

Investigating the Construct of Anxiety in Relation to Speaking Skills among ESL Tertiary Learners

CHAN SWEE HENG

*Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication
Universiti Putra Malaysia
shchan@fbmk.upm.edu.my*

AIN NADZIMAH ABDULLAH

*Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication
Universiti Putra Malaysia*

NURKARIMAH BINTI YUSOF

*Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication
Universiti Putra Malaysia*

ABSTRACT

Oral communication skills are a highly valued commodity. Part of the packaging is the exuding of confidence, which can be modulated by other mental states such as that of anxiety. Anxiety can be both good and bad and thus facilitating or debilitating, as a confidence booster or demotivator. Anxiety is worthy of investigation because it is a factor that influences communicative competence. Language anxiety can be defined along communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. Specifically, the study examines dimensions of language anxiety aligned to the major sub-constructs mentioned earlier. Data for this study is obtained through a survey questionnaire administered to 700 UPM students prior to an oral communication test. Findings suggest that most of the students experienced a medium level of oral communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. In the learning process, anxiety forms an important element that could determine language learning success. Thus, teachers must learn to identify anxiety and be able to enhance facilitating anxiety while reducing the negative. In this way, the teacher will have the awareness about the learning process of the oral skills defined along the construct of anxiety.

Keywords: oral communication skills; language anxiety; test anxiety; communicative competence; negative evaluation

INTRODUCTION

In general, anxiety is defined as “the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the automatic nervous system” (Spielberger 1983, as cited in Horwitz 2001, p.113). Anxiety therefore can occur in many contexts of human life. Alpert and Haber (1960) as cited in Ellis (1994) differentiated facilitating anxiety from debilitating anxiety, indicating that anxiety can either be positive or negative. Facilitating anxiety motivates learners to do things more efficiently and to make extra effort in overcoming feelings of anxiety. On the other hand, debilitating anxiety is the opposite. According to Simpson, Parker and Harrison (1995), debilitating anxiety refers to “excessive amounts of anxiety” which could lead to a poor response or could even inhibit it. Debilitating anxiety will cause learners to avoid the learning process in order to suppress the feeling of anxiety.

Another view of anxiety relates to breaking it down into trait anxiety, state anxiety and situation-specific anxiety (Ellis 1994, as cited in Tasnimi 2009). Trait anxiety is a stable personality trait of an individual while state anxiety is a temporary apprehension state

experienced by individuals in a certain situation, for example, the feeling of anxiety experienced before or when taking an oral communication test. On the other hand, situation-specific anxiety is caused by a specific type of situation or event such as having to speak in public or in class (Horwitz 2001, Ellis 1994, as cited in Tasnimi 2009). Individuals who experience state anxiety repeatedly can eventually experience situation-specific anxiety (Zuhana Mohd. Zin & Shameem Rafik-Galea 2010).

Ehrman (2003) postulates that affective factors can cover motivation, self-efficacy, tolerance of ambiguity and anxiety. Anxiety in language or better known as language anxiety is best defined 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" (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope 1986, p. 133). Language anxiety may not only bring harm to the second language learning process, but it could also reduce a person's motivation to learn a language. Motivation as one of the affective factors, can also be said to influence the pace and achievements in acquiring a language, especially that of a foreign language. (Azizeh Chalak & Zohreh Kassaian 2010). Thus, anxiety and motivation are closely related to each other in the acquisition of second language which can then manifest in language competence and performance.

The well quoted model of communicative language ability (CLA) by Bachman and Palmer (1996) highlights the affective factors or schemata in language use. Described as "affective or emotional correlates of topical knowledge" (p. 65), the affective schemata can either facilitate or debilitate language use in context of the characteristics of the particular test tasks. Another framework that could explain anxiety is that of MacIntyre and Gardner (1994). They theorized that foreign language anxiety may occur at any of the three stages of learning; the Input stage, the Processing stage and the Output stage. Anxiety may affect the initial information received during the Input stage, the processing of the information which involves the cognitive operations during the Processing stage, and finally at the production or retrieval of previous inputs (the Output stage). A specific example of the interference of anxiety in language use is when students experience 'freezing' during a language test (Horwitz et al. 1986). During the Output stage, the students' performance may not only be affected by anxiety towards the language, but could also be made worse due to language use in a test situation.

