

Speaking Anxiety Among English Majors at Misurata University: A Learner's Perspective

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Article information

Abstract

This paper investigated the major causes of speaking anxiety and students' perceptions in a Libyan EFL context. Fourth semester students (N=30) of English at Misurata University participated in the study, in the academic year 2022-2023. The data of the level of EFL speaking anxiety were collected through a questionnaire, and then, other participants (N=7) were interviewed to get in-depth data on speaking anxiety. The quantitative data were analysed through descriptive statistics, and the qualitative data were analysed via content analysis. The results of the quantitative data revealed that the majority of the students (70%) experienced a high level of EFL speaking anxiety. The qualitative data, on the other hand, showed that there were mainly three factors behind students' speaking anxiety namely linguistic, individual and gender-related factors, and most students perceived the speaking skill as an anxiety provoking factor. Finally, depending on the findings of the study, some recommendations were emphasized.

Keywords: English as a foreign language, EFL speaking anxiety, Libyan learners

The Problem and Its Background

It could be argued that mastering a language is determined by how far someone can speak it perfectly, especially in public. However, because speaking a foreign language is an on-the-spot production, then it is usually judged immediately by those who receive the conveyed message, and the level of clarity and understanding of this message mostly rely on how well it was delivered.

Investigations on the connection between foreign language learning and affective variables commonly concentrate on a number of personality factors such as self-esteem, risk-taking, extroversion, motivation and anxiety (Noormohamadi, 2009). With these qualities, it is expected to either have positive or negative effects in

the process of language learning. Yet, anxiety is considered one of the most important factors and has been an interesting research area for quite a long time.

Background of the Study

Many students of English as a foreign language have difficulties speaking the language especially in class, and they experience anxiety because of some psychological factors such as fear of committing mistakes while others might judge the speaker, shyness or nervousness around others, or self-consciousness in front of a large group of people. No matter the reason why, those factors (or maybe any one of them) may hinder students' progress in learning the language and cause difficulties in mastering the skill of speaking. Young

(1992), proposed that learners experience more anxiety when performing speaking activities in front of class and on spot performance than when performing other skills.

Objectives of the Study

In the light of this theoretical background, the objectives of the current study are as follows:

- To examine whether English majors in the English Department, Misurata University experience speaking anxiety in class,
- To detect the key factors (if any) that may cause speaking anxiety for students,
- To investigate the possible effects of foreign language anxiety on the students' speaking performance.

Statement of the Problem

The exact research focus is on the anxiety in students' L2 speaking behaviour in evidence at the university education level of EFL in Libya. Specifically, and according to the objectives stated above, the present study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. To what extent do English majors in the English department, Misurata University experience foreign language speaking anxiety in class?
2. What are the major causes of foreign language speaking anxiety and how students perceive it?

Scope and Delimitations

The aim of this research is to investigate whether EFL learners experience speaking anxiety, the causes of this anxiety and how does it affect the learners' performance. The study is delimited only to fourth semester (spring, 2022-2023) university students who enrolled in the English department at Faculty of Arts, Misurata university.

Literature Review

A key issue which has been highlighted in the research literature is the speaking anxiety among language learners and its effect upon EFL learning processes, which forms the basis for discussion in this section.

Anxiety is "a subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the automatic nervous system" (Spielberger, 1983, p. 15). Different studies tackled the issue of speaking anxiety in relation to its effect on English language learning. However, many researchers (e.g., Wörde, 1998; Arnold & Brown, 1999; Hurd & Xiao, 2010) described anxiety as one of the most prevalent variable which obstructs the language learning outcomes. Wörde (1998), for example, argued that anxiety is a serious issue experienced by almost one third to one half of students in second and foreign language classes. Also he confirmed its significant effects on the performance and the acquisition of a foreign language.

With regard to foreign language anxiety (henceforth, FLA), Horwitz, et al. (1986) were the first to conceptualize FLA as a unique type of anxiety specific to foreign language learning responsible for students' uncomfortable experience in classroom situations. FLA was defined as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (Horwitz, et al., 1986, p. 128). Three conceptual foundations underlying language anxiety were suggested namely, communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety (Horwitz, et al.). A Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) was developed by Horwitz et al., which became the current most widely used instrument for measuring language anxiety.

