Investigating the Levels and Factors of English Language Speaking Anxiety in Online Classroom

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ABSTRACT
Speaking anxiety is commonly faced by second language or foreign language students who view English speaking skills as the most challenging language skill to acquire. This group of students also believes that their performance in English oral communication is not as good as others. Although online learning has replaced traditional classrooms, speaking anxiety is still prevalent among our students. This study aims to determine the level of speaking anxiety among Malaysian undergraduates and also to identify its factors in an online classroom setting. A set of questionnaires has been adapted from The Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety Scale (FLSAS), and distributed to 81 undergraduate students from Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Kelantan. The collected data was analysed using statistical analysis. The findings of this study revealed that Malaysian undergraduates experience English language speaking anxiety to a certain level and three main factors were identified. This study will benefit the undergraduates and the educators, to be more sensible of the level of speaking anxiety and may prevent this issue from worsening since the influential factors have been highlighted.

Keywords: English language, speaking anxiety, undergraduates, online learning, FLSAS

INTRODUCTION

English is regarded as a second language in Malaysia and it should be learned by all Malaysians at school for at least eleven years (Ansari, 2015). This is due to the fact that English language is widely used in a big range of daily activities including commercial enterprise, education, and office management. Thus, it is vital for Malaysian students to acquire and master the English language as they will use this global language from elementary till their career world. Its relevance is much more obvious as the students are required to communicate and collaborate with peers and teachers in their teaching and learning process, especially when they are in tertiary education.

All four language skills - listening, reading, speaking, and writing - are taught in the school syllabus as well as in higher education English subjects. However, according to Yahaya et al. (2011) as well as Aziz and Kashinathan (2021), many Malaysian employers often complain that their new employees who are fresh graduates, lack communication skills as they are unable to express their ideas orally, and not to mention their low confidence level when it comes to the company presentation. This national issue is explained by Hmaid (2014), as cited in Toubot et al. Abdullah (2021) that claims ESL/EFL students may be good at reading, writing, and listening, but they seem to be poor at speaking skills. Speaking is viewed as the most challenging skill in ESL/EFL classrooms. English language learners often express anxiety when speaking and communicating in the target language (Horwitz et al., 1986).

Since the traditional face-to-face classroom learning has now shifted to the online classroom due to the global pandemic, educators and students have struggled in adjusting themselves to this new method of learning. Having very little experience with this form of learning and the need for thorough technical security lead to students' anxiety of the foreign language (Pichette, 2009), and one of the foreign language anxieties that the students encounter is the students' speaking skills (Pahargyan, 2021).

The researcher found that students remained silent in some online class activities, especially those involving speaking tasks. Students preferred not to turn their cameras on. Students were also afraid of being active in the discussion even though the course was conducted online. Some of them were unwilling to answer the questions when their names were randomly called. Students also found it hard to cope with their speaking anxiety, which made them unable to express their language expressions in class and even limit them to explore their language competency.

Scholars in language learning have put their interest in the issue of speaking anxiety among second or foreign language students in the recent years. There are numerous studies done to investigate the level of speaking anxiety faced by the students (Subasi, 2010; Mak, 2011; Kayaglou & Saglamel, 2013; Miskam & Saidalvi, 2019). This is due to worrisome problems that have been noticed among undergraduate students worldwide including in Malaysia. However, there is still a lack of research conducted to find the factors that trigger anxiety among undergraduates, especially in online classroom. The current study is purposely conducted to investigate how far the undergraduates face speaking anxiety and to examine the factors that spark the speaking anxiety issue in an online classroom setting. This is crucial so that the educators could take some immediate actions to overcome speaking anxiety among our undergraduates. Thus, there are two research questions formulated for this study: (1) what level of English speaking anxiety do the

undergraduates face in online classroom, and (2) what are the influencing factors that cause speaking anxiety among undergraduates in online classroom?

LITERATURE REVIEW

English Language Speaking Anxiety

English language is difficult to master; hence, students often experience certain levels of anxiety when learning the language. Speaking has been reported to be the most anxiety-provoking skill in learning a second language or foreign language and it is the most notable source of anxiety in language classrooms (Saltan, 2003; Ozturk & Gurbuz, 2014). Balemir (2009) defined speaking anxiety as the fear of using the language orally. Speaking poses a challenge to language learners as it is both a productive as well as an interactive skill (Carter & Nunan, 2002). As such, many students stumble when they are required to perform oral communication tasks as speaking involves more complex skills than other language tasks such as listening, reading, and writing.

