

Undergraduates' Speaking Anxiety in English as Second Language (ESL) Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

Many students exhibit fear of speaking in English in the English as Second Language (ESL) classrooms. Additionally, there are limited studies in this area of concern among the undergraduates in Sarawak. Hence, this study aimed to identify the students' anxiety level towards speaking English based on four components, namely communication apprehension, test anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and comfort in using English in the classrooms. This study also examined whether there is any significant difference in the level of anxiety in terms of gender. A total of 592 undergraduates from two public institutions of higher learning in Sarawak were involved in this study. A Public Speaking Class Anxiety Scale (PSCAS) by Yaikhong and Usaha (2012) was adopted in this study to measure anxiety in the ESL speaking classes. The results gathered through the questionnaires were analysed using SPSS package to determine the students' speaking anxiety levels and the significant difference in the level of anxiety in speaking English in terms of gender. The findings revealed that undergraduates experienced an average level of speaking anxiety. T-test analysis of the findings in the study also portrayed that generally the female undergraduates experienced higher speaking anxiety as compared to the male undergraduates in all the four factors of ESL speaking anxiety. Among the four factors of speaking anxiety, only the factor of 'comfort in using English' in the classrooms showed a statistically significant difference between male and female undergraduates. Findings of this study would be significant as knowing the level of anxiety among the undergraduates in ESL classrooms will provide the basis for educators to



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plan better strategies or techniques to help students in overcoming their English speaking anxiety and to improve their oral English proficiency. It will also help students to be aware of their own speaking anxiety level so that they can seek for measures to overcome their speaking anxiety.

Keywords: *Speaking anxiety; ESL classrooms; gender; anxiety level; undergraduates*

INTRODUCTION

English is a second language which is a compulsory subject for students in Malaysian schools and higher education. Hence, students have about 11 years of English learning experiences in primary and secondary schools. However, Malaysia Employers Federation (MEF) Executive Director, Datuk Shamsuddin Bardan highlighted that there are still many Malaysian students who cannot speak English upon leaving secondary school (The Star, January 21, 2017). He addressed that the problem of graduates' incompetence to converse in English has resulted in high unemployment rate in Malaysia. Some could hardly utter a grammatically correct sentence due to poor speaking skills in the language.

Language learning and testing require the four skills namely, listening, speaking, writing and reading and numerous studies identified speaking as the most anxiety provoking skill when it comes to language learning (MacIntyre, 1995; Price, 1991). Speaking anxiety is also a general phenomenon encountered by majority of second language learners affecting both language and educational achievements (Said Muhammad Khan, 2015). One of the challenges in English language learning is the existence of anxiety (Darmi & Albion, 2012; Rafek, Ramlli & Hasni, 2015) which especially affects the speaking skills of the students.

Majority of the English proficiency courses in institutions of higher learning require students to undertake a variety of speaking activities designed to develop communication skills such as role play and oral presentation which can be individual, in pairs or in groups. Most of the tasks and activities conducted are discipline-based with an emphasis on oral communication. Given that, the undergraduates may encounter certain level of speaking anxiety when it comes to English speaking tasks. This

matter is of much concern among educators as well as the society because oral fluency in English is deemed important to relay correct messages and it would be useful for students' future working world when dealing with clients. Thus far, limited studies have investigated this area of concern among the undergraduate students in Sarawak. It is, therefore, pertinent to identify the students' anxiety level towards speaking English as a second language, and to examine whether there is any significant difference in the level of anxiety in terms of gender. Components such as communication apprehension, test anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and comfort in using English in the classrooms are among the factors that were studied in this study.

METHOD OF THE STUDY

This study used quantitative research design and it is part of a study which examined the factors that contributed to speaking anxiety among undergraduate students in ESL classroom (Sim, Yeo & Lau, 2018). Survey method was utilised to collect data for this study. The study involved 592 Degree undergraduates from two public institutions of higher learning in Sarawak.

The data were obtained via questionnaire. The questionnaire was adapted from Public Speaking Class Anxiety Scale (PSCAS) by Yaikhong and Usaha (2012). Items in the PSCAS instrument were adopted and adapted from previous scales: Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) by Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986); Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24) and Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety (PRPSA-34) by McCroskey (1970); and Speaker Anxiety Scale (SA) by Clevenger, Halvorson and Bledsoe (1992) based on their critical appraisals. The PSCAS by Yaikhong and Usaha (2012) was adjusted from '1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4=Agree and 5=Strongly Agree' to become '1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Mildly Agree, 4=Agree and 5=Strongly Agree' in this present study. A reliability test was conducted to check the consistency of the ESL speaking anxiety instrument which was adapted from Public Speaking Class Anxiety Scale (PSCAS) developed by Yaikhong and Usaha (2012) and it was found to be highly reliable.

