42. The Impact of Gender on Speaking Anxiety among Malaysian Tertiary ESL Learners

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to determine the level of tertiary ESL (English as a second language) students' anxiety in speaking in English in ESL classrooms. It also investigates the impact of gender on the speaking anxiety among these ESL learners. The speaking anxiety constructs include psychological anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, social-environmental factor, English classroom language anxiety, and perception factor. Responses from 237 undergraduate students at a Malaysian university were collected using a structured questionnaire that modified from the Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope's (1986) FLCAS (Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale). The participants of this survey were asked to rate each of the statement in the 32-item questionnaire using a five-point Likert-type scale in which 1 refers to strongly disagree, 2 as disagree, 3 as neutral, 4 as agree, and 5 as strongly agree. Results from the research show that tertiary ESL students experienced moderate level of speaking anxiety. The research also examines the key influential factor on speaking anxiety among tertiary ESL (English as a Second Language) learners. The findings reveal that the three major contributory factors of the ESL speaking anxiety are perception factor, English classroom speaking anxiety, and psychological anxiety. This research has corroborated the hypothesis that female tertiary ESL students displayed a higher level of speaking anxiety than their male peers.

Keywords: speaking anxiety, language anxiety, gender, ESL learners, FLCAS

Introduction

The role of a language is very crucial in today's world. Learning a foreign language as a second language has become a necessary tool to broaden the cultural horizons. Richards, Platt and Platt (1992 as cited in Wilson, 2006) provide a definition of "second language"' used in Britain, in the ***Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics*** **which is** "a language which is not a native language in a country but is widely used as a medium of communication (e.g., in education and in government) and is usually used alongside another language or languages" (p.33). In Malaysia, the national and official language is Malay language; however, Malaysian government has accorded English as a second language status as stated in Article 152 (Jalaluddin, Mat Awal and Abu Bakar, 2008, p. 106). As an officially recognized important second language in Malaysia, English plays a vital role in social, economic, science, technology and educational development. English is also widely used in diplomatic services as well as local and international businesses.

David and Govindasamy (2005) noted that in order to stay competitive, employers in developing countries such as Malaysia are interested in employing graduates with both professional and English language skills. Mehar Singh and Chuah (2012) also claimed that proficiency in English language skills among graduates is preferred by prospective employers as one of the main criteria for employability. Citing Dayal, Mehar Singh and Chuah (2012) affirmed that graduates are expected to possess excellent communication skills apart from knowledge and expertise in their respective technical fields. According to Pandian (2006 as cited in Mehar Singh and Chuah, 2012), employees will not be able to participate effectively at the workplace if they do not master the English language. Therefore, it is very crucial to equip Malaysian students with the ability to communicate in English. However, Malaysian graduates are reported to have serious lacking in their English language proficiency. According to Mehar Singh and Chuah, the results from the studies that have been carried out on the issue of graduates' language proficiency at the workplace revealed that Malaysian manufacturing industry employers perceived that the graduates are not fully equipped with English

language proficiency to function at the workplace. Likewise, a survey conducted by Malaysian Employers Federation among its members a few years ago found that 60% of them identified low English proficiency as the main problem with young recruits (Mahavera, 2014). Mahavera added that a similar survey in September 2013 by JobStreet.com among senior managers and companies indicated that poor command of the English language was the main reason for unemployment among undergraduates.

In the light of the issue of the inability to converse English among graduates, this research is carried out in the Malaysian tertiary ESL setting which aims to identify the key speaking anxiety factors among ESL learners and explore the anxiety experience of Malaysian ESL students in relation to speaking in the English Language. Based on the research objective, the following research questions were formulated:

1) What is the level of tertiary ESL students' anxiety in speaking in English?
2) Is there a significant difference between male and female tertiary students in ESL speaking anxiety?
3) What is the major contributory factor of ESL speaking anxiety among Malaysian tertiary students?

