

On the Relationship between Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety, Willingness to Communicate and Scholastic Success among Iranian EFL Learners

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Abstract—The present study aimed at investigating the relationships among foreign language classroom anxiety, willingness to communicate, and the scholastic success of Iranian EFL learners. To this end, 74 senior and junior students majoring in English Literature and English Translation at Shahid Bahonar university of Kerman participated in this study. To collect the required data, the following questionnaires were applied: Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz et al. (1986) and the Willingness to Communicate Scale (MacIntyre et al., 2001) to measure the participants' frequency of time chosen to communicate in English. The participants' GPAs were also used as a measure of their scholastic success. The results of this study revealed that there was a significant negative relationship between foreign language classroom anxiety and willingness to communicate. The relationship between foreign language classroom anxiety and scholastic success was also found to be significantly negative. However, a significant positive relationship was found between willingness to communicate and scholastic success. This study recommends that language teachers identify the causes of language anxiety and try to avoid being one of them. They should also help their students boost their language achievement by increasing their willingness to communicate and decreasing their anxiety in language classes.

Index Terms—Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA), Willingness to Communicate (WTC), scholastic success, English as a Foreign Language (EFL)

I. INTRODUCTION

Research in the area of second or foreign language learning has acknowledged that many language learners face intrapersonal difficulties. Anxiety and lack of willingness to communicate in the L2 are two of them. As a matter of fact, foreign language anxiety prevents many people from achieving their desired goal in language learning.

Despite the fact that foreign language classroom anxiety and willingness to communicate are two important affective factors in determining one's L2 learning success, no study has focused specifically on the relationship among Iranian EFL learners' foreign language classroom anxiety, their willingness to communicate, and their scholastic success. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to bridge this gap by discovering the situation of language learning anxiety and its relationship with willingness to communicate and scholastic success among Iranian EFL students.

A. Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety

Anxiety as a psychological construct has been defined as "a state of apprehension, a vague fear that is only indirectly associated with an object" (Hilgard, Atkinson, & Atkinson, 1971, as cited in Tanveer, 2007, p. 3). Psychologists make a distinction between three categories of anxiety: trait anxiety, state anxiety, and situation-specific anxiety (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989). According to Zheng (2008), the differences between these three categories can be identified on a continuum from stability to transience. In other words, trait anxiety, which is related to a generally stable tendency to be nervous in a wide range of situations, forms one end, and "a moment-to-moment experience of transient emotional state" (Zheng, 2008, p. 2) forms the other.

Situational anxiety, representing the probability of becoming anxious in a particular type of situation, falls in the middle of the continuum. According to MacIntyre (1998), language anxiety is a form of situation-specific anxiety. Also, Horwitz et al. (1986) recognized that language anxiety is a situation-specific anxiety construct, "largely independent of the other types of anxiety" (p. 127).

Brown (2007) has defined language anxiety as "a feeling of worry experienced in relation to a foreign language, either trait or state in nature" (p. 384). MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) defined foreign language anxiety as "the feeling

of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language contexts, including speaking, listening, and learning" (p. 283).

The study of L2 anxiety began more than three decades ago, in the 1970s. From the beginning, there have been two different approaches to the study of anxiety in language learning: (1) the "anxiety transfer" approach, and (2) the "unique anxiety" approach (Toth, 2010, p. 15). These two approaches are based on different conceptualizations of L2 anxiety.

Based on Toth (2010), the assumption underlying the first approach is that L2 is the transfer of other forms of anxiety into the L2 learning context, in other words, it is assumed that those who are generally anxious or experience anxiety in certain situations tend to also feel anxious when learning or using a foreign language (Toth, 2010).

In contrast, the assumption behind the second approach is that language learning produces a unique type of anxiety. In this assumption, L2-related anxiety is seen as a situation-specific anxiety aroused by the experience of learning and using a second language. Of these two contrasting perspectives, the unique anxiety approach has turned out to be the more fruitful one.

