

AN INVESTIGATION INTO FOREIGN LANGUAGE SPEAKING ANXIETY IN ENGLISH CLASSROOMS AT TERTIARY LEVEL

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Abstract: *Achieving fluency in English communication remains a challenge for many. Thus, this study aims to explore the extent of foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA) and identify the factors contributing to FLSA in English classrooms at Yersin University of Dalat, Vietnam (hereafter referred to as YUD). The study involved the participation of 200 students from YUD who are not majoring in English. The study's findings indicated that students experienced a high level of FLSA. The six primary factors identified as causing FLSA included Teachers' manner, Lack of language knowledge, Lack of confidence and preparation, Fear of negative attitude, Inability to express ideas, and Fear of making mistakes.*

Keywords: *Tertiary level, English learning, foreign language speaking anxiety, anxiety level*

1. Introduction

Language is essential for communication, allowing individuals to express thoughts, emotions, and ideas. Ur (1996) emphasized that speaking is a crucial language skill, as a learner is recognized as a speaker of that language. However, despite studying English for 8–10 years, many YUD students struggle with oral communication and interacting with native speakers. This raises questions about whether the issue stems from difficulty in language acquisition or external obstacles affecting oral performance.

While various international studies (e.g., Occhipinti, 2009; Zohra & Khaoula, 2012; Landström, 2015; Abedini, 2017; Pabro-Maquidato, 2021) have examined speaking anxiety, research in the Vietnamese context remains scarce. Few studies (e.g., Luu, 2011; Nguyen & Tran, 2015; Tran, 2022) have explored this issue, and no literature specifically addresses the levels of English speaking anxiety at YUD. This study aims to fill that gap by assessing the degree of anxiety among YUD students and identifying key factors affecting their English speaking skills. Ultimately, it seeks to provide insights that can help students mitigate the effects of speaking anxiety in their language-learning journey.

The present study is guided by the two following research questions:

Question 1. To what extent are the students anxious in their English-speaking class at YUD?

Question 2. What factors affect students' anxiety in the English-speaking class at YUD?

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2. Literature review

2.1. Foreign language (FL) anxiety

Oxford (1999) shows that language anxiety can be simply understood as a passing state of fear which normally appears when someone has to use a second language. Similarly, Horwitz et al. (1986) were the first to conceptualize FL anxiety as a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors. These items are linked to the system in which people learn foreign languages and there are three kinds of anxiety including communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation to help teachers understand the nature of anxiety clearly. Their breakthrough study shed light on the concept of FL anxiety and thus led to much more prolific studies on language anxiety conducted subsequently [8]. What is more, MacIntyre (1999) stated that anxiety is referred as a negative emotional reaction and being of worries when studying the second language.

2.2. The impact of anxiety on speaking skill

According to Horwitz et al. (1986) “anxiety is a group of feelings of blocking, unsafe and discomfort, combined with the process of learning English and language learning is referred as anxiety - breeding business” (p.125). Similarly, Tercan and Dikilitaş (2015) stated that anxiety is a feeling that could cause decreased and ineffective levels of learning among students. Anxiety has an effect on learning language, especially speaking skill. If students are worried so much, they will have difficulty in concentrating on producing the output of speaking English. Anxiety has been viewed as a highly detrimental element in foreign language acquisition, particularly in mastering the spoken aspect of the language. Anxiety is considered as the main factor in speaking English [20].

2.3. Speaking anxiety (SA)

According to Rachman (1998), anxiety is one of the most beetling and general feelings that uneasy suspense. In addition, according to Young (1991), speaking anxiety relates to a multi-faceted reality that has an effect on learners in terms of culture, characteristics, and classroom environment. Horwitz et al. (1986) stated that “Anxiety is the feeling of force, nervousness, worry, and uneasiness with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system” (p.125). FLSA is that learners feel anxious particularly when they speak English in the classroom. Learners feel shy; their hearts beat quickly; their faces turn red. They are too nervous to express their ideas. All those symptoms make learners not be able to communicate.