Levels of Speaking Anxiety

Miskam and Saidalvi (2019) investigated the level of speaking anxiety among Malaysian undergraduate learners and determined the dominant factor that contributes to speaking anxiety among Malaysian undergraduate learners. The result from FLCAS indicated that majority of the participants (76%) have a moderate level of English language speaking anxiety which corroborated the findings by Balemir (2009), Abdullah and Abdul Rahman (2010) and Chan et al. (2012).

Karatas et al. (2016) examined the relationship between students' foreign language speaking with gender, level of language, English preparatory training and the type of secondary school from which they graduated. The respondents were 320 males and 168 female English preparatory students at Istanbul Technical University. The result indicated that, in terms of gender, their findings are parallel with Huang (2004) and Ozturk and Gurbuz (2014) that female respondents have higher anxiety level than male respondents. In terms of English preparatory training, students who received English preparatory training has lower anxiety than those who did not receive any. In sum, students' level of language and the kind of high school they graduated from did not have any effect on the level of their speaking anxiety.

Factors of Speaking Anxiety

Badrasawi et al. (2020), stated that learning anxiety can arise from both linguistic and non-linguistic aspects. In terms of linguistics, students were normally anxious when they were worried that they made grammatical errors or mistakes during the conversation. Other than that, they were sometimes worried about their lecturers' comments. In a non-linguistic context, students seem to be having trouble speaking English in the presence of a general audience because of their negative perceptions of the audience.

According to Horwitz et al. (1986), there are three related performance anxiety namely: 1) communication apprehension, 2) fear of negative evaluation, and 3) test anxiety. According to McCroskey (1984), the first type of anxiety which is communication apprehension is a fear about

actual or anticipated communication with other individuals, and it is a behavioral trait related to the psychological constructs of shyness and reserve. Horwitz et al. (1986) further highlighted that communication apprehension is a kind of shyness that is characterized by anxiety in communicating with people.

The second type of anxiety, fear of negative evaluation is considered as 'apprehension about others' evaluations, the act of avoiding the evaluative situations, and the expectation that others will evaluate oneself negatively (Horwitz et al., 1986). Aydin (2001) mentioned that communicating in a foreign or second language is a course of concern to some learners for fear of being evaluated by other learners. Learners are aware about their lack of necessary linguistic competence to produce the language; thus, they are afraid that they might portray improper social impressions about themselves.

The third type of anxiety, test anxiety, is defined as a type of performance anxiety which is stemming from a fear of failure (Horwitz et al., 1986). According to Covington (1985), test anxiety comprises of four phases which are test anticipation, test preparation, test-taking stage and test reaction.

Speaking Anxiety in Online Learning
Learning and teaching paradigm have dramatically changed since the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020. Many countries including Malaysia have opted and agreed to conduct online learning in schools and universities to prevent the transmission of COVID-19. Putri et al. (2021) stated that online learning refers to the use of an internet network with the access, connectivity, and flexibility that will enable multiple learning interactions. It is a learning system that provides a platform for language instructors to share teaching materials and for students to interact with both language instructors and other language learners via varied technological devices and applications (Susilowati, 2020).

Even though utilizing and involving technology in language activities may foster the development of learners' language skills, especially speaking (Ataiefar & Sadighi, 2017), there is still a limited number of research conducted to examine the level of speaking anxiety in an online classroom. A study by Bakar et al. (2013) found that online discussion may provide a non-threatening situation for learners who are shy and withdrawn. This is because online learning can decrease their anxiety and concerns about being embarrassed when speaking face to face. Therefore, it can be assumed that online learning reduces speaking anxiety among learners as it provides a less anxiety-provoking environment to language learners.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This non-experimental study employed a descriptive research design as it is to describe the characteristics of a population or an existing phenomenon (Awang, 2012). This research design suits the purpose of this study that involved the determination of the degree to which certain variables (levels and factors) are related to the actual phenomena (speaking anxiety).

