

## FACTORS AFFECTING UNDERGRADUATES' ENGLISH LANGUAGE SPEAKING ANXIETY

Miskam, Nuraqilah Nadjwa<sup>1</sup> and Saidalvi, Aminabibi<sup>2</sup>

Fakulti Pendidikan<sup>1</sup>, Language Academy<sup>2</sup>,  
Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), 81310 Skudai, Johor Bahru.  
(E-mail: aqilahnadjwa@gmail.com<sup>1</sup> aminabibi@utm.my<sup>2</sup>)

**Abstract:** *The issue of Malaysian graduates not having effective speaking skill in English has become a distressing matter. It seems that speaking in English is a daunting task that many Malaysian graduates would avoid. This is due to the existence of second language anxiety that hinders these undergraduate learners from speaking in English. This study aims to determine the level of English language speaking anxiety among Malaysian undergraduate learners and the contributing factors that lead to this issue. The Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety Scale (FLSAS) by (Balemir, 2009) was adapted and administered to measure the level of students' speaking anxiety and a semi-structured interview was conducted to investigate the factors that contribute to English language speaking anxiety among Malaysian undergraduates. The findings of this study will benefit both undergraduates and educators to be more aware of the existence of English language speaking anxiety and to find appropriate strategies to curb this issue.*

**Key Words:** *English language speaking anxiety, speaking anxiety, FLSAS, factors*

A negative correlation between anxiety and second or foreign language speaking anxiety is established in the literature (Balemir, 2009; Suleimenova, 2013; Huang, 2004). Speaking has been highlighted as the most anxiety-provoking skill and it is the most prominent source of anxiety in language classroom (Ozturk and Gurbuz, 2013). The issue of Malaysian graduates not having effective speaking skill in English has become a distressing matter especially in securing employment in the future. Despite the fact that they have been exposed to this language since kindergarten, Malaysian graduates find it intimidating to use the second language. This situation is worrying as most employers put English proficiency skills as a requirement to recruit future employees. If this situation continues, we might be looking at an increasing number of unemployed graduates in our country.

Despite the known importance of mastering English language, our graduates are still struggling to use the target language in both academic and social context. Several factors may contribute to poor communication skills among graduate and one of them is anxiety. Language anxiety has been known as one of the inhibiting factors in language learning (Ohata, 2005). Due

to the limited exposure on the structure and function of language, learners find it challenging to acquire new language.

Though research on speaking anxiety has recently increased (Suleimenova, 2013; Cagatay 2015), very limited research has been conducted in the context of undergraduates learning second language. Looking at the impact that anxiety has on second language learning process, there is a crucial need to deal with the language anxiety faced by learners in Malaysia, especially in speaking skill. This study hopes to investigate the level of English language speaking anxiety and the factors that contributes to speaking anxiety among Malaysian undergraduates.

### **English Language Speaking Anxiety**

Speaking anxiety can simply be defined as the fear of using or producing the language orally (Balemir, 2009). Suleimenova (2013) noted that the concern over communication competence among second or foreign language learners in the recent years may trigger a high level of speaking anxiety.

Ozturk and Gurbuz (2013) who explored the effect of gender on foreign language speaking anxiety and learners' motivation found that female participants are more anxious than male participants in speaking English. Some studies have also explored the relationship between foreign language anxiety and proficiency level, achievement of performance (Llinas and Garau, 2009, Hismanoglu, 2013). Most of these studies showed negative relationship between language anxiety and learners' proficiency, achievement or performance. Llinas and Garau (2009) explored the effects of foreign language anxiety on learners of Spanish in three different proficiency levels. The results depicted that the advanced level participants were the most anxious while the beginner level participants were the least anxious.

### **Factors Contribute to English Language Speaking Anxiety**

Kayaoglu and Saglamel (2013) conducted a study in exploring the learners' perceptions of language anxiety in north-eastern state university in Turkey found that learners' personal reasons, learners' belief, teachers' factors were among the three main sources of anxiety.