B. Willingness to Communicate

A recent addition to the list of factors that have been identified as having an impact on learning a foreign language is the extent of learners' willingness to communicate (WTC). Willingness to communicate can be defined as "an underlying continuum representing the predisposition toward or away from communicating, given the choice" (MacIntyre, Baker, Clement, & Donovan, 2001, p. 538). Or, more simply put, a learner's "readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2" (MacIntyre, Clement, Dornyei, & Noels, 1998, p. 547). Willingness to communicate has also been defined as "the intention to initiate communication, given a choice" (Brown, 2007, p. 157).

In 1998, MacIntyre et al. proposed a multi-layered pyramid model of WTC. Their model distinguishes between stable factors (such as personality traits) and situation specific factors influencing communicative behavior such as desire to communicate with a specific person (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p. 547). So, the authors suggested that WTC depends on some factors such as "the degree of acquaintance between communicators, the number of people present, the formality of the situation, and the topic of discussion" (MacIntyre et al., 1998, cited in Leger & Storch, 2009, p. 270).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety and Willingness to Communicate

Horwitz et al. (1986) identified three components of FL anxiety: communication apprehension (CA), test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. They defined CA as "a type of shyness characterized by fear or anxiety about communicating with people" (p. 128). One of the most studied topics in the field of communication is the tendency of some people to avoid communicating orally (Toth, 2010). In fact, Many researchers have pointed out that "the skill producing most anxiety is speaking" (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991, cited in Tanveer, 2007, p. 11).

Philips (1992) carried out a research to study the relationship between language anxiety and oral performance. He found that the more anxious the students were, the lower performance they had in oral tests. So, language anxiety can have an effect on learners' willingness to communicate and their oral performance.

Park and Lee (1995) in their study of 132 Korean college students reported that "The higher anxious the students were about speaking English, the lower scores they gained on their oral performance" (p. 197).

Liu and Jackson (2008) investigated the relationship between Chinese EFL learners' unwillingness to communicate and their FL anxiety. For this purpose, 547 first-year undergraduate non-English majors were studied. The following conclusions were reached from this study:

First, "a learner who feared being negatively evaluated more tended to be more apprehensive about speaking and more anxious about tests" (Liu & Jackson, 2008, p. 10).

Second, most of the students were willing to participate in interpersonal conversations; however, because of some reasons such as anxiety or low English proficiency, many of them did not like to speak English in class and were apprehensive of speech communication. They also reported that there was a positive correlation between the students' unwillingness to communicate and their FL anxiety. Moreover, "their unwillingness to communicate and their FL anxiety were significantly correlated to their self-rated English proficiency and access to English" (Liu & Jackson, 2008, p. 12).

B. Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety and Scholastic Success

The effect of FL anxiety on L2 students' scholastic success has been widely explored. Atef-Vahid and Fard Kashani (2011) explored English language learning anxiety and its relationship with overall English achievement among 38 high-school students. The results of this study showed that "English learning anxiety has a significant moderate negative correlation with the English achievement of the students in this study" (Atef-Vahid & Fard Kashani, 2011, p. 37). Therefore, it can be maintained that "anxiety plays a debilitating role in language learning" (p. 37). Also, Kao and Craigie (2010) in their study of the relationship between foreign language anxiety and English achievement in

Taiwanese undergraduate English-major students "ascertained a negative relationship between anxiety and achievement" (p. 61).

Despite the fact that a large number of studies have shown that anxious language learners are less successful at language learning, in several other studies anxiety has been found to help improve performance in language learning (Ehrman & Oxford, 1995; Young, 1992). Neutral relationships have also been found. In a study by Chastain (1975), it was shown that the directions of the correlations between anxiety and language learning in three languages (French, German, and Spanish) were not consistent. Three levels of correlation, positive, negative, and near zero were found. Many researchers have attributed these inconsistent results to "the discrepancy of measurements used to assess second language anxiety and imprecise definitions of second language anxiety that do not take the uniqueness of second language learning into consideration" (e.g., Horwitz, 1986; Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989, cited in Chu, 2008, p. 28). In order to prevent such inconsistencies, Horwitz et al. (1986) defined foreign language anxiety as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (p. 128). They developed the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) in order to provide researchers with a standard instrument to measure foreign language anxiety, thus bringing about a clearer picture of its nature.