Participants

The participants involved in this study were 81 diploma and degree students from Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Kelantan, March-August 2022 semester. They were taking their compulsory English language subjects which involved various speaking assessments and speaking activities throughout the semester. All speaking assessments required them to do online oral presentations as these participants had experienced Open and Distance Learning (ODL) for more than two semesters; thus, making them suitable participants for this study. These participants were chosen by using random sampling method to avoid biasness and to ensure good representation of the population (Alvi, 2016; as cited in Miskam & Saidalvi, 2019).

Instruments

This study adapted Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety Scale (FLSAS) from Huang (2004) as an instrument for data collection. It was a set of questionnaires consisting of 24 items where the respondents were asked to rate each item on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5 ('Strongly Disagree' to 'Strongly Agree'). This instrument was utilized to collect the data related to the level of English language speaking anxiety and the dominant factor that contribute to English language speaking anxiety among Malaysian undergraduates based on the three factors identified by Horwitz et al. (1986) which were communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety. The researchers have adapted this set of questionnaires into the online classroom setting to suit the purpose of the current study.

Data Collection Procedures

The instrument was distributed via Google Form to the selected 100 participants and only 81 participants submitted the questionnaires. According to Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) table, the number of participants was already sufficient. The data collected from the questionnaires were statistically analysed by using SPSS version 28.0 and presented in the form of descriptive statistics highlighting the percentage and mean.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Level of English language speaking anxiety in online classroom

The quantitative data that is gathered from 24 items of the FLSAS, meant to measure the level of English speaking anxiety among Malaysian undergraduates. Since the instrument utilised the 5-point-Likert scale, the total score of each item rated by the participants was tabulated. Hence, a total score of more than 84 is categorised as a high level of speaking anxiety, whereas a total score ranging from 60 - 83 is reflected as a moderate level of speaking anxiety, and a total score of less than 59 indicates a low level of speaking anxiety. The items that were negatively worded are scored reversely to ensure an accurate data analysis.

Table 1 below presents the level of English language speaking anxiety among Malaysian undergraduates as indicated through the responses obtained in the FLSAS. It shows that the majority of the undergraduates experience a moderate level of speaking anxiety. The descriptive statistics show that 67% of the participants scored 60 - 83 which indicates a moderate level of speaking anxiety. The rest of the participants experience a low level of speaking anxiety (20%) and another 13% encounter a high level of speaking anxiety. This result reveals that the level of

speaking anxiety among Malaysian undergraduates is quite alarming as almost two-thirds of the participants truly experience English language speaking anxiety. In a study conducted by Miskam and Saidalvi (2019), a similar result was obtained where 32 out of 42 participants (76%) showed moderate level of speaking anxiety, followed by a similar number of participants (12%) who experienced a high and low level of speaking anxiety.

Table 1.
Level of English language speaking anxiety experienced by the participants

Total FLSAS	Anxiety Level	Frequency	Percentage
84 - 120	High	11	13.58 %
60 - 83	Moderate	54	66.67 %
24 - 59	Low	16	19.75 %
	Total	81	100 %

Factors of English language speaking anxiety in online classroom
Table 2, 3 and 4 below illustrate the three factors of English language speaking anxiety as suggested by Horwitz et al. (1986). Each table shows the most dominant factor for the different levels of speaking anxiety; high, moderate, and low, experienced by the participants.

Based on table 2, the data shows the most dominant factor for students who experience a high level of speaking anxiety is communication apprehension with the highest mean (M=3.75), followed by fear of negative evaluation (M=3.62) and test anxiety (M=3.58). This finding is aligned with Kusumawardhani and Lestari (2022) who conducted a similar study in Indonesia and found that the majority of the participants, especially for those with high and moderate level of speaking anxiety mentioned that communication apprehension is the most influential factor for their speaking anxiety in online speaking class.

Table 2.
Factors of English language speaking anxiety for students with high level of speaking anxiety

Factor of Speaking Anxiety	Items	Mean
Communication apprehension	1, 3, 4, 7, 8, 11, 13, 14, 15, 17, 19, 20, 24	3.75
Fear of negative evaluation	2, 6, 9, 16, 18, 22, 23	3.62
Test anxiety	5, 10, 12, 21	3.58

Table 3 below illustrates the contributing factors for students who experienced moderate level of English language speaking anxiety. The result shows that communication apprehension has the highest mean which is 3.25, whereas fear of negative evaluation states the mean of 3.10 and 2.87 for the test anxiety factor. Thus, the most dominant factor for students with a moderate level of speaking anxiety is communication apprehension.