Speaking Anxiety in Second Language Learning

Citing Trang, Rajanthran et al. (2013) posited that learning a foreign language in classroom setting is often full of challenges compared to the acquisition of mother tongue that comes naturally. Attitude, motivation, anxiety and beliefs about foreign language learning have been considered as affective variables that might influence foreign language (FL) or second language (L2) learning (Trang, Moni and Baldauf, 2012). Of these affective factors, anxiety has attracted much interest. Rachman (1998 as cited in Liu and Huang, 2011) reported that anxiety has been considered as one of the most prominent and pervasive emotions which was generally defined as a feeling of uneasy suspense. According to Young (1991 as cited in Humphries, 2011), language anxiety is an important area of research because the research suggested that "anxiety... may affect the quality of an individual's communication or willingness to communicate" (p. 66). Language learning anxiety has been a focus of research in foreign language education since early 1970s (Liu and Huang, 2011). Various studies (e.g. Liu and Chen, 2013; Nahavandi et al., 2013; Wang and Li, 2011; Yahya, 2013) have pointed to the fact that anxiety plays an important affective role in L2 acquisition.

As regards the L2/FL anxiety, the literature shows that researchers have provided different definitions to language anxiety. Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) conceived the L2/FL anxiety as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (p.128). This definition appears to be widely accepted by language learning anxiety researchers. Prior literature on language anxiety research also viewed the anxiety in relation to L2/FL learning as "the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with L2/FL contexts, including speaking, listening, and learning" (Balemir, 2009; Humphries, 2011; Liu, 2012; Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2013; Wilson, 2006). Gkonou (2011), Mak (2011) and Subaşi (2010) found that anxiety over L2/FL speaking has received the most empirical attention in the literature. In fact, Öztürk & Gürbüz (2013) asserted that a lot of past studies revealed that speaking is the most anxiety-provoking skill, and it is the greatest source of anxiety in language classrooms. Students had been found to experience the greatest level of anxiety in speaking (Saltan, 2003 as cited in Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2013). The present research aims to contribute to the understanding of ESL learning anxiety, in general, and speaking anxiety in Malaysian tertiary ESL environment, in particular.

The role of the student's gender in language anxiety research has yielded conflicting results. Even though some of the language anxiety research have not been shown to be gender-dependent (e.g. Campbell, 1999; Campbell & Shaw, 1994; Matsuda &Gobel, 2004; Pappamihiel, 2001; Wong, 2009 as cited in Wu, 2011), nevertheless, the impact of gender, which has been proved to be a prominent factor in language learning process in several studies (e.g. Batters, 1986; Clark & Trafford, 1995; Powell, 1986; Pugsley, 1991 as cited in Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2013), on foreign language speaking

anxiety. Thus, this research also aims to find out whether gender is an influential factor on the degree of speaking anxiety experienced by tertiary ESL learners.

Research Methodology

Participants

There were 240 undergraduate students in at Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman responding to the questionnaire. They were selected from two different campuses who were taking different programmes such as Actuarial Science, Applied Mathematics with Computing, Financial Mathematics, Software Engineering (Science-based programmes), Broadcasting, Corporate Communication, Early Childhood Studies, and Graphic Design & Multimedia (Arts-based programmes). All the participants were enrolled in the English Language units during the time of the administration of the questionnaire. However, 3 incomplete questionnaires were excluded from the analyses due to missing data. Of the remaining 237 participants, there were 149 females and 88 males.

Procedure and Instrument

Data were obtained using the structured questionnaire survey approach. After participants were identified, the survey questionnaire was administered to each ESL (English as a Second Language) class respectively with the assistance of several English lecturers during the regular class time in either 13th or 14th week of the May 2013 trimester. Each participant took approximate 20 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

The survey questionnaire contained two sections: Sections A and B. Section A of the questionnaire measured students' ESL speaking anxiety using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree), which is henceforth referred to as ESLSAS (**E**nglish as a **S**econd **L**anguage **S**peaking **A**nxiety **S**cale). Section B aimed to elicit student demographics.