2.4. Levels of Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety

The levels of Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety (FLSA) are categorized into High, Moderate, and Low. Students with high FLSA often feel intense fear and nervousness when speaking a foreign language, leading to avoidance behaviors like not participating in class or avoiding speaking tasks. This high anxiety can significantly hinder language performance and overall learning outcomes [4]. Moderate anxiety is quite common among

language learners and can sometimes be motivating, encouraging students to prepare better and engage more in learning activities [3]. However, if not managed well, it can also cause discomfort and negatively affect performance. Low anxiety levels are typically linked to better performance and a more positive attitude towards language learning. Students with low anxiety are more likely to engage in speaking activities and take risks in using the language, which can enhance their learning experience [4]. The interpretation scale which was based on the study of Mahmud (2017), about the effects and problems of speaking anxiety in Bengali Medium classrooms of Bangladesh as table below:

Table 1. Classification of FLSA level

FLSA Level	Mean scores
No anxiety	1 - 2.25
Low anxiety	2.26 - 3.0
Moderate anxiety	3.01 - 3.75
High anxiety	3.76 - 5.0

Source: Mahmud (2017)

In summary, FL anxiety can be understood as a complex psychological phenomenon that relates to feeling, self-confidence, beliefs, behaviors, and perceptions in foreign language learning.

2.5. Conceptual framework of the study

Based on the literature review and the aims of the study, the conceptual framework of the current study is displayed in the figure below.

The figure 2.1 below shows that all the main ideas of the study are presented.

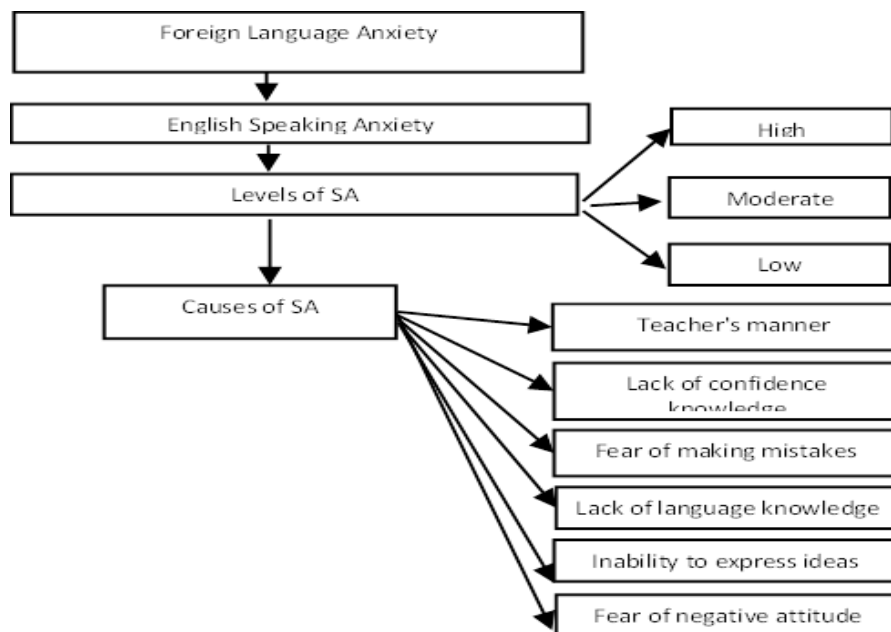


Figure Error! No text of specified style in document..1. Conceptual Framework of the Study

2.6. Research methods

The study at YUD in Vietnam focused on 200 freshmen from a pool of 1,750 non-English major students, selected through convenience sampling. Data was collected using a closed-ended questionnaire and a semi-structured interview, adapted from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). Both quantitative and qualitative methods were applied, with SPSS used for questionnaire analysis and content analysis for student interviews. Interview participants were coded from S1 to S20, and qualitative data was categorized by themes.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Results of the study

3.1.1. The students' levels of anxiety in the English-speaking class

The table below presents the overall levels of SA among the students.

Table 2: The distribution the levels of SA

No	Statements	Mean	Std. D	Level of SA
1	I feel very anxious when I speak English if I do not prepare in advance.	3.92	.072	High
2	I feel shy and nervous when I speak English in front of other students.	3.68	.079	Moderate
3	I feel anxious when I communicate with the teachers and friends in English in class.	3.80	.081	High
4	I feel nervous when I cannot understand what the teacher is saying.	3.83	.080	High
5	I feel nervous when I raise my hand to answer the teacher's question.	3.42	.086	Moderate
6	My heart will pound, if teacher calls me to answer the question.	3.44	.094	Moderate
7	I feel anxious while I am waiting to speak English.	3.60	.092	Moderate
8	I feel nervous when our group members ask me to represent the group to talk.	3.88	.081	High
9	I feel nervous when I attend an oral English examination in class.	3.82	.073	High
10	I am afraid that I will fail in the final oral English examination.	4.07	.090	High

As indicated in Table 1, six situations (items 1,3,4,8,9,10) make the students seriously anxious and four situations (items 2,5,6,7) cause moderate anxiety. The results of the questionnaire showed that students feel very anxious in speaking classes. High anxiety accounts for 60% and moderate anxiety accounts for 40%. Likewise, the outcomes of the interviews aligned with the questionnaire results, indicating that a significant number of participants acknowledged the impact of anxiety on foreign language acquisition.