Language learning and testing covers many skills, among them, that of oral communication skills. Communication is essential in our daily life as it helps us to exchange information, ideas and thoughts between individuals or groups of people. Individuals who possess good communication skills are highly advantaged in their social life, relationships and work. Good communication skills in English have become one of the skills that are highly valued in the workplace. Individuals with impressive oral communication competencies are more likely to have better opportunities for employment and promotion. "Employers identify communication as one of the basic competencies every graduate should have, asserting that the ability to communicate is valuable for obtaining employment and maintaining successful job performance." (Morreal et al. 2000, as cited in Devi & Feroh 2008 p. 2).

Communicative competence and oral communication performance are closely related to each other. "Communicative competence involves understanding what is orally competent as well as the proficiency to create and achieve a competent oral communication outcome." (Morreale et al. 2000 as cited in Devi & Feroh 2008, p.3). Findings show that students with low communicative competence will experience high communication anxiety. Students with high communicative competence who are likely to perform well at all times can also be affected by anxiety. As a result, a highly proficient student of English may not perform well in an oral test because of being overly affected by nervousness and anxiety during the test.

In view of the importance of anxiety as one of the factors that affects oral communication performance, this study seeks to examine the role of anxiety in speaking, especially in a test-taking situation.

ANXIETY AND LANGUAGE LEARNING

As oral communication competence is given salience in language learning, numerous studies have been conducted to investigate the relationship between anxiety and oral communication competence especially among students. MacIntyre (1999) said that anxiety influences “both language learning and communication processes” (p. 24). Horwitz et al. (1991), conducted a research examining the relationship between anxiety and foreign language learning in a classroom situation. They labeled anxiety experienced during foreign language learning in the classroom as Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA). In addition, they stated FLCA 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. 31). Their study is deemed very important since it initiated many other studies in language anxiety.

Horwitz (2010) proposed that foreign language anxiety is related to communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Communication apprehension arises out of having a feeling of fear or anxiety when communicating with other people in different situations. Apprehension could eventually lead to frustration resulting in debilitating anxiety. Communication apprehension is not peculiar to individuals with a low level of language proficiency; it could happen to anyone. Extending from apprehension is test anxiety or test apprehension which is a common phenomenon that is experienced among individuals before taking a test. Individuals could be put in a state of mental and physical discomfort due to the worry of being evaluated in a test. This is a manifestation of debilitating anxiety which can affect test performance in a negative manner. On the other hand, positive anxiety could arise when students are able to overcome the negative anxiety and turn it into a motivating force to encourage themselves to perform better. Zeidner (1998) and Brown (2010) also mentioned that test anxiety could either be facilitative or debilitating.

According to Horwitz et al. (1986), foreign language anxiety should be considered as situation-specific anxiety, and not just a form of general classroom anxiety. The study also showed that learners felt extremely anxious during formal second language learning. Noticeably, they cited that they were afraid of being asked to perform orally in front of the class or to give their own opinions. Young (1992) also found that students’ performance during formal classroom learning was affected by excessive amount of anxiety. It could be said that anxiety caused by second language learning is unique and distinctive from other academic anxieties (Tran 2012). However, it is found that language learners who perform poorly in language learning as a result of language anxiety can perform better in other subjects. The interactive nature of language classrooms and the demands of communicating well in language arouses anxiety more in the language learning classroom compared to other academic classrooms.

In the learning of the language skills, speaking appears to be a main source of anxiety (Keramida 2009, cited in Subasi 2010). Young (1992) supported this notion too. Students with a high level of language anxiety mostly perform poorly during their oral performance. Initially, they would feel nervous and may become uncomfortable when they experience language anxiety, which would eventually lead them to hesitate and stumble during their speech.

Many studies have revealed that anxiety can inhibit the oral performance of many students, and interest regarding this matter has been increasing. Linguists and other researchers have taken initiatives to go deeper into the issue of anxiety and one direction is to examine the relationship between oral language testing and anxiety. There is agreement that students with test anxiety will experience high levels of stress, nervousness, and apprehension during testing and evaluative situations and this will significantly interfere with students' performance, emotional and behavioral well-being, and attitudes toward school. (Cizek & Burg 2006; Huberty 2009 cited in Salend 2011).

