



## ENGLISH SPEAKING ANXIETY IN EFL UNIVERSITY CLASSROOMS IN TAIWAN

**Ching-Yi Tien<sup>1</sup>**

Assistant Professor,  
Department of Applied English,  
I-Shou University, Taiwan

### **Abstract:**

The present study focuses on the relation between English speaking anxiety and factors among Taiwanese university English and non-English majors. A total of 658 volunteer student participants from eight different universities in southern Taiwan were recruited for this study. This research aims to investigate the factors causing EFL English speaking anxiety. A mixed-method approach was used for data collection. The results indicate that learners are extremely concerned about the accuracy of their grammar usage, their lack of vocabulary knowledge, correct pronunciation, and wanting their meaning to be understood. For the gender-related issue, female learners experience more English speaking anxiety than male students. Additionally, non-English majors have more English speaking apprehension than English majors. In a similar vein, comparing the years of English learning, students who studied more years of English are less worried about speaking English in the classroom. This article concludes with some pedagogical implications for English instructors who wish to reduce speaking anxiety, particularly in Taiwanese EFL classrooms.

**Keywords:** English speaking anxiety, higher education, gender, EFL, communicative competence

### **1. Introduction**

Language anxiety has become one of the significant concerns in foreign language teaching and learning over the last 3 decades. In recent years, much attention has been jointly paid to the concerns about English speaking anxiety. In the past, Grammar-translation was the primary teaching methodology employed at all school levels in Taiwan for learning English, yet one drawback of this was that both teachers and learners merely focused on linguistic knowledge and test preparation rather than on

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<sup>1</sup> Correspondence: email [tien@isu.edu.tw](mailto:tien@isu.edu.tw)

oral linguistic performance. Due to the widespread criticism that the Grammar-translation method did not help learners to improve their English speaking skills, the Communicative Approach was then adopted in the 1990s in Taiwan in the hope of enhancing learners' English communicative competence. Twenty more years have passed, and although it has been proven that English language learners are more willing to speak out in English both inside and outside of the classroom, many are still quite reticent, lack self-confidence in using English, and perhaps suffer from some other problems.

To identify the reasons for reticent language learners in the foreign language classroom, advocates have conducted various studies worldwide; for instance, Akkakoson (2016) in Thailand, Ahmed (2016) in Turkey, El-Sakka (2016) in Egypt, Liu and Jackson (2008) in China, Mak (2011) in Hong Kong, Santos et al. (2017) in Spain, and Suleimeonva (2013) in Kazakhstan. Despite this, only a few studies have been conducted in Taiwan. Chen and Lee (2011) employed a sensor, signal processing human emotion recognition system to assist the instructor when teaching English conversation classes. The results of their experimental study indicated that the proposed method was helpful to both the teacher and the learners in reducing English speaking anxiety in English conversation classes. Chiu et al. (2016) investigated 114 English-major college students' foreign language anxiety. The research found that worries about grammar and fears of making mistakes were the two biggest reasons for English speaking anxiety among the participants. Huang (2004) investigated speaking anxiety among EFL non-English major university students in Taiwan and found that students experience a high level of speaking anxiety. Wang and Chang (2010) applied an innovative method by adopting self-monitoring and portfolios to assess 60 university English major students' English speaking performance. The findings showed that students' communication EFL apprehension was reduced through the use of videotaping their own presentations, learners' reflections and self-adjustments.

Since so little research has been conducted in Taiwan to help reticent English learners, more studies should be carried out to address this issue. Additionally, consistently hearing students commenting on their worries about speaking English in the classrooms as well as outside of school settings for more than a decade, I aimed to explore the factors and issues causing learners' speaking anxiety in the Taiwanese higher education context among English and non-English majors. It is hoped that the results of this study can provide some pedagogical implications for EFL instructors worldwide.