To test their theory, Horwitz et al. (1986) included 75 English learners of Spanish in order to respond to their FLCAS. The study revealed that many students experienced a considerable amount of anxiety which appeared to affect their language performance. Also, those who complained from high anxiety mentioned that they became nervous and hesitant to speak in the target language. Aida (1994) supported these results in a study aimed to investigate anxiety in a Japanese language context. Aida used FLCAS to examine its reliability and the relationship of the anxiety levels of students to their performance in Japanese. Besides the reliability of the FLCAS proved by the study results, a considerable amount of anxiety was found in the

Japanese classroom along with a significant negative correlation between anxiety scores and final grades among American students learning Japanese claiming that students with high levels of anxiety are more likely to receive low grades and vice versa.

Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety

The literature has given much interest in foreign language speaking anxiety. Speaking has been considered as the most anxiety-provoking skill (Phillips, 1992; Young, 1992; Wörde 2003; Horwitz, 2010; Melouah, 2013; Aldarasi, 2020; Zhang & Wu, 2020). Aldarasi (2020), for instance, conducted a study to discover the reasons behind the foreign language anxiety that English majors experience at a Libyan university. The study included both students and teachers of English as participants and the findings showed that in spite of the different possible sources of FLA, speaking was highlighted as the main source of foreign language anxiety in EFL learning classrooms. This was in line with the findings of Wörde's (2003), which revealed that speaking and listening were the most anxiety-producing sources among the vast majority of the participants in the study.

In a similar vein, Rafada and Madini (2017) conducted a study to explore their EFL learners' perceptions of speaking anxiety in language classroom. The learners described speaking as the most stressful skill in English. They also declared that they feel embarrassed and unconfident while speaking the target language, which as a result create their speaking anxiety.

Factors of Language Speaking Anxiety

In terms of the factors that might contribute to speaking anxiety among learners of English as a foreign language, Öztürk and Gürbüz (2014) mentioned different reasons for speaking anxiety that can be classified into three factors: environmental, individual and educational.

Similarly, in an attempt to identify the main factors that are assumed to increase speaking anxiety among EFL learners, a study conducted in eight EFL university classrooms in Taiwan by Tien (2018) figured out various sources of English speaking anxiety among Taiwanese university students related to linguistic knowledge. Besides the participants who were afraid of being misunderstood by others or mispronouncing the words, most of them stated that they were concerned about making grammatical mistakes and not having enough vocabulary/grammatical knowledge and sentence structure.

In a Libyan context, Toubot et al. (2018) involved 300 fourth-year English majors at three Libyan universities. The findings revealed that the Libyan students suffer from a moderate to high level of foreign language speaking anxiety. Additionally, students' high level of anxiety is caused either by speaking English without preparing in advance, their fear of making mistakes or speaking the target language in front of their classmates.

Effects of Language Speaking Anxiety

As for the possible effects of speaking anxiety on language learning, most of the studies conducted concluded that anxiety can negatively impact the performance of foreign language learners. Horwitz (2010) stated that language anxiety is intuitively considered to have a debilitating effect on second/foreign language learning, performance and achievement. Regarding speaking, Young (1986) confirmed the significant negative relationship between anxiety and oral performance. Phillips (1992) also confirmed statistically the significant negative relationship between scores on the Second Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (SLCAS) and oral exam grades. Similarly, Rachmawati and Jurianto (2020) claimed that the higher the foreign language speaking anxiety the students experience, the lower achievement score they get.

Moreover, speaking anxiety can affect the speaking achievement of the EFL learner in a negative way as it is considered a psycholinguistic barrier (Al-Khotaba et al., 2019). The results of Al-Khotaba et al.'s work revealed a weak negative correlation between language speaking anxiety and EFL learners' performance in speaking. Consequently, EFL learners with high level of language anxiety tended to have less achievement in speaking than those with low language speaking anxiety.

As stated above, though there are a substantial number of studies in literature carried out to reveal the level of EFL speaking anxiety experienced by learners,

few of them provide an insight on the unique nature of it, and a deep understanding of this phenomenon is missing in the literature. For that reason, the present study aims to present a broad understanding of EFL speaking anxiety.

Methodology

Research Design

This study investigated the speaking anxiety of English majors in the English Department at Misurata University. In order to provide more reliable results and to avoid any potential biases, data was collected both quantitatively and qualitatively by using a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview.

Participants

Participants were 30 students (26 female and 4 male students) majoring in English in the spring semester of the academic year 2022-2023. Their ages ranged between 20 and 21, and they were in the fourth semester of their university studies of English.

The rationale behind choosing fourth semester students was that working with students at the beginning of their tertiary education would have meant that they had had only a limited exposure to university setting, while the data obtained from the fourth semester students' questionnaire and interview might have said more about their university education, which was the context for the enquiry.