Aside from test anxiety asserting an influence on an oral test, Gardner et al. (1997) also found that anxiety could affect the learning of other language skills as well, such as listening comprehension, learning process of new vocabulary, and word production. In addition, some research investigated the link between anxiety and language proficiency level. Second language learners at beginner's level may have a lower proficiency level which can cause them to experience a high level of anxiety. However, their high anxiety level declines as their proficiency level increases (Gardner & MacIntyre 1993).

Additionally, gender appears to be another issue in language anxiety. However, there is limited literature on this area. The review revealed that females experienced a higher level of test anxiety compared to males (Phillips et al. 1972 cited in Guida & Ludlow 1989). In other words, male learners seem to be able to cope with test anxiety better than female learners. In addition, Couch et al. (1983) in their study found that there is a relationship between types of test anxiety (debilitating or facilitating) with gender. They found that male students experienced more facilitating test anxiety.

THE STUDY

The central objective of the study is to explore the anxiety experience of Malaysian ESL students in relation to English speaking skills. Based on the objective, the following research questions were formulated:

- 1) What is the level of Malaysian ESL students' anxiety towards speaking in English and taking a speaking test in English?
- 2) What is the relationship between speaking anxiety and speaking test anxiety?
- 3) What is the difference between male and female students' levels of anxiety towards speaking in English and taking a speaking test in English?

METHODOLOGY

SAMPLING

A questionnaire was administered to a random sample of 700 undergraduate students of Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) prior to an oral communication test (TOCIE – Test of Communication in English) conducted by UPM for final year students. To answer research question 3 which focuses on gender, a stratified random sampling was used after the general administration of the questionnaire.

CONSTRUCTING AND PILOTING THE QUESTIONNAIRE

The FLCAS (Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale) adapted in the survey was originally targeted at the classroom context. A few items were deleted from the original FLCAS as they were considered irrelevant, while some new items were also added. The modified questionnaire consisted of 34 items scaled with a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'.

The term ‘foreign language’ in the original scale was changed to ‘English’ to suit the present study. The modified questionnaire has three sections; section one solicits demographic information of the students, section two (item 1-12) focuses on information on students’ anxiety towards speaking in English and finally the last section (item 13-34) focuses on students’ anxiety towards taking a speaking test in English. In short, the questionnaire covers the fundamental aspects of communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation espoused by Horwitz et al. (1986). A pilot run was conducted on 200 students and some modifications to the pilot test were made in terms of item comprehensibility and suitability for the test-taking situation.

To determine the internal consistency or reliability of the questionnaire, the Cronbach alpha reliability coefficients were calculated. The calculations revealed alpha values of .875 for the section on anxiety towards speaking in English and .906 for anxiety towards taking a speaking test in English. Data from the questionnaire were further analyzed using SPSS Version 19.0 for t-tests and correlation analysis.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Only 631 questionnaires were returned after the administration. The initial data about the demography of the students were as follows (Table 1):

TABLE 1. DEMOGRAPHICS OF STUDENTS

Personal Information	Types	Frequency	Percentage	Total number
Gender	Male	165	26%	631
	Female	466	74%	
Race	Malay	427	67.7%	631
	Chinese	166	26.3%	
	Indian	22	3.5%	
	Others	16	2.5%	

Based on Table 1, the majority of the participants are females (74%) with males constituting 26%. The sample comprised the four major ethnic groups in Malaysia with the Malay as the dominant group (67.7%), followed by the Chinese (26.3%), Indians (3.5%) and others (2.5%). The data obtained appeared to reflect the constituent characteristics of a public university student population.

To answer research question 1, an analysis on the level of Malaysian ESL students’ anxiety towards speaking in English and towards taking a speaking test in English was done. The descriptive data indicates that most of Malaysian ESL students had a medium level of anxiety towards speaking in English (65%). Twenty-four percent of the students experienced a low level of anxiety and 11% of them experienced a high level of anxiety towards speaking in English. As for test-taking anxiety, a majority of the students (79%) also experienced a medium level. 14% of the students experienced a low level of speaking test anxiety and only 7% of them experienced a high level.