#### ***1. Personal reasons***

Personal reasons are associated with learners' self-evaluations and self-comparison to others. Learners are inclined to evaluate their own abilities and these kinds of evaluations can either be positive or negative.

Anxiety has both positive and negative impact on language learning. When it comes to evaluations, research shows that any negative evaluations promote anxiety (Nur Afiqah Ab.

Latif, 2015). But, if the evaluation is positive, it can help the learners to develop and improve their language skills (Cagatay, 2015).

Another personal reason associated with speaking anxiety is self-comparison to others. It is referred to as learners' competitive behaviours in the language classroom (Aydin, 2001). When learners feel that they have weaker language skills than their peers, they will start to compete with each other and causing them to feel anxious.

## **2. *Learners' belief***

Learners' own belief about language learning have an influence over language anxiety and speaking anxiety. Some students have this mind-set that specific skills are more important than others in language learning.

Ohata (2005) stated that some learners choose grammatical structures over pronunciation because they feel that grammatical knowledge is much more important than pronunciation while some other learners believe that reading is the most vital skill in language learning. The unrealistic notion about language learning may have an inhibiting impact on their accomplishment (Aydin, 2001).

## **3. *Teachers' factors***

Teacher has a detrimental role to the success or failure in language learning (Kayaoglu and Saglamel, 2013). Studies on the role of teachers in language and speaking anxiety showed that teachers' treatment of error and attitude towards the students may provoke anxiety (Aydin, 2001).

In language learning process, the way the teachers treat error is pivotal because research revealed that learners' motivation and self-efficacy in language learning depend on the amount of feedback; negative or positive, they received (Aydin, 2001). Teachers' harsh manner in treating learners' error can be said to be an anxiety-breeding factor and studies also indicate parallel evidence to this notion ( Kayaoglu and Saglamel, 2013).

Apart from that, teachers' attitude towards the students can also be a factor in language and speaking anxiety. Cheng (2005) investigated the role of teachers' manner and characteristics in language anxiety found that teachers who were friendly, supportive and patient result in less anxiety among the learners. But, teachers who are poor communicator and rigid increased the learners' anxiety level.

It is a norm in speaking classes that students are required to participate in oral activities. However, many researches have shown that learners will feel anxious when they are asked to speak in front of the teacher or their peers and it can be said that most learners would avoid giving presentation as it is such an anxiety-provoking situation (Suleimenova, 2013).

## Methodology

This study employed a mixed method design. The quantitative and qualitative data will be collected and analyzed separately. There are two sampling procedures used in this study. The first sampling procedure is random sampling procedure that is used to distribute the questionnaire to 280 participants of third year undergraduates in the selected university. The second sampling procedure is purposive sampling procedure for the semi-structured interview. For this interview, the participants were selected based on their level of English language speaking anxiety. 2 participants in each level of speaking anxiety were selected for this interview. This is to gain more insight on the factors that contribute to speaking anxiety from different level of speaking anxiety.

The first instrument used for this study is questionnaire. The questionnaire utilized is Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety Scale (FLSAS) adapted from Huang (2004) and Balemir (2009). The second instrument used is semi-structured interview. The questions from the interview were adapted from various sources (Balemir, 2009; Ozturk and Gurbuz, 2013).

The data obtained from the questionnaire were analysed using statistical analysis SPSS version 23.0 and presented in the form of descriptive statistics. The data collected from the semi-structured interview were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clark, 2006). The data were coded into a few main themes which mainly focused on the factors contribute to the English language speaking anxiety among Malaysian undergraduates.

## Findings

### *Level of English language speaking anxiety*

FLSAS that is used to measure the level of English language speaking anxiety among Malaysian undergraduate contained 28 items. FLSAS used a 5-point Likert scale ranging from one 'strongly disagree' to five 'strongly agree'. The items in FLSAS that are negatively worded were scored reversely.

Table 1 below illustrates the level of English language speaking anxiety among Malaysian undergraduates. It can be seen that 203 participants (73%) have moderate level of English language speaking anxiety. 66 participants (24%) have high level of English language speaking anxiety and the remaining 11 participants (4%) have low level of English language speaking anxiety.