The data were collected and analysed through descriptive statistics (means, frequencies, percentages and standard deviations) by using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) to identify the level of English speaking anxiety among the students. Inferential statistics (Independent-Samples T-Test) was used to examine whether there is any significant difference in the level of anxiety in speaking English in terms of gender.

RESULTS AND DATA ANALYSIS

Students' Anxiety Level Towards Speaking English Based on Four Components – Communication Apprehension, Test Anxiety, Fear of Negative Evaluation, and Comfort in Using English

The students' speaking anxiety levels were categorised based on Baharuddin's (2009) three levels of anxiety as shown in Table 1. According to Baharuddin (2009), students can be categorised into 3 levels of language anxiety. Table 1 exhibits mean 3.67-5.00 (high anxiety level – HLA), mean 2.34-3.66 (moderate language anxiety – MLA) and mean 1.00 – 2.33 (low language anxiety – LLA).

Table 1: Mean of Students' level of English Language Speaking Anxiety

Speaking Anxiety	Mean
High	3.67-5.00
Average	2.34-3.66
Low	1.00-2.33

Findings of this study revealed that the ESL undergraduates experienced average level of speaking anxiety. This is manifested in Table 2 which displayed the overall mean score of 3.31, signifying that the undergraduates from the two public institutions of higher learning in the state of Sarawak are experiencing a moderate level of ESL speaking anxiety.

Table 2: Overall Mean of Level of Speaking Anxiety among ESL Undergraduates

Item	Mean
I am never sure of myself while I am speaking English.	3.46
I start to panic when I have to speak English without a preparation in advance.	3.64
In a speaking class, I can get so nervous that I forget things I know.	3.62
I feel confident while I am speaking English.	3.33
I get nervous and confused when I am speaking English.	3.39
I am afraid that other students will laugh at me while I am speaking English.	3.31
I get nervous when the English teacher asks me to speak English which I have prepared in advance.	3.19
I have no fear of speaking English.	3.26
I can feel my heart pounding when I am going to be called on.	3.57
I feel relaxed while I am waiting to speak English.	3.29
It embarrasses me to volunteer to go out first to speak English.	3.40
I face the prospect of speaking English with confidence.	2.69
Certain parts of my body feel very tense and rigid while I am speaking English.	3.32
I feel anxious while I am waiting to speak English.	3.46
I dislike using my voice and body expressively while I am speaking English.	2.82
I have trouble to coordinate my movements while I am speaking English.	3.14
Even if I am very well prepared, I feel anxious about speaking English.	3.40
Overall Level of Anxiety towards speaking English among the undergraduates.	3.31

A closer analysis of the four major components of ESL Speaking Anxiety as shown in Table 3 demonstrated that communication apprehension ranked the highest ($m=3.37$), followed by fear of negative evaluation ($m=3.36$), test anxiety ($m=3.35$) and comfort in using English in ESL classrooms ($m=3.14$).

Table 3: Students' Level of ESL Speaking Anxiety

ESL Speaking Anxiety	Mean	Level
Fear of Negative Evaluation	3.36	Moderate
Comfort in using English in ESL Classrooms	3.14	Moderate
Test Anxiety	3.35	Moderate
Communication Apprehension	3.37	Moderate

The findings of this study which revealed that majority of the undergraduates from the public institutions studied are experiencing moderate level of speaking anxiety coincide with the findings in previous studies done by Çağatay (2015); Chan, Abdullah and Yusof (2012); Abdullah and Abdul Rahman (2010); and Lim and Budin (2014). Moreover, results in Siew's study bore similar findings that the ESL undergraduates in general experienced moderate level of speaking anxiety. Most of the undergraduates in this study manifested moderate level of speaking anxiety for all the four components (Communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, test anxiety and comfort in using English in the classrooms).

On another note, the finding that most of the undergraduates in this study experienced moderate level of ESL speaking anxiety is in contrast to findings yielded in previous studies done by Bunrueng (2008); and Wan Mustapha, Ismail, Ratan Singh and Elias (2010) which found that the undergraduates exhibited high level of speaking anxiety. According to McCroskey, Booth-Butterfield and Payne (1989), high level of anxiety could hinder the interaction between teacher and learners which is extremely imperative to productive teaching and learning of the target language. Thus, it can be implied from the findings in this study that the moderate level of ESL speaking anxiety serves as a motivation for the undergraduates to strive harder to learn the target language.