In terms of educational attainment, there is of course a higher level that could be achieved as target improvement in so far as anxiety is concerned. That being the premise, then the details of the responses could be investigated in order to reveal the relative concerns of the factors that could have an impact on anxiety and in return on training and educational awareness that may lead to further decision makings about organizing teaching targets and management. As such, research question 2 is addressed and the data is first discussed with reference to responses to the individual items. The analysis will highlight those response

features that have 33% and above in percentage value. This value is used as a benchmark of concern as it indicates at least one-third of the total responses to the item. Therefore, it arbitrarily marks a sizeable number of the total population that is considered to give responses that are of concern. Another feature to be noted is the design of the questionnaire which utilizes a 5-point Likert scale which provides for a neutral stand in terms of agreeing or disagreeing. This 5-point design flows with the notion that respondents have a right to choose a realistic response which should not be coerced. Tables 2 and 3 below list the responses and a discussion ensue based on the data obtained.

TABLE 2. POSITIVE RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS WITH A PERCENTAGE VALUE OF 33% AND ABOVE

No.	Question	Students' responses (%)		Valid Percent (%)
		Strongly agree	Agree	
1	I never feel sure of myself when I am speaking in English	5.4	33.3	38.7
2	I don't worry about making mistakes when speaking in English	6.2	36.0	42.2
3	I feel nervous speaking to native speakers of English	13.0	42.6	55.6
4	I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in English	10.6	36.9	47.5
5	I get upset when I don't understand what other people are saying in English	9.7	39.0	48.7
6	I always feel that other students speak English better than I do	10.9	41.8	52.7
7	I feel very self-conscious when I have to speak in English in front of other students	5.7	39.1	44.8
8	I am afraid that other students will laugh when I speak in English	7.6	30.1	37.7
9	I feel uncomfortable speaking English under any circumstances	4.6	28.4	33
10	I feel anxious if someone asks me something in English	3.8	28.1	31.9
11	It wouldn't bother me at all to take a speaking test in English	7.4	32.2	39.6
12	It frightens me when I don't understand what the examiner is saying during the speaking test in English.	10.0	42.9	52.9
13	I tremble when I know that I'm going to be questioned during a speaking test in English.	3.6	36.3	39.9
14	I think that the other students are better at speaking English than I am during the speaking test in English.	6.7	40.4	47.1
15	I am usually at ease during a speaking test in English in my language class.	2.9	35.3	38.2
16	I worry about the consequences of failing the speaking test in English.	7.3	48.0	55.3
17	I don't understand why some people get so upset over the speaking test in English.	5.2	27.3	32.5
18	In the speaking test in English, I feel like I can get so nervous that I forget things I know.	10.0	43.3	53.3
19	It embarrasses me to volunteer to give my opinions during a speaking test in English.	4.4	27.4	31.8
20	Even if I am well prepared for the speaking test in English I feel anxious about it.	6.8	41.0	47.8
22	I feel confident when I am required to take a speaking test in English.	2.9	26.8	29.7
24	I can feel my heart pounding when I'm about to be called to take the speaking test in English.	7.8	38.7	46.5
26	I don't feel pressured to prepare for a speaking in English test.	5.4	25.5	30.9
27	I feel tense and nervous when taking a speaking test in English compared to other test in English such as reading test.	5.9	30.4	36.3
28	I feel tense and nervous when taking a speaking test in English compared to other test in English such as writing test.	5.2	32.6	37.8
29	I feel tense and nervous when taking a speaking test in English compared to other test in English such as listening test.	6.3	33.1	39.4
30	I worry about having to sit for TOCIE.	8.7	32.0	40.7
31	I get nervous when the examiner or other participants asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance.	8.4	46.4	54.8
32	I feel nauseated before taking a speaking test in English.	4.9	30.4	35.3
33	I panic before and during the speaking test in English	5.4	33.6	39.0

TABLE 3. NEGATIVE RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS WITH A PERCENTAGE VALUE OF 33% AND ABOVE

No.	Question	Students' responses (%)		Valid Percentage (%)
		Disagree	Strongly Disagree	
8	I am afraid that other students will laugh when I speak in English	26.6	6.8	33.4
9	I feel uncomfortable speaking English under any circumstances	27.3	7.8	35.1
21	I feel like not taking any speaking test in English.	25.2	8.1	33.3
23	I am afraid that the examiner or other participants are going to correct every mistake I make during the speaking test in English.	27.7	6.7	34.4
25	The more I study for speaking in English test, the more confused I get.	30.4	8.7	39.1
27	I feel tense and nervous when taking a speaking test in English compared to other test in English such as reading test.	28.1	9.2	37.3
34	I have trouble sleeping the night before the speaking test in English.	30.0	19.0	49.0