Table 3.
Factors of English language speaking anxiety for students with moderate level of speaking anxiety

Factor of Speaking Anxiety	Items	Mean
Communication apprehension	1, 3, 4, 7, 8, 11, 13, 14, 15, 17, 19, 20, 24	3.25
Fear of negative evaluation	2, 6, 9, 16, 18, 22, 23	3.10
Test anxiety	5, 10, 12, 21	2.87

The data from Table 4 below presents the factors of speaking anxiety among students with a low level of speaking anxiety. The finding reveals that fear of negative evaluation appears to be the most dominant factor for those with low level of speaking anxiety (M=2.40), followed by communication apprehension (M=2.25) and test anxiety (M=2.18). This marks a different finding from Miskam and Saidalvi (2019) who found test anxiety as the main factor for students with low level of speaking anxiety.

Table 4.
Factors of English language speaking anxiety for students with low level of speaking anxiety

Factor of Speaking Anxiety	Items	Mean
Communication apprehension	1, 3, 4, 7, 8, 11, 13, 14, 15, 17, 19, 20, 24	2.25
Fear of negative evaluation	2, 6, 9, 16, 18, 22, 23	2.40
Test anxiety	5, 10, 12, 21	2.18

Discussion
The first question in this study was to investigate the level of English speaking anxiety among Malaysian undergraduates in online classroom. The result from FLSAS reveals that the majority of the participants (67%) experience moderate level of English language speaking anxiety in online classroom which is in line with findings by Miskam and Saidalvi (2019), Abdullah and Abdul Rahman (2010) and Chan et al. (2012) where students experience moderate level of English language speaking anxiety in physical classroom. Any level of anxiety should be a red flag to both language instructors and learners as it can be debilitative. When learners face speaking anxiety, it affects their performance and ability in expressing opinions and thoughts (Cagatay, 2015) and readiness to communicate in English language (Wu & Lin, 2014).

The second question of this study was to determine factors influencing English language speaking anxiety among Malaysian undergraduates in online classroom. The finding indicates that the dominant factor for learners with high and moderate levels of English language speaking anxiety is communication apprehension. In online classroom setting, learners become anxious

when they could not comprehend what the lecturer says and they become self-conscious when they have to speak in front of other learners. Suleimaenova (2013) reported that anxiety can hamper learners' speech performance and eventually lead to communication apprehension.

For learners with low level of speaking anxiety, the dominant factor that contributes to English language speaking anxiety is fear of negative evaluation. High proficiency students should be more willing to take risks and make mistakes in language classroom as this will give them the opportunities to further improve their language use. This finding is similar to Huang and Hwang (2013) that university students are afraid of losing face in front of their lecturers and classmates hence, they tend not to speak in language class for fear of making mistakes. It can be inferred from the finding of this study that the pressure of speaking in online language class is lower compared to face to face class.

CONCLUSION

The present study was conducted to determine the level of anxiety and factors that influence English language speaking anxiety in online classroom among undergraduate learners in Malaysia. The findings showed that the majority of the students experienced a moderate level of speaking anxiety. The dominant factor that contributes to this situation is communication apprehension for students who experienced a high level of speaking anxiety. For students with moderate and low level of speaking anxiety, the dominant factors are communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation respectively.

Speaking anxiety that exists in both face-to-face and online classrooms could hinder the performance of language learners speaking in the target language. Thus, it is hoped that the findings from this study could facilitate both language learners and language instructors in improving their speaking skills and addressing the issues related to speaking anxiety in English language classrooms. Greater and holistic approaches are needed to ensure language learners experience a stress-free, interactive and supportive learning environment. Further research can be done to investigate other factors that contribute to speaking anxiety in English language classrooms as well as the coping strategies that can be taken to tackle this issue. The significant findings from these future studies will provide advancements to the teaching and learning process specifically for English as a second language in online learning.
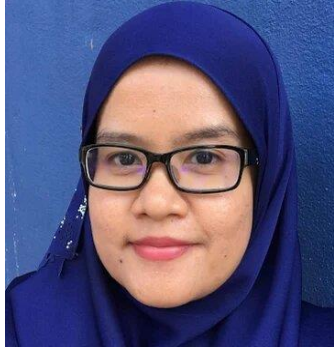
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