### 1.1 Literature Review

Ever since Horwitz et al. (1986: 125) proposed that '*[a]nxiety is the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness and worry associated with an arousal of autonomic nervous system. ...many people find foreign language learning, especially in classroom situations, particularly stressful*'. A growing number of studies have subsequently been conducted adopting Horwitz et al.'s Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) model in an attempt to understand the cause of emotional states which link to why students

cannot perform well in an additional language in the classroom (e.g., Aida, 1994; Gübendir, 2014; Liu, 2006; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989; Tien, 2017; Young, 1994). The list is not exhaustive.

To deal with more specific issues concerning learners' foreign language classroom anxiety, researchers have limited the focus on the cause of English reading anxiety (Zhao & Dynia, 2013; Lien, 2016), English writing anxiety (Qashoa, 2014; Tsao et al. 2017), English listening anxiety (Golchi, 2012; Zhai, 2015), and English speaking anxiety (Akkakoson, 2016; El-Sakka, 2016; Santos et al. 2017; Suleimenova, 2013; Yaikhong & Usaha, 2012; Yalçın & İnceçay, 2013). Additionally, some studies have looked into the relationship between speaking anxiety and factors such as gender or language proficiency in EFL contexts (e.g., Karatas et al., 2016; Santos et al., 2017).

Liu and Jackson (2008) examined the relationship between 547 first-year non-English majors' unwillingness to communicate and their foreign language anxiety at Tsinghua University, China. The study found that more than one-third of the students experienced foreign language anxiety in the English classroom and were worried about being negatively evaluated as well as being apprehensive about speech communication and tests. Mak (2011) explored the factors contributing to the speaking-in-class anxiety of 313 randomly-selected Chinese ESL first-year university students in Hong Kong. The study provided evidence that students' negative attitudes toward language classes and negative self-evaluation are the major factors leading to speaking-in-class anxiety. The author also suggested that all the language professionals should not only provide linguistic knowledge to the students but should also cater to students' affective needs to reduce their speaking anxiety in the classroom. Particularly, the author mentioned 'the influence of appropriate wait-time in reducing anxiety' for helping Chinese learners to speak out in English language classrooms (p. 211). Ahmed (2016) investigated Kurdish university EFL learners' English language speaking anxiety. Thirty participants were purposively selected from the Faculty of Arts and English Department because their medium of instruction was English. The results of the study revealed that when speaking English in class, learners were most worried about the consequences of failure in the English class, getting laughed at by their peers, encountering unknown grammar, and how to use the proper English words.

Research into the relationship between English speaking anxiety and gender-related differences has also gained some attention among research advocates, although their results are inconsistent. It seems that gender plays a vital role in foreign language speaking anxiety as females tend to think foreign language speaking is more worrisome. Çağatay (2015) examined 147 Turkish state university students regarding their foreign language speaking anxiety and found that female students seemed to be noticeably more anxious while speaking English than the male students. Öztük and Gürbüz (2013) looked at the impact of gender on foreign language speaking anxiety and motivation and reported that female students were more anxious than male students while speaking English in the classroom. The evidence of female students experiencing more apprehension than male students when encountering English speaking situations in the classroom has also been proved in some other research (e.g., Çağatay, 2015;

Karatas et al., 2016; Mahmoodzadeh, 2012). Although the mentioned students have shown that females might be more reticent and anxious about speaking English in the classroom, Han et al. (2016) investigated the impact of communication classes taught by native English speaking teachers and non-native English speaking teachers on EFL students' and teachers' attitudes toward foreign language speaking anxiety. Their findings indicated no significant difference between the students' attitudes toward anxiety and their gender. As mentioned previously, so little research has been conducted in Taiwan to help reticent English learners, this empirical study attempts to explore issues concerning university-level EFL learners' English speaking anxiety in Taiwan. Three research questions are as follow:

Q1. What are the most crucial factors causing English speaking anxiety among Taiwanese university students?

Q2. Is there any significant difference in the degree of English speaking anxiety between genders as well as English majors and non-English majors among Taiwanese university students?

Q3. Is there any significant difference in the degree of English speaking anxiety regarding years of studying English among Taiwanese university students?

## 2. Methodology

The following section presents information concerning the research methodology of this mixed-method study.