Data Collection

The Questionnaire. The questionnaire used in this study was adapted from Horwitz et al. (1986) with some modifications and the items used were 12. The selected 12 items were checked and discussed with one of the members of staff at the English Department who holds a PhD degree in applied linguistics and has taught different modules including phonetics, sociolinguistics, speaking and other skills. The literature also proved that those items were directly related to EFL speaking anxiety (e.g., Saltan, 2003; Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2014). The items of the questionnaire were translated by the researcher into the students' L1 (Arabic) to avoid any misinterpretations of items and to guarantee accurate and reliable data.

The Interview. The purpose of conducting interviews with the participants in this investigation was to answer the second research question concerning the major causes of foreign language speaking anxiety and how students perceived it. Hyland (2003) argues in favour of this technique saying that what makes interviews very common is the flexibility and responsiveness associated with them. The type of interview used in the present research was a semi-structured type which is known by its flexibility and freedom as well as being controlled and guided by the researcher to lead the participants to where he wanted them to go. After conducting the questionnaire, seven students from those who completed the questionnaire agreed to be interviewed (5 females and 2 males). The participants were given the chance to use whatever language (Arabic or English) they wanted in the

interview so that students could feel more relaxed answering the open-ended questions prepared by the researcher (see Appendix B).

Data Analysis

The quantitative data obtained from the questionnaire was statistically analyzed. Moreover, since the data gathered from the interviews was qualitative, it was organized into themes. To ensure data reliability, the researcher conducted the interview with the participants who had the questionnaire data which showed the results that had high, medium and low level of anxiety. The findings were then integrated and related to the background of the study, specifically to the research questions and to the methodology used in order to classify the data into meaningful units. However, the data gained from the interviews was filtered during the analysis process. In other words, only the information supported by the majority of the participants was counted. Nevertheless, any interesting findings related to the research objectives were found, certainly they were counted as well, which accordingly improved the reliability of the research findings.

Research Findings and Discussion

The Extent of Anxiety Among Students

To address the first research question (To what extent do English majors in the English Department, Misurata University experience foreign language

speaking anxiety in class?), a 5-graded Likert-scale questionnaire of 12 items was used (see Appendix A). Since the questionnaire is a 5-graded Likert scale, the total score ranged from 12 to 60. A total score of more than 48 demonstrated a high level of speaking anxiety; a total score ranged from 36 to 48 presented a moderate level of speaking anxiety, and participants who had a total score less than 36 showed a low level of foreign language speaking anxiety.

In order to know to what extent students experience English speaking anxiety in class, percentages were calculated. However, the results illustrated in Table 1 below showed that the majority of participants experienced a high level of English-speaking anxiety.

TABLE 1 PERCENTAGES OF PARTICIPANTS' ENGLISH-SPEAKING ANXIETY

	Number of participants	Percentage
High degree of speaking anxiety	21	70%
Low degree of speaking anxiety	6	20%
Medium degree of speaking anxiety	3	10%
Total	30	100%

From the participants' responses to the questionnaire items, a high level of anxiety was revealed. As the Table above shows, 70% (21) of the participants chose either 'agree' or 'strongly agree' to the 12 items in the questionnaire which all included some features of speaking anxiety. The rest, 20% (six) and 10% (three) of the participants, either picked 'undecided', 'disagree', or 'strongly disagree'. These results meant that most of the students did not feel relaxed when speaking in English during class time. The following figure could also help in illustrating the three levels of speaking anxiety among participants.

Factors Contributing to Speaking Anxiety

The data collected from the interview sessions was utilized to answer the second research question: What are the major causes of foreign language speaking anxiety and how students perceive it?

Three areas of potential causes of students' speaking anxiety were recognized, namely: linguistic factors, individual factors, and gender-related factors.