S1 expressed *"I think most of the students are anxious when they speak English with the teacher or when they stand in front of the class to present their opinions about a topic..."*

In terms of the levels of speaking anxiety, 12 students reported high levels of SA, while 8 students had moderate levels. For example:

S16 expressed *"I believe that many students experience the high level of FLSA, some better students get the lower level of FLSA"* and S2 expressed *".....I think that my level of FLSA is high, because I do not believe by myself and I feel my linguistic knowledge is not good..."*

Regarding the feeling of the students when they speak English, most students expressed that they felt nervous, unconfident and their faces turned red when they speak English, while some other students wrote that they felt so shy even they do not have the ability to express their ideas in speaking English. For example:

(S1) answered *".....I feel extremely nervous while speaking English..."*; *"...I am nervous when I speak English in classroom...(S15)"*; and (S11) expressed that *"...I feel worried, so there are some sentences that I do not know how to speak..."*

However, some students had opposite feelings. For example:

(S11) revealed that *"I feel confident when I speak English"*; or (S2) said that *"I love English, so when speaking English, I feel excited but sometimes I also feel anxious"*. Being asked about the effects of preparation in advance on the level of anxiety, most of students said that if they do not have prepared in advance, they will get anxious when they start speaking. For example:

S10 expressed: *"I usually ask my students to prepare everything at home before coming to class. For example, I have to ask them to write ideas. If they have nothing to talk in class. They don't dare to raise their hands when I ask them..."*

Regarding the students' feelings in oral examinations, 17 students said that the midterm tests and the final tests in the oral form usually make me nervous. For example:

S7 expressed: *".... we have two oral exams in every semester. Usually, the teacher gives us some questions to prepare in advance; but while I am waiting for my turn, I get nervous. When I answer the teacher's questions, I sometimes forget what I have prepared at home."* *".....I'm always afraid that I will fail the oral exam...(S8)"*.

3.1.2. Factors causing students' speaking anxiety in the English-speaking class

Data collected from the questionnaire is presented in two tables below corresponding to the six categories including Teachers' manner, Lack of language knowledge, Lack of confidence and preparation, Fear of negative attitudes, Inability to express ideas and Fear of making mistakes.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of mean score's average of each category

No	Categories	Mean	No. of items
1	Teachers' manner	2.148	3
2	Lack of language knowledge	3.884	5
3	Lack of confidence and preparation	3.564	4
4	Fear of negative attitudes	3.050	2
5	Inability to express idea factor	3.840	3
6	Fear of making mistakes	3.475	2

Table 4. Factors causing of SA reported by students

No	Statements	Mean	Std. D
Teachers' manner			
1	My English teacher often interrupts me to correct the mistakes.	2.66	1.41
2	My English teacher creates a stressful atmosphere in the English class.	2.17	1.41
3	My English teacher does not encourage me to learn English in class.	1.61	1.99
Lack of language knowledge			
4	I am a little afraid of speaking English because my vocabulary knowledge is not good enough.	3.90	1.03
5	I am a little afraid of speaking English because my grammar knowledge is not good enough.	3.85	1.01
6	I am afraid that my teachers and friends don't understand me because of my wrong pronunciation.	3.78	1.12
7	I am afraid of speaking English because my English proficiency is low.	3.87	1.16
8	When I want to speak a sentence in English, I do not how to arrange position of the words.	4.01	1.09
Lack of confidence and preparation			
9	I am unconfident about my voice, accent, pronunciation.	3.70	1.13
10	My face turns red and I cannot remember anything to communicate.	3.08	1.26
11	I get stressed when communicating with people.	3.55	1.12
12	If there is not any preparation in advance, I feel nervous to speak English.	3.92	1.10
Fear of making mistakes			

13	I am not confident in communicating English because I am afraid that I will make mistakes.	3.58	1.18
14	I am afraid that the peers and teacher will be confused when I make mistakes.	3.37	1.43
Inability to express idea factor			
15	I feel nervous when speaking in front of others because I'm afraid I would speak nothing.	3.60	1.16
16	I do not know how to express my ideas so that everyone can understand easily.	3.99	1.02
17	I'm nervous because I don't know what to say or even if I know what to say, I can't switch it into English or speak it smoothly.	3.92	1.09
Fear of negative attitudes			
18	I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me while I am speaking English.	2.93	1.26
19	I am fearful of losing face if my teacher and friends have negative attitudes towards my poor speaking.	3.16	1.36