### 2.1 Setting and Participants

The present study aims to shed light on foreign language speaking anxiety by English learners in Taiwan. It was conducted among eight national and private universities in southern Taiwan in the fall semester of 2017. A total of 658 volunteer student participants were recruited for this study, 250 males (38%) and 408 females (62%). The participants were informed of the purpose of the study. The questionnaire was then distributed in the middle of the semester (week 8).

### 2.2 Instrument

To investigate the Taiwanese university students' English speaking anxiety, a modified *Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS)* was used to meet the purpose of this study. The original *Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS)* developed by Saito, Horwitz, and Garza in 1986 was modified to some extent by Mahmoodzadeh (2012) for his investigation on foreign language speaking anxiety within the EFL learner's interlanguage system. Mahmoodzadeh (2012) deleted and modified some items in the inventory of the FLCAS and divided the questionnaire into three subsets: interlanguage phonology, interlanguage grammar, and interlanguage meaning system.

The questionnaire used for the present study is that of Mahmoodzadeh (2012) with some modification of my own to best meet the needs of the Taiwanese context. In this study, to avoid any confusions the student participants may have, the statements

with double negative words were simplified (e.g., The statement '[i]t frightens me when I cannot speak English without any grammatical mistakes in the class' was changed into '[i]t frightens me when I speak English with some grammatical mistakes in the class.' Also, the items in the adopted inventory were re-ordered based on categories of phonology (items 1 to 6), grammar (items 7 to 12), and meaning system (items 13 to 18). It was based on a 5-point summated Likert-type scale, ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree* for this study. Two extra open-ended questions were added to the questionnaire in the hope of gaining deeper insights from the participants. Besides, to make sure that the participants had no problem understanding the questionnaire, the recreated questionnaire was then translated from the English version into Mandarin Chinese. To guarantee the quality of the translation, the Chinese version of the questionnaire was examined and confirmed by two colleagues who are highly proficient in both English and Chinese. Additionally, Mahmoodzadeh (2012) reported that his modified and translated questionnaire had achieved an alpha coefficient of .82 which was claimed to have a high degree of reliability. The questionnaire for the current study reached the internal consistency coefficient of .95 (Cronbach's alpha,  $n=658$ ).

### 3. Results and Discussion

The descriptive statistical analysis was used to analyze the data via SPSS software to answer the three research questions. The participants' background information regarding the research questions is also discussed and presented in the following.

The average mean scores of participants' responses to the questionnaire items were calculated to investigate the most important factors causing English speaking anxiety among Taiwanese university students. The statistical result indicates that the mean score of average speaking anxiety level is 3.38, which suggests that the students tend to have a high level of English speaking anxiety.

#### 3.1 The most crucial factors causing English speaking anxiety among Taiwanese university students

Among the 18 questionnaire items, the top six statements (15, 11, 1, 9, 17, 18) reporting the causes of students' speaking anxiety are listed in Table 1.

**Table 1:** The highest 6 mean score items reported by the participants

Statements	N	M	SD
15. I feel afraid when the teacher does not understand what I mean in English.	658	3.70	0.98
11. When I want to use correct grammar to speak English in the class, I get so nervous that I forget what to say.	658	3.67	0.98
1. I never feel quite sure of myself when I am pronouncing English words in my English class.	658	3.60	1.05
9. I would be worried about failing to use correct grammar when I speak English in my English class.	658	3.60	1.05
17. I start to panic when I am not sure about saying something that makes sense in English.	658	3.58	1.00
18. I can feel my heart pounding when the teacher asks me the question: "What do you mean?"	658	3.58	1.06

Table 1 shows that three out of six statements the student participants were most concerned about regarding English speaking anxiety are meaning related (15, 17, 19), two are about grammatical issues (11, 9) and one is related to pronunciation (1). The statistical figure of mean scores for the three categories (meaning system:  $M=3.52$ ,  $SD=.89$ ; grammar:  $M=3.52$ ,  $SD=.80$ ; phonology:  $M=3.11$ ,  $SD=.87$ ) also reveal similar results.