Based from the responses (Table 2), confidence level is an area that needs consideration and thus is discussed. The students (38.7%, Q1) revealed that they never feel sure of themselves when speaking in English. However, it was also said that they (42.2%, Q2) generally do not worry too much about making mistakes when speaking. However, students did say that they were not that afraid that people would ridicule them if they made mistakes (37.7%, Q8). They also said that they were not too uncomfortable when having to speak in English (negative response-35.1%, Q9). In view of the responses, more speaking activities should be encouraged among students to emphasize speaking as a spontaneous act in naturalistic settings. If too many students were to worry about making mistakes when speaking, then the flow of the speaking discourse would be a problem leading to a poor impression of the speaking skill. In addition, nervousness is also a negative indicator in oral skill management. One aspect of speaking experience is to interact with native speakers who often are used as benchmarks of proficiency in a language. From the results, it appears that students generally experienced anxiety (55.6%, Q3) when speaking to native speakers of English. It is likely to be an intimidating experience, as they have to speak to people who are viewed as highly proficient in the language. Students may benefit from further simulations of having to interact and speak to native speakers of English in order to overcome this type of anxiety.

Preparation before speaking in English is valued, though it would lead to some erosion of speech authenticity. However, students appear to have a negative attitude (47.5%, Q4) if they had to speak without preparation. Often, in the Malaysian classrooms students are overly guided, resulting in them being unable to transfer the skills learnt to automatic and spontaneous use. Thus, it is not unusual to have panic attacks when put into a situation especially when students have to speak extemporaneously.

Comprehension determines level of anxiety in interaction as well. Results indicate that 48.7% (Q5) of the students felt upset when they had problems understanding messages conveyed orally. In other words, students should learn to speak clearly and lucidly so as to be well received as speakers and to receive a positive reaction to their message.

Confidence is also linked to self-consciousness. The students (52.7%, Q6) generally felt that other students spoke better English than they did. Many students (44.8%, Q7) lacked the confidence to speak in public. This response showed that they felt self-conscious in front of their peers. They (37.7%, Q8) also feared of being ridiculed if they did not speak proper English. Generally, students felt uncomfortable speaking in English (33%, Q9). An extension

of university training would be work-life performance where they are expected to be confident in this aspect of speaking and not feel constrained by self-consciousness. Those who feel anxious when they have to respond in English is 31.9% (Q10). This means that the number of students who have this positive attitude is still not very high.

Taking a speaking test was quite an anxiety-evoking experience (39.6%, Q11). Much of their performance was seen to be dependent on the examiner. If the rubrics were not understood in a test situation, it became frightening (59.2%, Q12). For some students (39.9%, Q13) they might even tremble when they had to take a test.

Confidence can also be interpreted in terms of a comparison with other speakers. If a speaker feels that the other speaker is better, then there could be a reverse psychology where he may feel inadequate in having to speak and perform to the best of his ability. Quite a number of students (47.1%, Q14) felt that they were competing with peers who were more competent than them, and therefore this feeling had led to anxiety in a speaking test. When students were put into a speaking test in a classroom situation, they (38.2%, Q15) claimed that they were more at ease among known peers, probably because this evoked less anxiety compared to a larger unknown in the case of a formal test situation.

As to their fear of failing a speaking test, the consequences were perceived to be severe. The students were afraid of the consequences of failing the speaking test (55.3%, Q16). In the course of taking an English test, bouts of nervousness could occur and responses showed that these students (53.3%, Q18) could have such an experience and it could become quite debilitating. They also reported that they were not that afraid that examiners would correct them (34.4%, Q23). Besides that, they did not think that they would get confused if they had to study more for a speaking in English test (39.1%, Q25). This could be related to the absence of test pressure when having to prepare for the test. However, students reported that they could still feel nervous even when they were well prepared (47.8%, Q20) and 46.5% (Q24) of the students admitted that their hearts actually pound when they had to take a speaking test. In the event of test taking, it could mean that students would need to exercise some control about anxiety when the test is on-going.