Significant Difference in the Level of Anxiety in Terms of Gender

Generally, findings in Table 4 portrayed that the female undergraduates experienced higher speaking anxiety as compared to the male undergraduates in all the four factors of ESL speaking anxiety, that is 'Fear of evaluation' (M= 3.3202, F= 3.3905), 'Comfort in using English in the Classrooms' (M= 3.0289, F= 3.2114), 'Test Anxiety' (M= 3.2917, F= 3.3830), and 'Communication Apprehension' (M= 3.3299, F= 3.3883). As demonstrated in Table 4, among the four factors of speaking anxiety, only the factor of comfort in using English in the classrooms showed a statistically significant difference between male and female undergraduates ($t=-2.986$, $df=590$, $p<.05$). Besides, more female undergraduates ($m=3.2114$, $SD=.72308$, $n= 216$) were more comfortable

and confident to use English in the classrooms as compared to male undergraduates ($m=3.0289$, $SD=.70301$, $n=376$).

Table 4: t-Test results for ESL Speaking Anxiety and Gender

Factors causing Speaking Anxiety	Mean	Std. Deviation	Levene's Test for Equality of Variance		t-test for Equality of Means		
			F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig.
Fear of Evaluation	3.3202 (M) 3.3905 (F)	1.00449 .90196	6.99	.008	-.850	409.87	.396
Comfort in using English in the Classrooms	3.0289 (M) 3.2114 (F)	.70301 .72308	.010	.920	- 2.986	590.00	.003*
Test Anxiety	3.2917 (M) 3.3830 (F)	1.07776 .99177	3.20	.074	- 1.045	590.00	.297
Communication Apprehension	3.3299 (M) 3.3883 (F)	1.01199 .88005	8.24	.004	-.709	399.19	.479

* $p<0.05$

A deeper analysis on the factor of comfort in using English in the classrooms as portrayed in Table 5 found that there are significant differences between male and female undergraduates in terms of 'no fear of speaking English' ($t=-2.202$, $df=590$, $p<.05$) and 'I face the prospect of speaking English confidently in the future' ($t=-2.034$, $df=590$, $p<.05$). As portrayed in Table 5, more female undergraduates ($m=3.35$, $SD=1.161$, $n=376$) have no fear of speaking English as compared to male undergraduates ($m=3.12$, $SD=1.263$, $n=216$). This indicates that female undergraduates are braver and more courageous to speak English as compared to their male counterparts.

Additionally, more female undergraduates ($m=2.76$, $SD=1.143$, $n=376$) than male undergraduates ($m=2.56$, $SD=1.143$, $n=216$) anticipated that they can speak English confidently in the future. The female undergraduates seemed to be more relaxed in speaking English ($m=3.35$, $SD=1.092$, $n=376$) as compared to the males ($m=3.20$, $SD=1.154$, $n=216$). This shows that female undergraduates as compared to the males have more confidence in their ability to converse well in English in the future. Likewise, the females are more relaxed and calmer when articulating in English.

Table 5: t-Test results for Comfort in using English in Class and Gender

Comfort in using English in Classrooms	Mean	Std. Deviation	Levene's Test for Equality of Variance		t-test for Equality of Means		
			F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig.
Confident while speaking English in class	3.23 (M) 3.39 (F)	1.221 1.070	8.333	.004	-1.599	401. 848	.11 1
No fear of speaking English	3.12 (M) 3.35 (F)	1.263 1.161	2.064	.151	-2.202	590	.02 8
Relaxed while speaking English	3.20 (M) 3.35 (F)	1.154 1.092	1.131	.288	-1.541	590	.12 4
Anticipate ability to speak English confidently in future	2.56 (M) 2.76 (F)	1.143 1.143	.008	.929	-2.034	590	.04 2

*p<0.05

A closer analysis on the factor of ‘fear of negative evaluation’ as shown in Table 6 disclosed that there is a significant difference between male and female undergraduates in terms of the feeling of their heart pounding when they were going to be called to speak English ($t=-2.124$, $df=590$, $p<.05$). Moreover, more female undergraduates ($m=3.64$, $SD=1.105$, $n=376$) felt their heart pounding when they were going to be called to speak English as compared to male undergraduates ($m=3.44$, $SD=1.085$, $n=216$). This indicates that generally, females are more nervous and emotionally stressed as compared to their male counterparts.

As manifested in Table 7, upon a careful analysis on the factor of ‘communication apprehension’, it is revealed that there is a significant difference between male and female undergraduates in terms of their dislike in using their voice and body expressively while they are speaking English ($t=-2.324$, $df=590$, $p<.05$). Additionally, more male undergraduates ($m=2.96$, $SD=1.093$, $n=216$) dislike using their voice and body expressively while speaking English as compared to female undergraduates ($m=2.74$, $SD=1.068$, $n=376$). This indicates that male

undergraduates are less expressive as compared to their female counterparts while speaking English.