**Table 1:** Level of English language speaking anxiety among Malaysian undergraduates

Total FLSAS	Anxiety Level	Frequency	Percentage
98 – 140	High	66	24%
70 – 97	Moderate	203	73%

## *Factors contribute to English language speaking anxiety*

### *1. Personal reasons*

#### *High anxiety*

Personal reasons are associated with learners' self-evaluation and self-comparison with others. The learners' evaluation of themselves and others can be facilitating or debilitating. These evaluations can either improve or impede learners' language ability.

Based on the data, for learners with high level of speaking anxiety, it is found that they did have the tendency to evaluate themselves however, this evaluation is debilitating them from improving their language ability.

“I get **nervous whenever I have to speak in front of people** no matter in what language. Somehow I believe that this is the reason why I will **never be confident** enough to speak English”

Student 1 | Self-evaluation | Semi-structured interview

Excerpt 4.1 proves that Student 1 (S1) has a negative evaluation about her ability to speak in front of people. Her negative evaluation towards herself has a negative impact to her language improvement.

Another personal reason that has led these learners to feel anxious when speaking English is self-comparison to others. Excerpt 4.2 reveals learners comparing their speaking skills with their classmates.

“I did **compare my speaking skill with my friends**. We have students who are majoring in English in our class. It is **intimidating** whenever I hear them speak because they have such a good English slang”

Student 2 | Self-comparison | Semi-structured interview

Student 2 (S2) admitted that she compared her speaking skill with her friends. Since some of her classmates are majoring in English, it even adds more to her nervousness and it is an 'intimidating' environment for her.

#### *Moderate anxiety*

The data obtained from the interview shows that both learners, Student 3 (S3) and Student 4 (S4) self-evaluate themselves but unfortunately, it has negative impact on their language learning performance. Student 3 (S3) in the excerpt expressed her worry about being ‘judged and laughed at’ by her classmates.

“In our class, after we presented in English, **we will be judged and laughed at by our classmates**. So the confidence to use the language next time is a bit shaky”

Student 3 | Self-evaluation |Semi-structured interview

In term of self-comparison to others, learners with moderate level of English language speaking anxiety did compare their speaking ability with their classmates.

“Of course I have. I always wonder **how they can speak so fluently** and why I cannot be like them. I feel **quite stressed out** whenever I compare myself with my friends

Student 4 | Self-comparison |Semi-structured interview

### *Low anxiety*

Learners with low English language speaking anxiety seem to have a very positive attitude with regards to their self-evaluation in speaking or language learning as a whole.

“**I am not really worried about my English subject**. I love to speak during English class.

Student 5 | Self-evaluation |Semi-structured interview

“**I do not feel that I have a low proficiency** in English but surely there are **some skills that need to be improved**”

Student 6 | Self-evaluation |Semi-structured interview

Student 5 (S5) are ‘not worried’ about her English class. She sees the class as an opportunity for her to improve her communication skill and to use English language. Student 6 (S6) believes that she does not have a low proficiency in English but admit that there are ‘some skills’ that she needs to improve.

In terms of self-comparison to others, learners with low speaking anxiety admitted that they did compare themselves with their peers but surprisingly, it does not affect them negatively nor does it hamper their performance in speaking.

## 2. Learners' belief

### *High anxiety*

Learners with high level of speaking anxiety expressed the belief that 'vocabularies', 'writing' and 'speaking' are the most important that they need to master in language learning. The excerpts below were extracted from the semi-structured interview to highlight the findings.

"I think the **most important would be vocabularies**. If we do not have enough vocabularies, we do not know what to say. **And also my speaking skill** because when we speak, we cannot correct our mistakes like writing"

Student 1 | Learners' belief |Semi-structured interview

Student 1 (S1) expressed the belief that vocabularies and speaking skill are the two most important skills to learn in language learning. It can be inferred from her comment that vocabularies and speaking are interrelated because without 'enough vocabularies', it will be difficult for them to speak.

