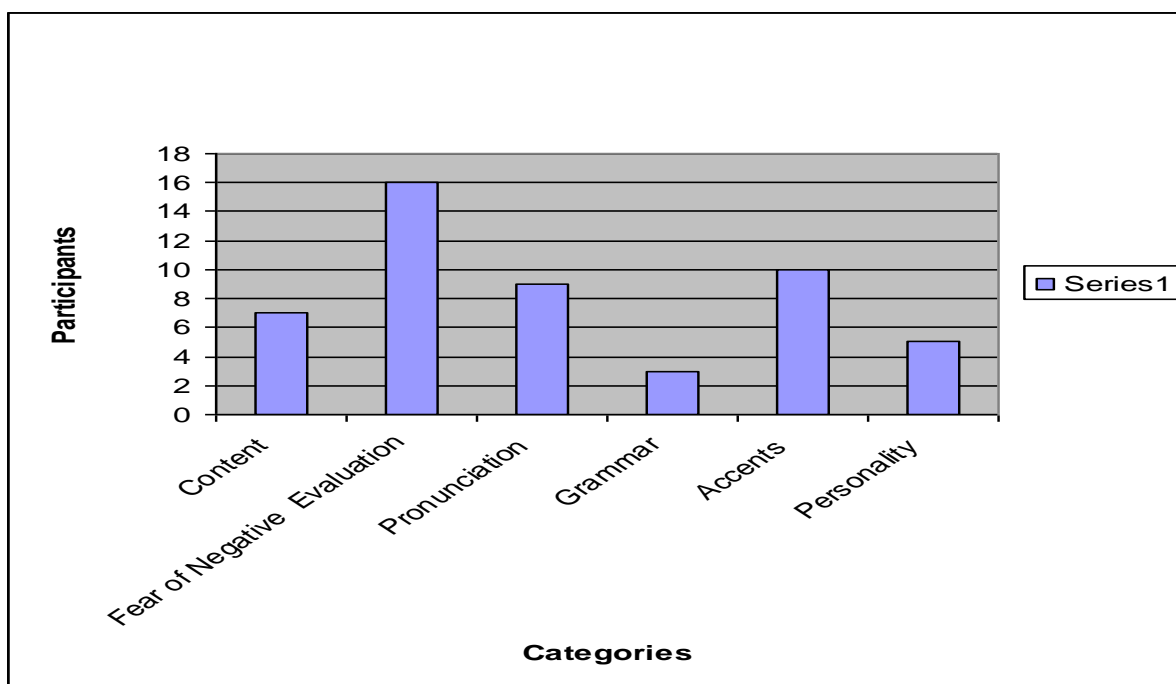
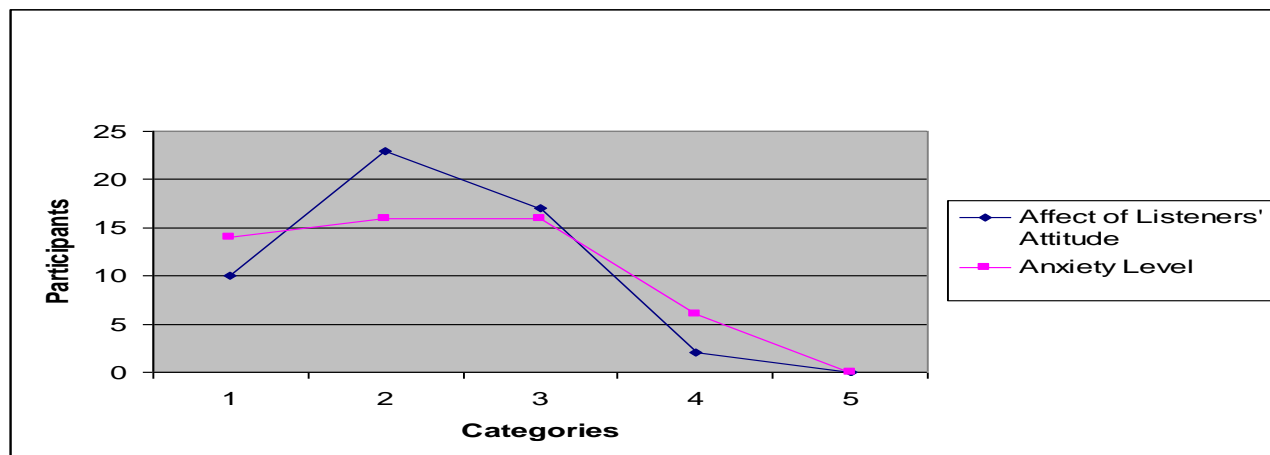


Table 8: Description of listener's attitude and anxiety level

	5(High)	4	3	2	1(Low)
Effect of Listeners' Attitude	10	23	17	2	0
Anxiety Level	14	16	16	6	0

Figure 8: Correlation between the effect of Listeners' Attitude and the anxiety levels