C. *Willingness to Communicate and Scholastic Success*

One of the researchers in this area has contended that "language learning is facilitated through meaningful interactions" (Chu, 2008, p.67). So, it is assumed that more interaction leads to more language development. Such a result was confirmed by Riasati and Noordin (2011). According to them, "the goal of modern language learning and teaching is to encourage learners to use language for meaningful and effective communication not only inside but also outside classroom" (Riasati & Noordin, 2011, p. 74). Some researchers (e.g., MacIntyre et al., 1998) have asserted that a basic objective of L2 teaching should be to develop learners' willingness to communicate, "because WTC is expected to facilitate the language learning process so that higher WTC among students leads to increased opportunity for practice in L2 and authentic language use" (Riasati & Noordin, 2011, p. 75). Dornyei (2003) argued that competence in the L2 is necessary but not sufficient. To wit, learners should be not only *able* to communicate but also *willing* to communicate in the L2 (Dornyei, 2003). Research has shown that learners' WTC influences how frequently they actively engage in communication in the L2 (Clement, Baker, & MacIntyre, 2003; Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide, & Shimizu, 2004). In addition, Chan and McCroskey (1987) found that higher scores on WTC scale were associated with students' more tendency to participate verbally in class.

Some other researchers (e.g. Baker & MacIntyre, 2000; MacIntyre, 1994; MacIntyre et al., 2001) showed that communicative competence and communication anxiety are two important predictors of WTC. In other words, high levels of competence together with low levels of anxiety would lead to greater WTC and consequently more communication in the L2. Also, other individual differences such as sex and age (MacIntyre, Baker, Clement, & Donovan, 2003), and attitude toward the international community (Yashima, 2002; Yashima et al., 2004) have been found to influence WTC.

The following research questions were posed to be answered:

1. Is there any significant relationship between students' foreign language classroom anxiety and their willingness to communicate?
2. Is there any significant relationship between students' foreign language classroom anxiety and their scholastic success?
3. Is there any significant relationship between students' willingness to communicate and their scholastic success?

III. METHODOLOGY

A. *Participants*

The sample used in this study consisted of 74 EFL students (50 females and 24 males) with an age range of 20 to 25 majoring at English literature and English translation at Kerman University. The rationale behind doing the study in an academic setting was due to its aim at finding out the relationship between EFL students' foreign language classroom anxiety, their willingness to communicate, and their scholastic success.

B. *Instruments*

The following questionnaires were utilized to obtain the required data:

1. **Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS)**

Students' foreign language classroom anxiety level was measured through using the FLCAS (see Appendix A) designed by Horwitz et al., (1986) to assess the degree to which a respondent feels anxious in a foreign language classroom. The questionnaire consists of 33 statements in the form of a Likert scale, ranging from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. In this scale 8 items are negative; therefore, their points were counted reversely. The sum of the points ranges from 33 to 165. The higher the total scores were, the more anxious the participants were considered to be. The internal consistency of the FLACS, as measured by Cronbach's alpha coefficient, was found to be .93, with the test-

retest reliability of .83. According to Horwitz et al. (1986), this scale can measure foreign language anxiety reliably and validly.

2. Willingness to Communicate Scale

L2 willingness to communicate was measured with the WTC scale (see Appendix B) adapted from MacIntyre, et al. (2001). The scale consists of 27 items assessing the frequency of time that students will choose to communicate in English in the classroom. The reliability coefficient for this questionnaire was found to be .92. Responses to the items were anchored on a 5-point Likert scale, at one end by *almost always willing* and at the other end by *almost never willing* and the scores range between 27 to 135. Higher scores indicated higher levels of WTC in English.

C. Data Collection Procedures

To gather data the FLCAS and the WTC scale were handed in to the participants simultaneously. Also, as the measurement of their scholastic success, the researchers asked them to write their GPAs. Moreover, to assure the exactitude of their self-reported scores, their GPAs were also extracted from their records. The participants were made certain that the collected data would be used only for research purposes. Finally, to explore any significant relationships among the sample's foreign language classroom anxiety, willingness to communicate, and their scholastic success, the collected data was entered into the SPSS software Version 15.0 to undergo Pearson product-moment correlation analysis.