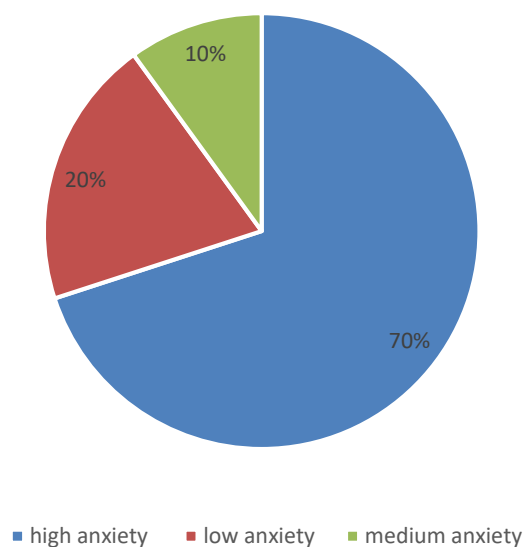


Figure 1. The extent of English-speaking anxiety among participants

Linguistic Factors. There was evidence in the data collected from the interview that students had the desire to participate in the oral activities, but they remained passive due to the lack of sufficient vocabulary and expressions in English. S3, for instance, said, *“It’s difficult sometimes to find the right words I want to say in English and for this reason I prefer not to speak”*. This was supported by Horwitz (2010), who argued that learners might experience cases of speaking anxiety even though they had mature thoughts and ideas in their L1 but they failed to express themselves in the target language. Another participant, S5, attributed her speaking anxiety in class to the possibility of committing grammar or pronunciation mistakes while speaking and this, in turn, might hinder her from commencing the talk; she said *“Grammar and especially choosing the right tense is my problem in speaking. I sometimes also feel worried about my pronunciation. I don’t know if my pronunciations of some words are correct or not”*.

Hence, the data revealed that students might have the ideas they wanted to convey in their target language, but they were over-concerned about some of the grammatical rules and structures which prevented them from transferring the intended message successfully. In a similar vein, Tien (2018), discovered various sources of English speaking anxiety among students related to linguistic knowledge such as being concerned about making grammatical mistakes and not having enough vocabulary/grammatical knowledge and sentence structure.

Moreover, these findings, i.e., the high level of speaking anxiety, might be attributed to the students’ lack of knowledge of oral communication and sufficient exposure to speaking in the pre-tertiary education. In other words, speaking skills were not given due attention compared to the focus given to grammar and reading.

Individual Factors. In response to the interview question: (Do you have any idea why you feel anxious in your English class?), some of the students, for example S1, S3, S5, and S18, said that they had an anxious personality and for that reason they were more disposed to anxiety. Responses to the same question above showed that they were nervous and introvert, and consequently it was difficult for them to speak while their classmates are listening. S1 went even further by saying, *“I also sometimes feel nervous speaking in Arabic in front of a large number of people. But of course, I feel more nervous when speaking in English in front of the class”*. This finding in particular made it clear that the personality factor was behind the reason of speaking anxiety for some learners, and it was not merely because they were afraid of making mistakes while talking in English. Also this finding was in line with Kim (2009) who stated that language learners “may experience some inherent levels of anxiety while taking part in oral activities” (p. 153). A similar finding was also reported by Zhang (2010) who stated that some students have a tendency to experience speaking anxiety because of personality issues.

Gender-related Factors. It was revealed that the presence of the opposite- sex students in the English class could cause speaking anxiety. Some participants, for example S16 and S18 (both were female students) explained that they experienced some difficulty in expressing themselves in English when they knew that some male students were sharing the same class. S16 stated that, *“I feel more comfortable speaking in class when it is only girls there. I don’t like the idea being watched by male students while speaking”*.

This was not the case, however, with the male student (S7) who reported that being in a class with some female students, *“will not prevent me from speaking easily as far as I understand the subject I want to talk about”*. Perhaps a similar attitude was expressed by another male student (S11) who stated that, *“speaking in class from my place is not an issue, but I may feel uncomfortable if the teacher asks me to go in front of the class and speak”*.

It happened, in some previous courses, that some female students came to my desk at the end of some lectures enquiring about some unclear points or asking questions about the aspects already being explained in class. Only while conducting this research I came to know that it was because they were shy and could not speak or ask during the lecture due to the presence of male classmates.

This opposite-sex anxiety could happen because of the lack of exposure to the opposite-sex counterparts in

Libyan educational institutions in pre-tertiary education where girls and boys are usually segregated starting from the 4th Grade Primary stage of education and for eight years before they could be engaged again in a co-educational setting in university.

Conclusion

The current investigation provided evidence that the majority of students of English at the Faculty of Arts, Misurata University experienced speaking anxiety during their intensive language learning programme. This was proved via responding to the questionnaire items which revealed high level of speaking anxiety among participants. Thirty students responded to the questionnaire in order to answer the first research question regarding the level of speaking anxiety among participants, and also seven students were interviewed to answer the second research question concerning the factors causing the speaking anxiety. The qualitative data showed that the reasons behind students’ high level of anxiety were related to three categories namely linguistic, individual and gender-related factors. The linguistic-related sources of anxiety included lack of vocabulary, grammar and incorrect pronunciation. The individual learner-related sources included students’ personality, nervousness, and lack of confidence. The gender-related sources included students’ mixed-gender classrooms and the pre-university English education settings.