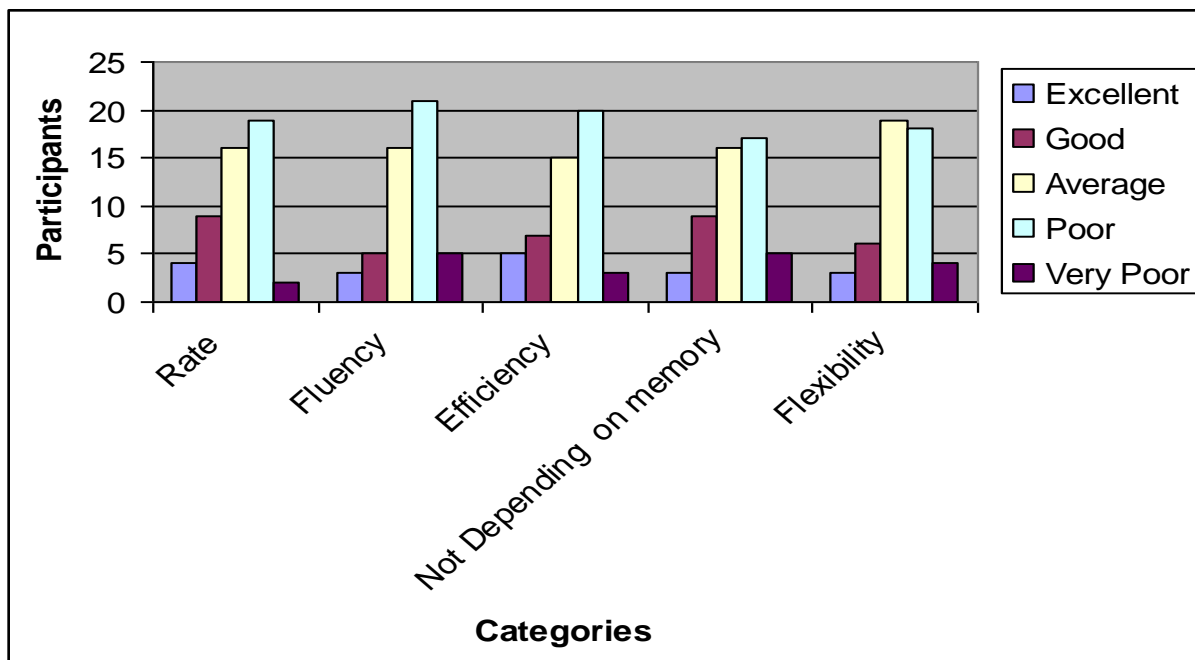


Tables (7) and Figure (7) indicate that there are some variable that affect the anxiety level of students during class participation. Among the mentioned variables, fear of negative evaluation from the audience has the greatest effect, 26.6%, followed by the accent variable, 16.6%, then by pronunciation of English, 15%. This is shown as well from table (8) and figure (8) that indicates a correlation between the listeners' attitude and the anxiety level sustained by the performing students.

Table 9: Evaluation of your own performance (Poor 1-----Excellent 5)

	Rate	Fluency	Efficiency	Not Depending on memory	Flexibility
Excellent	4	3	5	3	3
Good	9	5	7	9	6
Average	16	16	15	16	19
Poor	19	21	20	17	18
Very Poor	2	5	3	5	4

Figure 9: Evaluation of your own performance



As indicated by table (9) and figure (9), most of students rate themselves as (poor) in the five areas with the percentages of 38%, 42%, 40%, 34%, and 36% respectively, followed by average with the percentages of 32%, 32%, 30%, 32%, and 38% respectively. This indicates that most of students know that they have a problem in the second language usage during presentations and oral skills.

To sum up, it is obvious from the tables, graphs, and conducted analysis that: - There was performance difference if the students felt anxious or frustrated when speaking English in front of class. - Communication-anxious individuals who were speaking second language and fear negative evaluation initiate less or minimal conversation and interaction.

Based on the above, the alternative hypotheses are accepted, with recommendation of further studies to be conducted on the subject to find out more practical solutions to the problem.

From the self - evaluation form, the researcher found out that students already noticed and understood the importance of English speaking skills and also realized that they need teacher and self-helped improvement. They were also highly motivated to use any source and opportunities to improve their speaking skills.

The results of the class observation showed that the majority of the students, in spite of the great differences, had difficulties in giving presentations in front of the class. The data indicated that the average level of oral presentation and English speaking skills were between average and poor.

The research also indicated that students' performances in class participation in front of the class were affected by content, pronunciation, grammar, accents and personality. The characteristics of poor performance include more anxiety and frustration, less confidence, and even communication apprehension. The reason for all of those is due to the different language background, culture, teaching method, and accent.

The results of the study support the alternative hypothesis that there were performance differences if the students felt anxiety or frustration when speaking English in front of class. The causes of these anxiety included different and unfamiliar content, fear of negative evaluation, grammar and pronunciation problems, and accent, but the variable that had the greatest effect of all among students was the negative reaction of the audience as shown by the data provided.

## CONCLUSIONS

Findings of this paper confirm findings of other researchers conducted in the same are, such as Zhiping and Paramasivam (2013), Trang et al. (2012), and Zhou, N. et al. (2004), but in different societies. The major concern of this paper has been to shed light on the anxiety problem

sustained by Egyptian students in English- oriented educational/ training programs, and to probe the different variables affecting it, among which, reaction and response of the audience play the most substantial role.

Two messages are meant to be delivered by this paper. One to students participating in English oriented educational/ training programs, whether those representing and participating, or those representing the audience. For participating students, they should exert more efforts to overcome such problem, whether by improving their proficiency, rehearsing more, or enhancing their presentation skills, and for those representing the audience, they should be aware of how their response and reactions positively or negatively impact the self-confidence and anxiety levels of representing students, so they should be more careful. The other message is meant for educators to exert more efforts to support such students and guide them on the different strategies they could adopt to overcome their problem.

Even though there had been several limitations in this research, such as the small sample of students under approximately similar teaching styles, which affects generalization for all other students with different teaching conditions, and the non- response bias from students for different reasons that affect reliability of the information presented, such study could be a step for further studies to build on its findings, whether dealing with the different strategies that could be adopted by such students, or the methods of support that could be provided by educators. Furthermore, similar studies could be conducted in other Arab countries with the same problem, or even better, in conducting comparative studies among different societies with different affecting factors.

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