The ESLSAS as a systematic 32-item survey questionnaire was a modification of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986). The FLCAS is the best known and most widely used FL/L2 anxiety assessment scale that was originally aimed at measuring foreign language learners' level of anxiety while learning a target language using three anxiety constructs, which are communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. In this research, the author and co-researchers have established the following five factors that associated with communication apprehension which may have effects on the oral communicative competence instead of three:

- Psychological anxiety (e.g. self-esteem in speaking in English),
- fear of negative evaluation (e.g. worrying about negative evaluations from their instructors or peers),
- English classroom speaking anxiety (e.g. become anxious when participating in activities that require them to speak in **English**),
- social-environmental factor (e.g. an unpleasant emotion experienced as a lack of opportunities to practice English in daily lives), and
- perception factor (e.g. perception of the ability to communicate in English which will affect graduate employability in recruitment).

Since the focus of the research was to measure students' anxiety towards English speaking in the ESL classrooms, some items that were irrelevant to the focal point of the research were eliminated, minor changes had been made to certain items in FLCAS, and some new items were also added to suit the present research. Further, the term "foreign language" used in the FLCAS was replaced by "English" in the ESLSAS. For instance, the FLCAS item 1 "I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my foreign language class." was modified to "I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in English." In addition, several negatively worded items which need reverse scoring had also been modified to positively worded items to ease the data coding process. For example, in the FLCAS item 2 "I don't worry about making mistakes in language classes" was modified to "I am worried about making mistakes when speaking in English." The ESLSAS was

developed to probe deeper into the participants' perceptions of ESL speaking anxiety. The respondents were asked to give a rating to each of the items that built into the above-mentioned five factors.

A preliminary investigation was conducted to measure the internal consistency of the research instrument (i.e. the ESLSAS) before the empirical study was undertaken. Citing the past studies (e.g. Emory and Cooper, 1991; Kaplan, 1987), Shiratuddin (2002) noted that a reliable instrument should produce consistent results at different times under different conditions. According to Curtis and Drennan (2013), the Cronbach's alpha values greater than 0.70 are considered acceptable, while values greater than 0.80 indicating good internal consistency. The ESLSAS has demonstrated a reasonably good inter-item correlation within each formed factor in which the Cronbach's alpha values coefficient of the five factors ranging from 0.783 to 0.896 as shown in Table 1. Since the Cronbach's alpha values for all the five factors exceeded the minimum acceptance level of 0.70 as recommended by Hair et al. (2006), it can be inferred that the ESLSAS was well constructed and reliable.

Table 1
Cronbach's Alpha (α) Coefficient for each factor in the survey questionnaire

Contributory Factor of ESL Speaking Anxiety	Cronbach's Alpha (α) Coefficient
Psychological Anxiety	0.783
Fear of Negative Evaluation	0.805
English Classroom Speaking anxiety	0.869
Social-Environmental Factor	0.815
Perception Factor	0.896

Data Analysis

The data were entered into and analysed through SPPS (Statistical Package for Social Science) for statistical analysis. The data were then analysed to obtain descriptive and inferential statistics. The participants were asked to read the 32 items carefully and circle the appropriate choice which appealed to them best. Choosing the appropriate number would indicate the degree of agreement implied in each item.

Descriptive statistics were used to find out the respondent demographics. Moreover, descriptive statistics were also used to determine the level of speaking anxiety among tertiary ESL learners, and factors (i.e. psychological anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, English classroom speaking anxiety, social-environmental factor, and perception factor) that may contribute to ESL speaking anxiety (which is henceforth referred to as ESLSA). Descriptive statistical data such as means, standard deviation (SD), frequency and percentage of cases were generated to find out the number of respondents that agree or disagree with each item in the ESLSAS that measure the ESLSA to determine their current ESLSA level. In relation to the examination on whether or not the gender has significant impact on ESLSA, the data collected through the survey questionnaire were statistically analysed through inferential statistics. The independent-sample t-test was used to compare the means of two groups, to determine whether there is a significant difference between the mean scores of male and female tertiary ESL students on ESLSA.

Research Findings and Discussion

The ESLSAS used to measure the level of ESLSA contained 32 items. Since the ESLSAS was designed on the 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree), the total score of ESLSA ranged from 32 to 160. A total score more than 128 demonstrated a high level of ESLSA; the total score ranged from 96 to 128 presented a moderate level of ESLSA, and participants who had a total score less than 96 showed a low level of ESLSA.