"The most important skills for me would be **writing and speaking** in which **making me nervous** because I know that I need those skills for my study"

Student 2 | Learners' belief |Semi-structured interview

The comment by Student 2 (S2) above illustrates her concern for her writing and speaking skill. She believe that these two skills are important and it can be suggested that she has not yet master these two skills which making her 'nervous' as she need them for her study.

### *Moderate anxiety*

The excerpt below revealed that for Student 3 (S3), the most important skill for her in learning English is speaking.

"**Speaking** is important from any other skills in English"

Student 3 | Learners' belief |Semi-structured interview

When further prompted whether her perception has made her anxious about language learning, she said:

"**It does sometimes because speaking is one of my weaknesses**. But I know I need to improve this skill to get a good grade for this class"

Student 3 | Learners' belief |Semi-structured interview

Student 4 (S4) in the excerpt below mentioned that for her the most difficult aspect is to 'respond to what they said'. Due to her lack of vocabularies, it can be inferred that she is having a hard time retrieving the right words to use and at the same time to construct sentences in English.

"I can understand when people speak in English but **my problem is that I find it hard to respond to what they said**. Maybe because **my lack of vocabulary** has led me to this problem"

Student 4 | Learners' belief |Semi-structured interview

### *Low anxiety*

When asked about the most difficult aspect of learning or speaking, Student 5 and Student 6 responded quite similarly.

"I think it is **my expression of ideas**. If I do not have any ideas or I do not find the topic to be interesting, I cannot really speak"

Student 5 | Learners' belief |Semi-structured interview

"When I **cannot convey my ideas effectively** especially in a spontaneous or impromptu speech. I find it quite frustrating when I face that problem"

Student 6 | Learners' belief |Semi-structured interview

Student 5 (S5) and Student 6 (S6) echoed each other responses by saying that the most difficult aspect of learning or speaking English is their expressions of ideas. Student 5 (S5) revealed that when she cannot express her ideas or find that the topic is not interesting enough, she cannot speak well.

### 3. *Teachers' factors*

#### *High anxiety*

Based on the semi-structured interview, learners who experienced high English language speaking anxiety have both very different opinion about their lecturers' attitude and error treatment manner in class. The excerpts below were extracted from the interview to highlight the interesting finding.

"My lecturer is very **friendly** so I **do not feel stressed out** in her

class”

Student 1 | Characteristics |Semi-structured interview

“Being in my English class can be **very stressful and overwhelming**. The way she gave instruction also affecting us because she speaks so fast and it’s hard for us to process and comprehend what she wanted us to do”

Student 2 | Characteristics |Semi-structured interview

Talking about this issue, Student 1 (S1) mentioned that her lecturer is a friendly person in nature. Therefore, she does not feel ‘stressed out’ in class. As compared to Student 2 (S2), she indicated that her class is ‘stressful and overwhelming’. She further explained the situation in her class by saying that she cannot ‘comprehend’ what the lecturer is saying in class due to her fast pace in speaking.

Another important finding is about the teachers’/ lecturers’ treatment of error. The following excerpts provide the learners’ comment on their lecturers’ treatment of error.

“She usually gave us **feedback after all of us have finished our presentation**. But it is general not one by one. She did **not comment on our grammar or vocabularies** but more towards our confidence level”

Student 1 | Treatment of error |Semi-structured interview

The excerpt above by Student 1 (S1) revealed that her lecturer usually gives them a general feedback about their presentation (oral task) and it is done after they finished their presentation.

The finding for this factor is different for Student 2 (S2).

“She gave her feedback well, **sometimes in the middle of our presentation and sometimes, after we finished our presentation**. She does not really give us feedback but more like **asking us bunch of questions** without giving us ample time to answer them. I need time to construct my sentences in English and when she did that, it **feels really stressful**”

Student 2 | Treatment of error |Semi-structured interview

Student 2 (S2) in excerpt above expressed her ‘stressful’ situation when the lecturer starts to give her feedback on her oral presentation. She finds it stressful to have to answer questions posed by her lecturer in the middle of her presentation and not being given enough time to answer the questions.