Speaking anxiety was also compared to that of other language skills, reading, writing and listening. The lowest anxiety score was for reading (37.3%, Q27). Students felt more nervous when taking a writing test (37.8%, Q28). In terms of the listening skill, the result is slightly higher (39.4%, Q29). The trend that students were not overly anxious when taking a speaking test was translated into the TOCIE (Test of Communication in English) experience. 40.7%, (Q30) of the students reported that they did feel anxious about the test even though they may have been well prepared for the test. However, 33.3% (Q21) of them reported that they were not averse to taking a speaking test in English. Feeling anxious, as mentioned in the extant literature could be of a facilitating type if anxiety drive them to perform well, though, this could not be confirmed through a post test interview in this study. The students (54.8%, Q31) responded that they did get nervous and upset when questions asked were out of the ambit of their state of preparedness. The severity of the mental state was questioned further in relation to whether they felt nauseated or had panic attacks. The details revealed that there was quite a moderate level of anxiety in relation to the responses given to these questions – feeling nauseated (35.3%, Q32) and panicked (39.0%, Q33). These states of anxiety did not translate highly into having trouble sleeping (49.0%, Q34).

In addition to the discussion of the responses based on percentage value, other descriptive statistics were derived. A correlation analysis was performed to analyze the relationship between anxiety towards speaking in English and anxiety towards taking a speaking test to answer research question 2. The results are presented in Table 4 below.

TABLE 4. Relationship Between Students' Perceptions On Anxiety Towards Speaking In English And Students' Perceptions On Anxiety Towards Taking An English Speaking Test

Students' Perceptions on English Speaking Anxiety and Students' Perceptions on English Speaking Test Anxiety	N	Correlation	Sig
	631	.620**	.000

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

The correlation index indicated that there was a moderately strong significant relationship between anxiety towards speaking in English and anxiety towards taking a speaking test in English with r significant at the 0.01 level. This supports the data analyzed earlier about the relationship between speaking in English and anxiety towards taking a speaking test in English. In other words, it confirms that if the level of anxiety of speaking in English increases, the level of test anxiety may also increase.

In addition, a t-test was used to analyze if there was any differences between male and female Malaysian ESL students with regard to anxiety in speaking in English (see Table 5) to answer research question 3.

TABLE 5. *T-Test* For Independent Samples For Gender (Male, Female) On Anxiety Experienced When Speaking In English

Variable	Number of cases	Mean	Standard deviation	SE of Mean	
Anxiety Experienced when Speaking in English					
Male	164	33.3659	8.53792	.66670	
Female	466	33.3927	7.50958	.34787	
Mean difference = -.02685					
Levene's Test for Equality of Variance: $F= 5.420$, Significance = .020					
Variates	<i>T</i> value	<i>df</i>	2- Tail Significance	SE of Difference	95% Confidence Interval
Equal	-0.38	628	.970	.70724	Lower:-1.41569 Upper: 1.36199

Based on the analysis, the t-test results indicate that there was no significant difference between the scores for male ($M= 33.3659$, $SD= 8.53792$) and female ($M= 33.3927$, $SD= 7.50958$), $t(628) = -0.38$, $p = .970$. Another t-test analysis was run to analyze if there was any difference between male and female Malaysian ESL students with regard to speaking test anxiety. The results are presented in Table 6 below:-

TABLE 6. *T-Test* For Independent Samples For Gender (Male, Female) On Anxiety Experienced When Taking A Speaking Test In English

Variable	Number of cases	Mean	Standard deviation	SE of Mean	
Anxiety Experienced When Taking a Speaking Test in English					
Male	164	63.1890	14.20471	1.10920	
Female	466	63.5322	11.47808	.53171	
Mean difference = -.34316					
Levene's Test for Equality of Variance: $F= 8.691$, Significance = .003					
Variates	<i>T</i> value	<i>df</i>	2- Tail Significance	SE of Difference	95% Confidence Interval
Equal	-.309	628	.758	1.11170	Lower:-2.52627 Upper: 1.83994

CONCLUSION

Malaysian university students showed that they are not extremely affected by anxiety when they have to speak in English or take a speaking test in English. This is quite expected as Malaysian students are enculturized in the ESL situation where speaking in English and taking oral English tests are quite the norm within their student experience. Factors that registered a frequency value of 50% and above were identified as indicative of having greater significance and they are related to discrete details about nervousness, fear of peer

competition, examiner incomprehensibility, test failure and forgetting content knowledge during a test. Of the list, the highest value was nervousness relating to speaking to native speakers followed closely by the fear of test failure. Nonetheless, only 7% of the students reported experiencing a high level of anxiety towards taking a speaking test in English. Though most responses bunched at the medium level, it is still of significance to pursue more ways to lower the affective filter of anxiety in order to further improve their oral communication. In addition, industry needs and expectations are normally high as they expect the best performance for maximum productivity. Students need to be impressed on such high expectations especially when jobs become more and more competitive. Thus, the results of this survey will carry pedagogical implications.