The clear message of this research for EFL educators is that speaking anxiety does exist in

classrooms and could have a negative effect on students' speaking performance. Thus, this conclusion could provide basis for instructors to reduce the effect of anxiety among students of English. Teachers could provide students with a friendly and sociable classroom environment. Also students can be motivated to speak by informing them that making mistakes is natural in the English language learning process, and such mistakes should be seen as learning steps. Moreover, evaluating students' speaking performance in the classroom should be minimized by the educators so that more convenient classroom atmosphere can be guaranteed. Additionally, co-education environment at university can be stressful for some students. It is suggested that classroom tasks could be structured to involve both genders to eliminate students' fear and shyness and enhance collaboration in all activities.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Speaking Anxiety Questionnaire

Title of Research: Speaking Anxiety Among English Majors at Misurata University: A Learner's Perspective

Dear respondents,

I am currently conducting a research on EFL speaking anxiety among fourth semesters' English majors at the Faculty of Arts, Misurata University. Therefore, I am inviting you to participate in this research by completing the following questionnaire. It will require approximately 3-5 minutes to fill in. Your contribution will assist in ideally completing the research and enhancing the understanding of the research focus. Finally, your identity will be totally anonymous as well as the data collected will remain confidential and used solely for academic purposes.

Thank you for your contribution.

Sincerely,

Mustafa F. Elshawish,

Assistant Professor in TESOL,

Misurata University

عنوان البحث: قلق التحدث لدى طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية بجامعة مصراته:
دراسة من منظور المتعلم

أعزائي الطلاب،

أقوم حاليا بدراسة حالة التوتر عند التحدث باللغة الإنجليزية لدى طلاب
الفصل الدراسي الرابع بقسم اللغة الإنجليزية بكلية الآداب، جامعة مصراته.
لذلك أدعوكم للمشاركة بهذا البحث من خلال استكمال الاستبيان التالي.

سيطلب استكمال الاستبيان كحد أقصى 3-5 دقائق. مشاركتكم ستساهم في
استكمال البحث بشكل مثالي وزيادة التوعية بخصوص موضوع البحث.
أخيرا، هويتك وكذلك البيانات التي سيتم جمعها ستكون في غاية السرية
وسيتم استخدامها فقط لأغراض أكاديمية.
شكرا على مشاركتكم.

مع كل التقدير،

د. مصطفى فوزي الشاوش

Foreign language speaking anxiety questionnaire

Statements	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly agree
	لا أوافق بشدة	لا أوافق	لست متأكد	موافق	أوافق بشدة
I do not have enough self-confidence when I speak in English.					
عندما أتحدث الإنجليزية أشعر بعدم الثقة بالنفس.					
I am afraid of making mistakes in English classes.					
أخشى الوقوع في الأخطاء أثناء دروس اللغة الإنجليزية.					
I tremble when I know that the teacher will call on me in a class.					
أشعر بالذعر عندما أدرك أنه سيتم مناداتي أثناء دروس اللغة الإنجليزية.					
I get frightened when I do not understand what the teacher is saying in English.					
أخاف عندما لا أستطيع فهم ما يقوله الأستاذ بالإنجليزية.					
I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in English classes.					

يبتابني الشعور بالخوف عندما اضطرر للتحديث بالإنجليزية بدون تحضيرات مسبقة.					
I get embarrassed to volunteer answers in English classes.					
أشعر بالخجل عند التطوع للإجابة عن الأسئلة أثناء دروس اللغة الإنجليزية.					
I feel nervous while speaking English with native speakers.					
يراونني الشعور بالتوتر عند الحديث مع أشخاص لغتهم الأصلية/الأم هي الإنجليزية.					
I always feel					
that the other students speak English better than I do.					
دائما ما أشعر أن زملائي الطلبة أفضل مني في التحدث بالإنجليزية.					
I feel very self-conscious about speaking English in front of other students.					
أشعر بخجل شديد بمجرد التفكير بالتحدث بالإنجليزية أمام باقي الطلبة.					
I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules I have to learn to					

<p>speak English.</p> <p>أشعر بالارتباك من كثرة القواعد التي يجب تعلمها للتحدث بالإنجليزية.</p>					
<p>I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak English.</p> <p>أخشى أن يسخر مني زملائي عندما أتحدث بالإنجليزية.</p>					
<p>I get nervous when the English teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared answers for in advance.</p> <p>يتملكني التوتر عندما يبدأ الأستاذ بطرح أسئلة لم أقم بتحضيرها مسبقاً.</p>					

Appendix B: The Interview Questions:

1. Do you feel anxious in your English classes?
2. Do you have any idea why you feel anxious in your English class?
3. How do you think your classmates will react if you make a mistake in an English class?
4. Do you feel more anxious in some classes than in others?
5. Do teachers influence your mood in learning English?
6. Do you have any idea to make learning English more relaxing?