I added two open-ended questions in the redesigned questionnaire. For the qualitative data, one question is: 'What is the most difficult factor for you when speaking in English,' and the other is 'What worries you the most when speaking in English.' The respondents wrote lengthy answers. Regarding the most difficult factors when speaking in English, their responses were grouped into four major categories. To be more succinct, 92 of them were very concerned about not having enough grammatical knowledge; 89 of them were worried about their pronunciation; 67 reported lack of vocabulary knowledge; and 81 stated the worry of not being understood by the interlocutors. The following are some of the direct quotes from the respondents.

(#257) *"When I first started to learn English as a child, I was taught by learning grammar rules, and the teacher focused a lot on using correct grammar. Ever since then, I would really care if I make any grammatical mistakes when I am speaking English."*

(#551) *"I'm afraid of mispronouncing words. It usually takes time for me to think about the right words and grammar when speaking in English."*

(#607) *"By not having enough knowledge of vocabulary and sentence structure, I can only speak in a simple sentence like "this is a pen" this kind of level."*

(#120) *"I can't express my ideas fluently. I'm so worried that others don't understand what I mean."*

When asked 'What worries you the most when speaking in English,' the respondents reported that they were worried about their pronunciation (51), grammar (50), vocabulary (33), making mistakes (122), not knowing how to express their meaning to others (148), and other issues, such as nervousness. Some direct quotes from the respondents are presented here.

(#262) *"I'm so afraid of mispronouncing words and my accent."*

(#312) *"I'm afraid of making grammatical mistakes that I can't make myself clearly understood by others."*

(#557) *"I'm quite anxious when I speak English. I don't know what vocabulary I should use and how to arrange words into the correct grammatical structure."*

(#580) *“My mind goes blank when others can’t understand what I say. I will try to use different sentences to express my idea, and I feel so frightened.”*

(#409) *“I get so nervous when speaking English to native speakers or someone who has good English proficiency because I’m afraid that they will find out my speaking mistakes.”*

(#615) *“I try to remember the mistakes I have made, but this makes me more nervous the next time I need to speak English.”*

To address the first research question, the overall findings indicate that the participants are extremely worried about making linguistic mistakes and lacking linguistic knowledge including grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. This result is in line with most of the previous studies (Akkakoson, 2016; Ahmed, 2016; Chiu et al., 2016; Diaab, 2016; Han et al. 2016; Koçak, 2010). As mentioned previously, due to the long history of heavy reliance on Grammar-Translation teaching methodology, speaking ‘correct’ English is one of the main concerns when learners have to produce the English language. English is treated as a lingua franca with great promotion of ‘world Englishes’ in Taiwan’s English educational context, but it is still quite challenging to lead learners to focus more on fluency instead of accuracy. It seems that there is an urgent need to encourage communicative competence over linguistic competence when instructors wish to reduce learners’ English speaking anxiety.

### 3.2 English speaking anxiety by gender and by English vs. non-English major

An independent samples *t* test was used to find out whether there is any significant difference in the degree of English speaking anxiety between genders or between English and non-English majors among the Taiwanese university students. The results are presented in the following tables.

**Table 2: English speaking anxiety level difference between genders**

	G	Mean	SD	t	p
Phonology	M	3.08	.90	-.730	.461
	F	3.13	.86		
Grammar	M	3.44	.87	-1.999	.046*
	F	3.56	.75		
Meaning system	M	3.37	.97	-3.391	.001**
	F	3.61	.82		

Note: \* $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .0001$

Gender= G, male= M (N=250), female= F (N=408)