IV. RESULTS

To answer the research questions of this study, Pearson Product Moment Correlation was used. The analysis of the collected data revealed that there are significant correlations between the variables of the study, namely foreign language classroom anxiety, willingness to communicate, and scholastic success. Tables 1 and 2 below present the descriptive statistics of the variables and the correlation matrix, respectively.

TABLE1.
THE DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF THE VARIABLES

	N	Range	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Variance
FLCA	74	87.00	47.00	134.00	84.13	17.44	304.36
WTC	74	84.00	51.00	135.00	85.32	18.83	354.66
GPA	74	6.04	13.46	19.50	16.38	1.31	1.73

TABLE2.
CORRELATION MATRIX OF THE VARIABLES

	FLCA	WTC	GPA
FLCA	1.00	-.360**	-.573**
WTC	-.360**	1.00	.399**
GPA	-.573**	.399**	1.00

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

As can be seen in Table 2, the Pearson's correlation coefficient between students' FLCA and their WTC is -0.36. Pearson's correlation coefficient between FLCA and GPA is -0.57. Moreover, Pearson's correlation coefficient between learners' WTC scores and their GPAs is 0.39.

According to the results, it can be concluded that there were statistically significant negative correlations between students' foreign language anxiety and their willingness to communicate, on one hand, and foreign language anxiety and their scholastic success, on the other hand. However, a significant positive relationship was found between the participants' willingness to communicate and their scholastic success.

V. DISCUSSION

The first research question of this study probed the relationship between EFL students' language anxiety and their willingness to communicate. The results indicated a significant negative correlation between learners' foreign language classroom anxiety and their willingness to communicate. Based on the present research results, if EFL learners' language anxiety is high, they are less willing to communicate in the L2 and if their anxiety decreases, their willingness to communicate increases. These findings are in line with those of the previous studies (e.g., Horwitz et al., 1986; Liu & Jackson, 2008) which stated that learners who were more anxious about language classroom tended to be more apprehensive about communicating in the L2. Similarly, Liu and Jackson's (2008) study found a positive correlation between students' FL anxiety and their unwillingness to communicate. They also reported that the participants' unwillingness to communicate and their foreign language anxiety were significantly correlated to their English language proficiency. Moreover, Atef-Vahid and Fard Kashani (2011) confirmed these findings, reporting that high levels of anxiety discourage students from participating in classroom activities such as oral communication.

The second research question asked whether there were any correlation between learners' foreign language anxiety and their scholastic success. As the results revealed, foreign language classroom anxiety does exist among EFL learners who participated in this study. The findings of the present study are in line with those found in previous studies (e.g.,

Atef-Vahid & Fard Kashani, 2011; Horwitz et al., 1986; Kao & Craigie, 2010) stating that those learners who have higher foreign language anxiety scores show less scholastic success than those who have lower anxiety scores. Many of the studies focusing on the construct of language anxiety show an inverse relationship between language anxiety and various measures of language achievement (e.g., Horwitz et al., 1986; Phillips, 1992). Similarly, the results of this study showed that foreign language anxiety has a significant negative correlation with the academic achievement of the participants. Therefore, it can be said that high levels of foreign language anxiety impede language learning and less anxious students have the tendency to be more successful language learners. This finding confirms MacIntyre and Gardner's (1991) claim that "as experience and proficiency increase, anxiety declines in a consistent manner" (p. 92).

Finally, regarding the relationship between EFL learners' willingness to communicate and their scholastic success, the participants' WTC and their academic achievement were found to be significantly correlated. It means that the EFL learners who were more willing to communicate in the L2 were more scholastically successful, and as their achievement increased their willingness to communicate also augmented. These findings are confirmed by the results reported by previous researchers. Chu (2008), for example, maintained that more meaningful interaction leads to more language achievement. Also, MacIntyre et al. (2003) asserted that willingness to communicate facilitates the language learning process, so that higher levels of willingness to communicate among learners bring about more opportunity for them to practice in the L2, thus more language development.