Table 6: t-Test results for Fear of Negative Evaluation

Fear of Negative Evaluation	Mean	Std. Deviation	Levene's Test for Equality of Variance		t-test for Equality of Means		
			F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
I am afraid that other students will laugh at me while I am speaking	3.27 (M) 3.33 (F)	1.358 1.276	1.673	.196	-.525	590	.599
I can feel my heart pounding when I am going to be called on.	3.44 (M) 3.64 (F)	1.085 1.105	.648	.421	-2.124	590	.034*
It embarrasses me to volunteer to go out first to speak English.	3.36 (M) 3.43 (F)	1.120 1.138	.000	.992	-.667	590	.505
Certain parts of my body feel very tense and rigid while I am speaking	3.26 (M) 3.35 (F)	1.136 1.159	.159	.690	-.908	590	.364
I feel anxious while I am waiting to speak English.	3.36 (M) 3.52 (F)	1.188 1.095	3.576	.059	-1.653	590	.099
I have trouble to coordinate my movements while I am speaking	3.23 (M) 3.08 (F)	1.162 1.148	.044	.833	1.513	590	.131

*p<0.05

In general, findings in this study demonstrated that the female undergraduates experienced a higher level of speaking anxiety as compared to the male undergraduates in all the four factors of ESL speaking anxiety, that is 'Fear of evaluation', 'Comfort in using English in the Classrooms', 'Test Anxiety' and 'Communication Apprehension'.

These findings are substantiated by findings from earlier studies by Hsu (2012) and Siew (2014) in which it was found that in general, female students exhibited a higher level of speaking anxiety than male students.

Table 7: t-Test results for Communication Apprehension

Communication Apprehension	Mean	Std. Deviation	Levene's Test for Equality of Variance		t-test for Equality of Means		
			F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
I start to panic when I have to speak English without a preparation in advance	3.52 (M) 3.70 (F)	1.246 1.122	7.346	.007	-1.769	410. 849	.078
In a speaking class, I can get so nervous that I forget things I know.	3.50 (M) 3.68 (F)	1.201 1.105	5.545	.019	-1.769	418. 244	.078
I get nervous and confused when I am speaking English.	3.33 (M) 3.42 (F)	1.173 1.098	2.127	.145	-.932	590	.352
I dislike using my voice and body expressively while I am speaking English.	2.96 (M) 2.74 (F)	1.093 1.068	.136	.713	2.324	590	.020

*p<0.05

Overall, among the four factors of speaking anxiety, it was found that only the factor of comfort in using English in the classrooms showed a statistically significant difference between male and female undergraduates. The female undergraduates who are braver and more courageous to speak English, anticipated that they can speak English confidently in the future, and are more relaxed in speaking English than the male undergraduates. This could be due to the fact that generally, males are shyer to speak English in class with majority of the students being females. This indicates that female undergraduates are calmer and

more daring in interacting using English. These findings are contrary to previous studies by Çağatay (2015), Hsu (2012), Luo (2014) and Siew (2014) which found that female students have higher anxiety than male students and the former were shy when speaking in front of the class. Nevertheless, more research on this aspect needs to be conducted to confirm the findings.

In addition, the findings in this study manifested that for the factor on fear of negative evaluation, there is a significant difference between male and female undergraduates in terms of feeling that their hearts were pounding when they sensed that they were going to be called upon to speak English. More female as compared to male undergraduates felt that their heart pounded when they were called to speak English. These findings are similar to the findings from studies by Lim and Budin (2014), and Awang, Vitasari, Muhammad Nubli, and Othman (2010), which found that more female students as compared to male students feared negative evaluation. This shows that female undergraduates in this study are more emotionally stressed as compared to the male counterparts.

With regard to the factor of communication apprehension, it was found that there is a significant difference between male and female undergraduates in terms of their view of using their voice and body expressively while they are speaking English. More male as opposed to female undergraduates were found to dislike using their voice and body expressively while speaking English. This indicates that male undergraduates are less expressive as compared to their female counterparts while speaking English. In other words, unlike the female undergraduates, the male undergraduates were more stressed in having to express themselves via body gestures when speaking. The reverse of this finding was found in a study done by Lim and Budin (2014) which revealed that girls experienced higher communication apprehension than the boys.

CONCLUSION

This study on undergraduates' speaking anxiety in ESL classrooms showed that they experienced an average level of speaking anxiety. The T-test analysis also portrayed that generally the female undergraduates

experienced higher speaking anxiety as compared to the male undergraduates in all the four factors of ESL speaking anxiety. Among the four factors of speaking anxiety, only the factor of 'comfort in using English in the classrooms' showed a statistically significant difference between male and female undergraduates. The findings from this study serve as a guide for educators to conduct effective teaching methods in order to help students to overcome their speaking anxiety. In accordance to that, an innovative teaching and learning board game – Speaking Chess can be utilized to motivate and inculcate students' interest to speak English, boost students' self-confidence and enhance their soft skills in an entertaining way. This innovative language board game has great potential for commercialisation as it can be used as an English classroom activity and a social activity which can engage students in language learning through oral communication, and thus ultimately reducing students' speaking anxiety.

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