Table 2 shows that student participants (both male and female) face speaking anxiety in the EFL classroom with a mean score of 3.08 and above in these three categories (phonology, grammar, and meaning system). In this study, female students’ pronunciation (phonology) (M=3.13, SD=.86), grammar (M=3.56, SD=.75), and meaning system (M=3.61, SD=.82) tend to have higher speaking anxiety than male students’ pronunciation (phonology) (M=3.08, SD=.90), grammar (M=3.44, SD=.87), and meaning

system (M=3.37, SD=.97). Particularly, female students are significantly more anxious than male students when speaking in English regarding the use of meaning system ( $t=-3.391$ ,  $p=.001<.01$ ) and grammar ( $t=-1.999$ ,  $p=.046<.05$ ). For example, one female student (#272) wrote that ‘I get really apprehensive because I can’t speak English naturally and simultaneously. In a real-life situation, people talk quickly; this doesn’t allow time for me to think about what I should say. Therefore, I become more afraid of speaking English.’ The result of gender-related difference that female students experience more speaking anxiety than male students is congruent with some of the previous studies (Çağatay, 2015; Karatas et al., 2016; Mahmoodzadeh, 2012; Öztük & Gürbüz, 2013). Huang (2004) pointed out that the reason female students experience more English speaking anxiety than male students might be a cultural characteristic of Taiwanese society. This was true in the past; yet, due to the influence of western culture, female students are more expressive nowadays. Besides, an interesting phenomenon I have observed over the years is that in the English department, female students tend to be more outspoken than male students. However, in non-English majors, females are still more reticent than males.

**Table 3:** English speaking anxiety level difference between majors

	M	Mean	SD	t	p
Phonology	E	2.83	1.00		
	NE	3.16	.84	-3.063	.003**
Grammar	E	3.34	.87		
	NE	3.55	.78	-2.463	.014*
Meaning system	E	3.42	.94		
	NE	3.54	.88	-1.184	.237

Note: \* $p<.05$ ; \*\*  $p<.01$ ; \*\*\* $p<.0001$

Majors= M, English= E (N=100), Non-English= NE (N=558)

When comparing the English speaking anxiety level of English and non-English majors, it is unsurprising to see that non-English major students have more apprehension than English major students. Non-English majors are more worried about their pronunciation (phonology) (M=3.16, SD=.84), grammar (M=3.55, SD=.78), and meaning system (M=3.54, SD=.88) than English majors [pronunciation (phonology) (M=2.83, SD=1.00), grammar (M=3.34, SD=.87), and meaning system (M=3.42, SD=.94)]. The  $t$  test showed significant anxiety level differences between English majors and non-English majors for phonology ( $t=-3.063$ ,  $p=.003<.01$ ) and grammar ( $t=-2.463$ ,  $p=.014<.05$ ).

It is important to point out that in the phonology section, four statements reached an extremely significant level between English and non-English majors. These are: 1. I never feel quite sure of myself when I am pronouncing English words in my English class ( $t=-4.503$ ,  $p=.000$ ); 2. I feel embarrassed when other students hear my English accent in my English class ( $t=-2.535$ ,  $p=.011$ ); 3. It bothers me when I cannot speak English with a good accent in my English class ( $t=-3.391$ ,  $p=.001$ ); and 4. I always feel that the other students will laugh at my accent when I speak English in class ( $t=-2.368$ ,  $p=.018$ ). The result of this section comparing the English speaking anxiety level difference between English and non-English majors is quite significant.



The finding shows that among phonology, grammar, and meaning-making categories, non-English majors are more anxious than English majors. One possible explanation for this might be that English major students receive more English training and have more opportunities to practice speaking in English than non-English majors; hence they are more confident to produce oral English language than the non-English majors.

### 3.3 English speaking anxiety regarding years of studying English

To address the last research question, the data were computed by *t* test. In the distributed survey, participants had four options of years of learning English experience to choose from, ranging from option 1 (6 to 8 years), option 2 (9 to 12 years), option 3 (13 to 15 years), to option 4 (16 years and more). It was found that all the participants, at the time of the research, had learned English for between 6 and 12 years. Therefore, a *t* test was employed. Analysis of variance revealed some significant differences. Table 4 presents the mean scores, the standard deviations, and the *t*-test results.