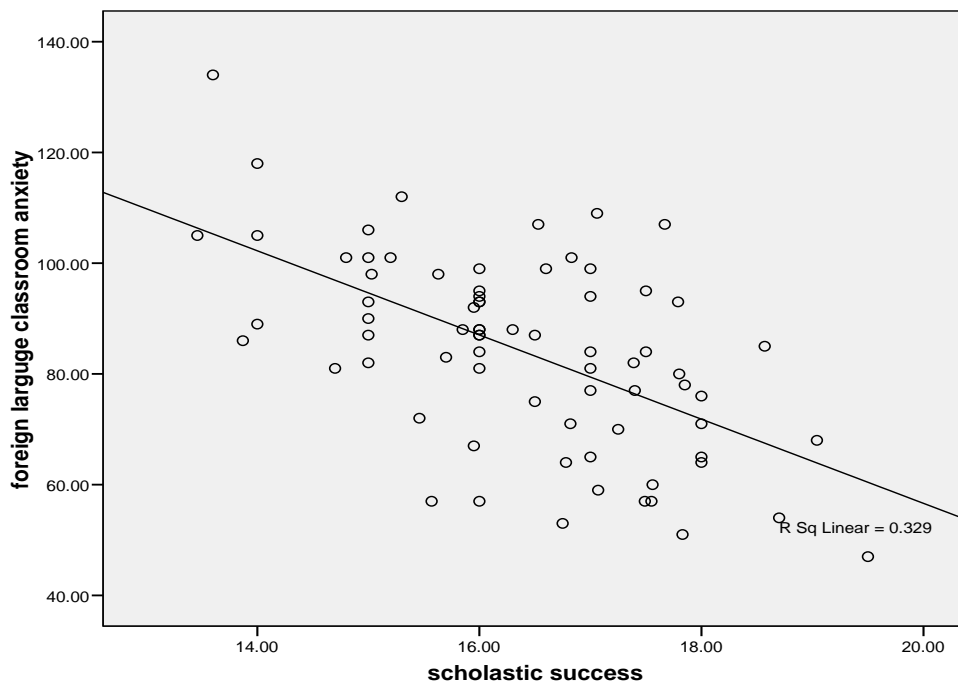
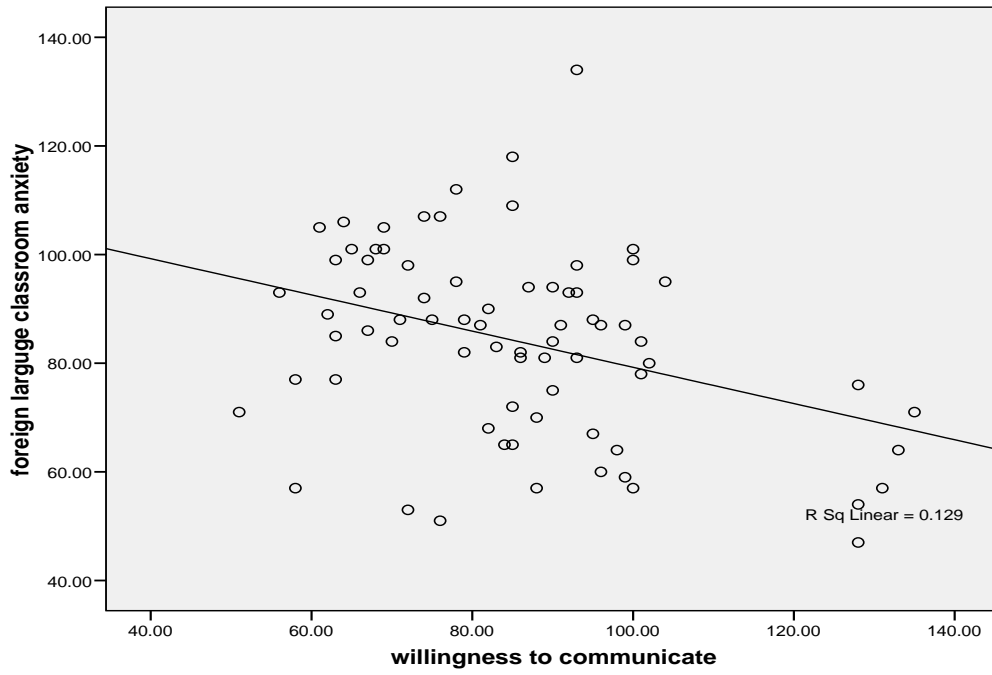
So, based on the results of both the present study and the previous researches, it can be concluded that (1) an increase in learners' foreign language classroom anxiety leads to decreased willingness to communicate, (2) higher levels of foreign language classroom anxiety are associated with lower levels of scholastic success, and (3) learners with more willingness to communicate are found to have higher levels of language achievement.