Since speaking to native speakers appears to be the main concern among students, this issue would need to be addressed in the classroom. More opportunities would have to be provided in simulated contact with native speaker speech to overcome anxiety. The more familiar students are with native speaker's manner of speech, the higher would be their confidence in being able to understand native speaker speech and accordingly, be able to respond confidently.

As for fear of test failure, concerted efforts in classroom learning and teaching of the skill will have to take place. For example, both teachers and students could work together to negotiate how anxiety can be controlled and managed. Teachers could do a systematic observation about the manifestations of student anxiety towards speaking and test taking and be able to identify the anxiety situations. Students, on the other hand, could also relate and give input about the anxiety situations and both parties can engage into a meaningful discussion on how best they could overcome the anxiety. In addition, model speakers could be observed to illustrate how confidence is exuded in speaking situations. This could be compared with videotaped oral speaking sessions involving students themselves to evoke comparison of the similarities and differences of speech control.

On the teacher's part, the awareness of the importance of rubrics clarity needs to be highlighted to overcome test anxiety. Test rubrics should be vetted among peers and guidelines could be outlined for such purpose. Other than the pedagogical suggestions, there could be some direction towards other techniques that could be helpful to overcome anxiety. For example, breathing techniques, physical and mental exercises could complementary actions. Even a simple tip like arriving early for a test, 20 minutes or so would be a psychological help in overcoming anxiety. Since motivation and anxiety are interrelated, issues regarding motivation in during language learning should also be taken into further consideration. Hence, teachers could plan the materials, syllabus and teaching methods based on the different needs and motivation of the learners. In addition, language practitioners could also look at the students' attitudes and reasons for learning the second language. (Ainol Madziah Zubairi & Isarji Hj. Sarudin 2009, Atef Al-Tamimi & Munir Shuib 2009).

In speaking, pragmatic knowledge is of great concern as shown in the study by Atieh and Tan (2012). Thus, materials designed for the acquiring of communicative competence must include materials that address pragmatic knowledge so that speaking is facilitated, and in the event, anxiety is reduced. Not knowing what to say or taking too long to search for the right words for the oral context in question could lead to debilitating anxiety which would increase substantially in test situations held under timed conditions.

On a final note, the data obtained rested on responses that were captured in a five-point Likert scale. From the pattern of responses, it was obvious that many respondents chose to be 'fence sitters' resulting in a reasonably big proportion of them not giving an opinion. While this option is seen as ethical, the data for the other two categories of agreeing or disagreeing is naturally affected. It might be worthwhile to reduce the scale to a four-point scale to investigate the trend of responses using this approach.

