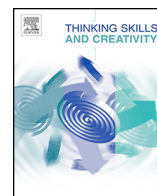




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# Reflective thinking, emotional intelligence, and speaking ability of EFL learners: Is there a relation?



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## ABSTRACT

The present study investigated the relationship among reflective thinking, emotional intelligence, and speaking ability of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. 150 Iranian EFL university students majoring in English language were randomly selected as the participants of the study who completed the reflective thinking questionnaire (RTQ) developed by Kember et al., (2000), filled out the Bar-On (1997) emotional intelligence questionnaire and sat an interview, the results of which were checked against IELTS speaking skill test descriptor. The results of multiple correlation analyses indicated that there was a significant positive association among: (a) reflective thinking, emotional intelligence, and speaking ability, (b) all fifteen components of emotional intelligence and speaking ability, (c) all fifteen components of emotional intelligence and reflective thinking of participants. Furthermore, the results of multiple regression analyses indicated that both reflective thinking and emotional intelligence significantly predicted speaking ability with the latter being a stronger predictor.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Overview

A considerable amount of research has been done to explore the relationship between speaking ability and such psychological affective factors in education as emotional intelligence (e.g., Egloff, Schmukle, Burns & Schwerdtfeger, 2006; Soodmand Afshar & Rahimi, 2014), anxiety (Beatty & Friedland, 1990; Tsiplakides & Keramida, 2009), self-esteem and motivation (Shumin, 2002), and thinking skills (Malmir & Shoorcheh, 2012; Roth, 2009; Slobin, 1987; Sun, 2009).

With regard to thinking skills and speaking for instance, Slobin (1987) maintains, “the activity of thinking takes on a particular quality when it is employed in the activity of speaking” (p. 435). Slobin adds, “In the evanescent of time frame of constructing utterances in discourse, one fits one’s thoughts into available linguistic forms” (p. 435). Roth (2009) also believes that speaking is made through the process of thinking. Similarly, Vygotsky (1986) holds the view that thinking and speaking are in dynamic interaction, a process that emerges in the course of development. It could thus be argued that thinking skills including reflective thinking are likely to be involved in speaking, and that they might regulate the process of verbal expression in mind before one utters out something.

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Speaking ability has also been found to be intriguingly but reversely associated with anxiety. For one, [Tsiplakides and Keramida \(2009\)](#) found that EFL learners' foreign language speaking anxiety, which originated from their fear of negative evaluation by their peers and also from low speaking ability, inhibited them from participating in speaking tasks. Therefore, it might be stated that emotionally intelligent EFL learners might not get easily anxious to speak in anxiety-provoking situations because they are able and know how to control their feelings and hence might reveal better performance in speaking.

[Shumin \(2002\)](#) also argued that sociocultural and affective factors such as emotions, self-esteem, empathy and motivation could affect EFL learners' speaking abilities. With regard to the relation between emotions and speaking, [Soodmand Afshar and Rahimi \(2014\)](#) found EFL learners who perceived, monitored, and appraised their emotions (i.e. were emotionally intelligent), and thought critically (i.e. were critical thinkers) felt highly competent to speak.

By the same token, [Barrow \(2015\)](#) argues that participatory pedagogy in which learners are involved in dialogue and hence use their interpersonal skills (as one of the components of emotional intelligence) promote their interactional skills and speaking ability. Therefore, it might be argued that social factors such as participation and interaction, which could be regarded as manifestation of interpersonal skills of emotionally intelligent learners, might enhance their speaking ability.

## 1.2. Reflective thinking

Reflective thinking and emotional intelligence are assumed to be two major variables in promoting EFL and English as a Second Language (ESL) learners' speaking ability ([Bora, 2012](#); [Naghdipour & Emeagwali, 2013](#); [Pishghadam, 2009](#); [Stam, 2006](#)). Reflective thinking could be regarded as an indicator of learners' success in learning ([Brabeck, 1983](#)). Learners who think reflectively are aware of their learning; they can thus control and assess what they know, what they need to know, and know how to bridge the gap in their knowledge ([Dewey, 1993](#)). It could further be considered as active, persistent, and careful consideration of a belief or supposed form of knowledge, the grounds that support that knowledge, and also further conclusions to which that knowledge leads ([Dewey, 1993](#)). Furthermore, [Loughran \(1996\)](#) describes reflective thinking in terms of such notions as claim, problem, hypothesis, reasoning and testing. [Schön \(1983\)](#) conceptualises reflective thinking as comprising two domains, reflection *in* action and reflection *on* action. Reflection in action is defined as thinking reflectively while an action is being done. Reflection on action, on the other hand, is described as thinking reflectively after an action has been done. Therefore, reflective thinking in the present study is defined as active and continuous thinking about what one is learning. It is also regarded as the process of analysing and making judgments about what has happened (i.e. thinking about what has been learned in educational contexts) ([Dewey, 1933](#)).

Reflective thinking could be regarded as a part of critical thinking process. The difference between critical thinking and reflective thinking is that critical thinking involves a wider-range of thinking skills that lead to desirable outcomes; on the other hand, reflective thinking focuses more on the process of making judgments about what has happened ([Dewey, 1933](#)). [Kember et al. \(2000\)](#) maintain reflective thinking incorporates four steps or procedures including *habitual action, understanding, reflection* and *critical reflection*. The first two steps seem superficial in nature and deal with automatic performance of an activity (i.e. habitual action) and thinking based on the knowledge available without any effort to analyse or evaluate that knowledge (i.e. understanding). The next step (i.e. reflection) consists of appraisal of assumptions and knowledge of how to approach and solve a problem while critical reflection (i.e. the last step) leads to paramount change in one's viewpoint ([Mezirow, 1991](#)).

Taking this importance of reflective thinking into account, [Dewey \(1933\)](#) suggests that before selecting a course of action or employing a belief system, reflective thinking should be considered in education. Following Dewey, [Baron \(1981\)](#) proposed a general model of reflective thinking which could serve education. The model comprised problem recognition, enumeration of possibilities, reasoning, revision, and evaluation, factors of crucial importance which he maintained could provide goals for education and a description of what a good thinker should do. However, he stated that the drawback of the model was that it could not provide us with the ways to achieve the goals. He further added that each parameter might be affected by beliefs, values, emotions, and habits; and that education for reflective thinking should deal with all these factors. Highlighting the importance of reflective thinking in education, [Mann, Gordon and MacLeod \(2009\)](#) also maintain that reflective practice integrated into the learning process, helps students to act and think professionally. These studies and other similar studies reveal the paramount role thinking skills in general and reflective thinking in particular might play in education.

Some experts in the field maintain that reflective thinking might influence learning (including foreign language learning). [Ertmer and Newby \(1996\)](#) for instance, maintain that expert learners reflect on the process of their learning and this reflection could develop their learning. They suggest that these learners apply reflective thinking skills to evaluate the results of their learning; hence, awareness of effective learning strategies can be increased. As a result, they can use these strategies to develop their learning.

Having highlighted the importance of reflection in learning, we should now delve into the studies which show how learners' reflective thinking skills are affected by various factors. [Ozcinar and Deryakulu \(2011\)](#), for instance, conducted a study to investigate the effect of reflection points in the video-cases and teacher participation in the online discussion groups on students' reflective thinking skills. The findings revealed adding reflection points to the video-cases had a significant positive effect on the students' reflective thinking. However, teacher participation in the online discussion groups did not have any significant effect on the students' reflective thinking. This might provide support for the premise that, individual factors (e.g., autonomy) might have more influence on reflective thinking than social factors (e.g., interaction), a

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