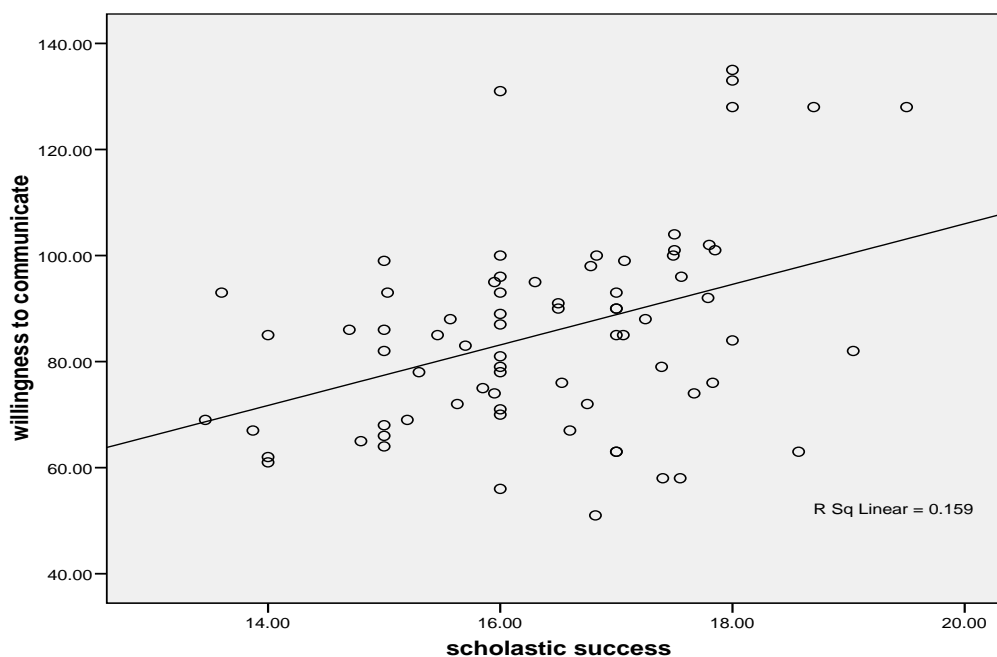
VI. CONCLUSION

The present study tried to determine how foreign language anxiety influences EFL students' willingness to communicate and their scholastic success. The relationship between learners' willingness to communicate and their academic achievement was also examined. It was concluded that a significant negative relationship exists between foreign language classroom anxiety and willingness to communicate, on the one hand, and foreign language classroom anxiety and scholastic success, on the other. Regarding the learners' willingness to communicate and their scholastic success, a significant positive relationship was found. Based on the findings of this study, it can be claimed that most of the EFL students of Bahonar University get nervous whenever they are in a situation that requires them to communicate in English in the classroom, implying that in educational contexts a great deal of attention should be paid to the construct of anxiety. In the same way, by paying attention to their anxiety, learners can boost their willingness to communicate and their ultimate success. In order to achieve such a goal, English teachers should get familiar with the construct of language anxiety; besides, they should try to identify the factors that create language anxiety for foreign language learners and find strategies that help the learners reduce their anxiety level. In this way, the students can increase their willingness to communicate and thus their eventual academic achievement will augment.

Although this research does not put forth generalizable results, it surely draws attention to the constructs of foreign language classroom anxiety and willingness to communicate. Language learning anxiety can be realized in every English classroom in Iran, so important measures should be taken to try to minimize its negative effects.

APPENDIX GRAPHS





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