REFERENCES

- Ainol Madziah Zubairi & Isarji Hj Sarudin. (2009). Motivation to learn a foreign language in Malaysia. *GEMA: Online Journal of Language Studies*. Vol 9(2), 73-87.
- Atef Al-Tamimi & Munir Shuib. (2009). Motivation and attitudes towards learning English: A study of Petroleum Engineering undergraduates at Hadhramout University of Sciences and Technology. *GEMA: Online Journal of Language Studies*. Vol 9(2), 29-55.
- Atieh Farashaiyan & Tan Kim Hua. (2012) On the relationship between pragmatic knowledge and language proficiency among Iranian male and female undergraduate EFL learners. *3L: The Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies – Vol 18(1): 33 – 46*.
- Azizeh Chalak & Zohreh Kassaian. (2010). Motivation and attitudes of Iranian undergraduate EFL students towards learning English. *GEMA: Online Journal of Language Studies*. Vol 10(2), 37-56.
- Bachman, L. F. & Palmer, A. S. (1996). *Language Testing in Practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Brown, H.D. (2000). *Principles of Language Teaching*. New York: Pearsons
- Cavanagh, S. (2005). Educators revisit girls' loss of math, science interest: Some suggest employing varied teaching strategies to motivate students. *Education Week*, Vol 24(34). 6.
- Couch. J. V., Garber. T. B. & Turner, W. E. (1983). Facilitating and debilitating test-anxiety and academic achievement. *Psychological Reports*. Vol 33, 237-244.
- Devi, S. I. & Feroz, F. S. (2008). Oral communication apprehension and communicative competence among Electrical Engineering undergraduates in UTeM. *Journal of Human Capital Development*. Vol 1(1), 1-10.
- Ehrman, M. E. (2003). A brief overview of individual differences in second language learning. *System*. Vol 31(3), 313-330.
- Ellis, R. (1994). *The study of second language acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gardner, R.C., Tremblay, P.F. & Masgoret, A.M. (1997). Towards a full model of second language learning: An empirical investigation. *The Modern Language Journal*. 344-362.
- Gardner, R. C., & MacIntyre, P. D. (1993). A student's contribution to second language learning. Part II: Affective variables, *Language Teaching*. Vol 26, 1-11.
- Guida, F. V. & Ludlow, L. H. (1989). A cross-cultural study of test anxiety. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*. Vol 20(2), 178-190.
- Horwitz, E. K. (2001). Language anxiety and achievement. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*. Vol 21, 112-126. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0267190501000071>
- Horwitz, E. K. (2010). Foreign and second language anxiety. *Language Teaching*. Vol 43(2), 154–167. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S026144480999036X>
- Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M. B. & Cope, J. (1986). Foreign language classroom anxiety. *Modern Language Journal*. Vol 70 (2), 125-132.
- Horwitz, M. B., Horwitz, E. K. and Cope, J. (1991). Foreign language classroom anxiety. In E. K. Horwitz & D. J. Young (Eds.), *Language anxiety: From theory and research to classroom implications* (pp. 27-39). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- MacIntyre, P. D. (1999). Language anxiety: A review of research for language teachers. In D.J. Young, (Ed.) *Affect in foreign language and second language learning: A practical guide to creating a low-anxiety classroom atmosphere* (pp 24-45). Boston: McGraw-Hill.
- MacIntyre, P. D. & Gardner, R. C. (1994). The subtle effects of language anxiety on cognitive processing in the second language. *Language Learning*. Vol 44(2), 283-305.
- Morreal, S. P., Osborn, M.M. & Pearson, J. C. (2000). Why communication is important: A rationale for the centrality of the study of communication. *Journal of the Association for Communication Administration*. Vol 29, 1-25.
- Salend, S. J. (2011). Addressing test anxiety. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, Vol 44(2), 58-68.
- Shameem Rafik-Galea & Zuhana Mohd. Zin. (2010). Anxiety and academic reading performance among Malay ESL Learners. *Pan-Pacific Association of Applied Linguistics*. Vol 14(2), 41-58.
- Simpson, M. L., Parker, P. W. & Harrison, A. W. (1995). Differential performance on Taylor's Manifest Anxiety Scale in Black private college freshmen: A partial report. *Perceptual and Motor Skills*. Vol 80, 699-702.
- Sowa, C. & Lafleur, K. K. (1986). Gender differences with test-anxiety. *Journal of Instructional Psychology*. Vol 13, 75-80.
- Subasi, G. (2010). What are the main sources of Turkish EFL students' anxiety in oral practice? *Turkish Online Journal of Qualitative Inquiry*. Vol 1(2), 29-50.
- Tasnimi, M. (2009). Affective factors: Anxiety. *Journal of Pan-Pacific Association of Applied Linguistics*. Vol 13(2), 117-124.

- Tran, T. T. T. (2012). A review of Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope's theory of foreign language anxiety and the challenges to the theory. *English Language Teaching*. Vol 5(1), 69-75.
- Young, D. J. (1991). Creating a low-anxiety classroom environment: What does language anxiety research suggest!. *Modern Language Journal*. Vol 75, 426-439.
- Young, D. J. (1992). Language anxiety from the foreign language specialist's perspective: Interviews with Krashen, Omaggio Hadley, Terrell, and Rardin. *Foreign Language Annals*. Vol 25(2), 157-172.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1944-9720.1992.tb00524.x>
- Wong, S. S. (2008). The relations of cognitive triad, dysfunctional attitudes, automatic thoughts, and irrational beliefs with test anxiety. *Curr Psychol*. Vol 27, 177-191.
- Zeidner, M. (1998). *Test anxiety: The state of the art*. New York: Plenum Press.