**Table 4:** English speaking anxiety level difference regarding years of studying English

	Y	Mean	SD	t	p
Phonology	6-8	3.33	.83	2.508	.013*
	9-12	3.12	.82		
Grammar	6-8	3.65	.80	1.606	.109
	9-12	3.53	.75		
Meaning system	6-8	3.63	.89	1.046	.296
	9-12	3.55	.80		

Note: \* $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .0001$

Year= Y; 6-8 years: N=169, 9-12 years: N=262

As Table 4 indicates, students who have fewer years of learning English (6-8 years) are more burdened with English speaking anxiety (phonology,  $M=3.33$ ,  $SD=.83$ ; grammar,  $M=3.65$ ,  $SD=.80$ ), meaning system,  $M=3.63$ ,  $SD=.89$ ) than those who have studied for a few more years (9-12 years) (phonology,  $M=3.12$ ,  $SD=.82$ ; grammar,  $M=3.53$ ,  $SD=.75$ , meaning system,  $M=3.55$ ,  $SD=.80$ ). A remarkable statistical result points out that phonology (pronunciation) plays a major role ( $t=2.508$ ,  $p=.013 < .05$ ). Additionally, there were five statements with substantial statistics when examining this research question, namely: Statement 1: I never feel quite sure of myself when I am pronouncing English words in my English class ( $t=2.503$ ,  $p=.013$ ); Statement 4: I always feel that the other students will laugh at my accent when I speak English in class ( $t=2.503$ ,  $p=.013$ ); Statement 5: The more I try to speak English fluently in the class, the more disappointed I get ( $t=2.178$ ,  $p=.030$ ); Statement 7: I think English grammar is very difficult when I need to speak English in my English class ( $t=2.398$ ,  $p=.017$ ); and Statement 12: It frightens me when I speak English with some grammatical mistakes in the class ( $t=2.052$ ,  $p=.041$ ). Although no research was conducted to investigate the influence of English speaking anxiety level difference regarding years of studying English, the result of this study sheds some light on this issue. As the result indicates that learners who have more years of English learning experience are less apprehensive about speaking in English, it can be interpreted that the learners' English proficiency and linguistic

confidence may have increased after more years of English language learning. Another possible reason might be that more years of English language learning gives learners more opportunities for speaking practice; therefore, they get used to speaking in English.

#### 4. Conclusions

Owing to the fact that Mandarin Chinese is different from the English alphabetic language in both writing and pronunciation, it is quite challenging for Taiwanese language learners to learn English, not to mention that speaking a foreign language, especially English, in a classroom setting is considered to be one of the greatest sources of anxiety. With regard to the result of this study, it is obvious that even though teachers have adopted a more communicative approach focusing more on fluency practice in English classrooms, students are still reticent and worry about their grammar accuracy, vocabulary usage, pronunciation, and meaning to be understood when speaking English in the classroom. Hence, it is suggested that English teachers should try to employ a teaching method that could both enhance students' linguistic competence and their linguistic performance. As for the issue that female students are more anxious while speaking English than male students in the classroom, Huang (2004) has pointed out that this might be a cultural characteristic of Taiwanese society. This was true in the past; yet, due to the influence of westernization, female students are more expressive nowadays. Language instructors should take both culture issues and individuality into consideration when handling female students' English speaking anxiety in the classroom. Another significant finding of this study is the evidence that more years of English language learning reduces learners' English speaking anxiety. This indicates the positive washback effect on English language teaching and learning for language learners both for English and non-English majors. A massive amount of research has already shown that language learners benefit tremendously from instructors' scaffolding supports. It is suggested that more affective feelings and guidance from language instructors is needed to not only help language learners to learn languages well but also to reduce their anxiety in the EFL learning situation. Likewise, Mak (2011) stated that Chinese students require more "wait-time" when speaking in English due to a face-saving issue and feeling pressed by their inability or reluctance to speak publicly. This situation is mirrored in the Taiwanese EFL classroom. To encourage students to speak English in the classroom as well as reducing their speaking apprehension, it is suggested that EFL teachers should provide more English speaking activities for learners to have more exposure to the language in the classroom. A student-centered learning environment is strongly recommended as practice is vital in language learning.

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