*Moderate anxiety*

Learners with moderate level of English language speaking anxiety that were interviewed experienced a very different environment in their respective classroom. In regards with the teachers'/lecturer's manner, Student 3 (S3) has a 'fun' lecturer to learn with while Student 4 (S4) has a strict lecturer to deal with.

“My lecturer is just a **fun person** to be with. Since she is very friendly to her students, **I did not feel too nervous to be in her class**”

Student 3 | Characteristics | Semi-structured interview

“**I do not perceive my lecturer as friendly or fun.** She likes to **pinpoint our mistakes** when we present our oral tasks”

Student 4 | Characteristics | Semi-structured interview

If we now turn to the teachers'/ lecturers' treatment of error, there are some interesting findings that need to be highlighted.

“The way she treated our mistakes is **not direct.** She would not tell you that you have made a mistake directly but she will make a general correction so that everyone will take note and learn from it”

Student 3 | Treatment of error| Semi-structured interview

Student 3 (S3) mentioned that her lecturer's treatment of error is indirect. Her lecturer did not tackle the learners' mistakes directly but instead she will make a 'general correction' so that everyone can learn from it as well.

“The way my lecturer gives us feedback is by **bombarding us with questions** in the middle of our speech. **Without giving us time to construct an answer** for the question that she asked, she already asks a different question.

Student 4 | Treatment of error| Semi-structured interview

It is apparent from the excerpt that Student 4 (S4) is overwhelmed with how her lecturer treats her errors and mistakes in class. The feedback is neither general nor specific but more on posing unnecessary questions in the middle of her oral presentation. It can thus be suggested that her lecturer has a harsh manner in treating errors.

### *Low anxiety*

Based on the semi-structured interview, learners with low speaking anxiety level have the same perception about their lecturer's manner in class.

“She is a **friendly** lecturer. **Never did I feel stressed out** in her class. She treats us like friends”

Student 5 | Characteristics |Semi-structured interview

“I have such a **friendly** lecturer. She is always positive and always support us to try to speak English”

Student 6 | Characteristics |Semi-structured interview

Student 5 (S5) and Student 6 (S6) have a ‘friendly’ lecturer in class. Student 5 (S5) further expressed that she never feel stressed out during her English class and that has a facilitating environment to her language learning. Student 6 (S6) noted that her lecturer is ‘positive’ and always ‘support the class to try to speak English which is another facilitating factor to learn English language.

In terms of the teachers’/lecturers’ treatment of error, these learners did not receive any harsh treatment of error by their respective lecturer.

“Pronunciation, yes but I think it’s normal. She **never critiques us in a negative way**. She will give us **general feedback** the week after we finished our presentation”

Student 5 | Treatment of error| Semi-structured interview

Student 5 (S5) experienced a general feedback from her lecturer. Never has she received any ‘negative’ comments. Her lecturer did comment on their pronunciation sometimes but it is just a way to help the learners to improve.

These learners commented that their lecturer have a positive attitude towards correcting error. The learners feels more comfortable to speak in class as the lecturer did not ‘pinpoints’ their grammatical or pronunciation error ‘directly’ which can inhibit learners’ performance.

“She likes to **ask us opinion on the topics** but never pressured us to speak in class. But since she **never pinpoints our grammatical mistakes or pronunciation directly**, we do not feel embarrassed to speak”

Student 6 | Treatment of error |Semi-structured interview

## Conclusion

### *Level of speaking anxiety*

The first research question in this study is on the level of English language speaking anxiety among Malaysian undergraduates. Findings from Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety Scale (FLSAS) revealed that majority of the Malaysian undergraduates (73%) experienced moderate level of English language speaking anxiety which is parallel to the findings in the study by Balemir (2009) and Hismanoglu (2013). Even though moderate level of speaking anxiety seems to be harmless, it is still worrying because any level of anxiety can still be debilitating to the learners' performance. It can affect the students' ability to express their thoughts and opinions in English and their readiness to communicate in English (Cagatay, 2015). While the result of this study is consistent with some studies that have been previously done, it is however inconsistent with the findings by Huang (2004) where majority of the Taiwanese learners of English experienced high level of foreign language speaking anxiety. The difference might be due to the cultural segregation as Taiwanese learn English as a foreign language where there is too little exposure of the language.