Table 3 highlights that students' biggest source of speaking anxiety (SA) is difficulty with sentence structure in English (Mean = 4.01). Their inability to express ideas clearly also significantly contributes to foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA). Other key factors include uncertainty about what to say, difficulty translating thoughts into English, and anxiety when speaking without preparation (Mean = 3.92). Many students attribute their SA to fear of speaking due to insufficient vocabulary, while low proficiency is another major concern (Mean = 3.87).

Interview data revealed several key factors contributing to students' anxiety, including the teacher's manner in language classrooms, lack of language knowledge, low confidence, inadequate preparation, shyness, fear of making mistakes, difficulty expressing ideas, and concern about negative attitudes. For example:

S1 stated *“Motivation is one of the other important factor causing SA, if you have the motivation to study English, you think that you will have a good and stable job in the future if you are good at English or when you are good at English, people will respect and admire you; at that time you will try your best to practice English all the time and it is easy to get success in learning English”*.

The students also mentioned the topic used for speaking. They prefer interesting topics for speaking. For example:

S14 said *“In my opinion, the teacher should give us the interesting and hot topics in speaking lessons. It is very useful because many students know those topics, they have the motivation to debate and take part in speaking activities, the class will vivid and exciting”*.

Regarding to the strategies to reduce speaking anxiety, S10 revealed that *“teachers should use active teaching methodologies and aids such as radio, telephone, records and visual materials such as TV, video, DVD, pictures...etc. to motivate students to learn as well as to help students remember the lesson longer and quicker”*.

It is evident that the results from the interviews align with the majority of the questionnaire findings. Both teachers and students identified numerous factors that contribute to speaking anxiety in their classes.

3.2. Discussion

3.2.1 The levels of Speaking Anxiety

Anxiety strongly affects foreign language acquisition, especially speaking skills. This study found that 60% of students experienced high speaking anxiety, while 40% reported moderate levels. Such anxiety can hinder language proficiency and performance. These results support Horwitz et al.'s (1986) theory that anxious students fear speaking in a foreign language, impacting academic achievement. They also align with Alshahrani (2016), who found moderate speaking anxiety among English learners, and Tran (2022), who noted high anxiety despite modern teaching methods.

Students felt most anxious in situations like impromptu speaking, presenting in front of the class, not understanding the teacher, or acting as a group spokesperson—similar to findings by Toubot, Seng, and Abdullah (2018) in Libya. Oral exams also triggered anxiety, likely due to academic or parental pressure.

3.2.2 Factors causing Speaking Anxiety

This study identified major factors contributing to foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA), including lack of language knowledge, confidence, and preparation; fear of mistakes and negative attitudes; difficulty expressing ideas; and teacher behavior. The primary cause was insufficient linguistic knowledge—students struggled with grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, which hindered participation and self-expression. This anxiety was often rooted in low English proficiency from high school. The second key factor was difficulty expressing ideas due to low confidence and poor word choice. These findings align with studies by Shabani (2012), Pal (2015), Toubot, Seng and Abdullah (2018), and Tran (2022), all of which emphasize linguistic knowledge as central to FLSA.

Additional causes included rigid classroom environments, low motivation, unsuitable speaking topics, poor teacher-student rapport, and fear of judgment. These results support Horwitz et al.'s (1986) view that academic and social contexts can trigger language anxiety. Teachers may fail to foster supportive environments or provide constructive feedback, further increasing student anxiety.

4. Conclusion and Implications

This research highlights the varying levels and causes of Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety (FLSA) among students at YUD, emphasizing their struggles with English proficiency due to limited practice opportunities. Overcoming this lack of confidence requires consistent effort and practice. The study is valuable for improving English teaching in Vietnamese higher education, particularly at YUD. It recommends that FL teachers refine their attitudes and feedback approaches, create supportive environments, select engaging speaking topics, and diversify teaching methods. Students are encouraged to enhance their language skills and practice speaking, including

interacting with foreigners, to boost confidence. The administrative board should invest in resources and student support for foreign language education. While the study provides helpful insights, further research at other Vietnamese universities is needed to deepen the understanding of SA levels and contributing factors.

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