### ***Factors contribute to English language speaking anxiety***

Personal reasons are closely related to learners' self-evaluation and self-comparison to others. For learners with high and moderate level of English language speaking anxiety, it is found that they have a negative perception about their own speaking ability that leads to low self-confidence. This finding is line with (Basic, 2011) that speaking-anxious people are those who are self-conscious about their speaking ability and having a fear of being laughed at when they speak. For low anxiety learners, they have more positive perceptions with regards to their self-evaluation in speaking. They are not worried about English subject which seems to be taking first seat in term of anxiety-breeding nature (Ohata, 2005). High and moderate anxiety learners also compare their speaking ability with their peers. This is parallel to a study done by Yan and Horwitz (2008) who indicated that majority of the participants compare their language ability with their peers. It creates an intimidating environment to the learners when they feel that their peers perform better than them. It is in contrast with low anxiety learners in which that they admitted of making comparison of their speaking ability to their classmates. This finding corroborates with Cagatay (2015) study who revealed that comparing one's ability to another can serve as a facilitative anxiety and promotes healthy competition in language classroom.

Learners' own belief about language learning have an influence over language and speaking anxiety. They believe that specific skill or reasons are more important than others in language learning. Learners with high and moderate level of English language speaking anxiety believe that vocabulary and speaking are the most important skills they need to learn or master in language learning. The learners' belief about what is important may be influenced by the way the teacher treat their error of whether the teacher correct more of their pronunciation or vocabulary (Nur Afiqah Ab. Latif, 2015). Learners with low level of English language speaking anxiety believe that the most difficult part about learning a language is the expression opinion and ideas when speaking. This finding is parallel to Dornyei (2005) who mentioned that anxious learners '

verbal production will decrease as a result of anxiety making it difficult for them to express their ideas.

Learners who perceived their lecturers as fun and friendly they do not feel stressed out or pressured being in English class as their lecturers managed to create a positive learning environment. Cheng (2005) in his found that a friendly, supportive and patient teacher may result in less anxiety among the learners. Learners who did not perceive their lecturers as friendly felt stressed and overwhelmed when they go for their English class. Their lecturers like to pinpoint their mistakes in class which makes them feel anxious to speak in English thus result in them being silence in English class. This finding is parallel to some studies (Suleimenova, 2013; Ozturk and Gurbuz, 2013) that leaners will tend to stay silence to avoid making any mistakes in class.

In terms of the treatment of error, it can be said that majority of the learners that are interviewed received general feedback from their lecturers. Their lecturers did not point out any grammatical or pronunciation mistakes made by the learners throughout their oral presentation. An emphasis on grammar rules will make the learners feel even more anxious when speaking (Nur Afiqah Ab.Latif, 2015). When learners feel anxious, their cognitive process will be interrupted (Suleimenova, 2013). This result in more time needed to process the information.

### **Suggestion and Recommendations**

Based on the findings, it is believed that English language speaking anxiety has the ability to inhibit the learners' speaking performance. The findings from this research can serve as guidance for both instructors and learners to further improve their speaking skill and to tackle the issue of speaking anxiety in English classroom. Lecturers must inculcate a supportive classroom environment and to treat error as a part of learners' language learning process. It is also suggested that the lecturers must be sensitive towards the learners' speaking anxiety and help them to overcome this issue. The lecturers may consider oral activities that are within the learners' linguistics competence. Giving learners interesting and relatable topics may help alleviate the learners' speaking anxiety as it help learners to have more ideas to talk about. Further research should be done in this field to explore some other factors that may contribute to learners' English language speaking anxiety and the coping strategies that can be employed by the learners to curb this issue.

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