With regard to the first research question, the descriptive data as shown in Table 2 reveals that 147 respondents (62%) experienced a moderate level of anxiety towards speaking in English as a second language and 80 (33.8%) of the them experienced a low level of speaking anxiety. There were only 10 respondents (4.2%) who experienced a high level of speaking anxiety. The research findings

from the current attempt show parallelism with several studies which revealed that the ESL/EFL learners experienced moderate level of anxiety when speaking in English (or learning English) as the second language in both Malaysian (e.g. Abdullah and Abdul Rahman, 2010; Chan, Abdullah and Yusof, 2012), Turkish (e.g. Balemir, 2009) and Saudi (e.g. Javid, 2014) contexts.

Table 2
Frequency and percentage of ESL students' total score of ESLSA and level of ESLSA

Total score of ESLSA	Level of ESLSA	Frequency	Percentage
More than 116	High	10	4.2
87 – 116	Moderate	147	62
Less than 87	Low	80	33.8

The second research question aimed to investigate whether there is a significant difference in the level of ESL speaking anxiety level between male and female tertiary learners. The analysis was done through inferential statistics. The independent-samples t-test was used to test the following null hypothesis ($H_0 1$), to examine if there is a significant difference between genders in terms of speaking anxiety in tertiary ESL classrooms:

$H_0 1$: There is no significant difference in ESL speaking anxiety between male and female tertiary students.

As can be perceived through the descriptive statistics (Table 3) and t-test results (Table 4), although both genders have a moderate level of ESLSA, it can be seen that ESLSA differs significantly (p=0.006) between the male (*M*=95.63, *SD*=17.43) and female (*M*=102.07, *SD*=17.26) tertiary ESL students. The data provides enough evidence to reject the $H_0 1$ ($p<0.01$). Therefore, there was strong evidence to support the hypothesis which corroborate that there was a significant different between female and male tertiary ESL students with regard to speaking anxiety. From Table 3, it can also be seen from the mean scores that female ESL students experienced a higher level of speaking anxiety than male ESL students.

Table 3
Descriptive statistics for ESL speaking anxiety and gender

	Gender	N	Mean	SD
ESL Speaking Anxiety	Male	88	95.63	17.43
	Female	149	102.07	17.26

Table 4
t-test results for ESL speaking anxiety and gender

ESL Speaking Anxiety	Levene's Test for Equality of Variance		t-test for Equality of Means		
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Equal variances assumed	0.024	0.877	2.769	235	0.006**
Equal variances not assumed			2.762	181.159	0.006

** $p<0.01$

Note: According to Griffith (2010), the value of equal variance assumed is applicable if the significance of the Levene's test is high (greater than 0.05). Since the p-value for Levene's test is large (p = 0.877), which is greater than 0.05, we can assume that the equal variances assumed is not violated. Thus, one should select p-value (0.006) for "equal variances assumed".

Like the findings of some research (e.g. Huang, 2005; Öztürk and Gürbüz, 2013; Wilson, 2006), it is found that L2/FL anxiety of female students is higher than it is in males; female students were significantly more anxious than the males while speaking in English in a Malaysian tertiary ESL context. Moreover, the results from the current attempt also cohere with a great deal of past studies (e.g. Abu Rabia, 2004; Elkhafaifi, 2005; Elliot & Chong, 2004; Ezzi, 2012; Mesri; 2012; Pappamihiel, 2001, 2002; Shahnaz & Bhatti, 2014), which showed that females tend to be more anxious than males in language learning. The results in the present research which reported higher ESL speaking anxiety levels among females could be attributed to females' greater sensitivity to anxiety (Simon and Nath, 2004 as cited in Piechurska-Kuciel, 2012) and males were more likely to exhibit reluctance to admit feelings of anxiety (Williams, 1996 as cited in Capan and Simsek, 2012). Perhaps, because of the feminine feature, women are more willing to admit that they face anxiety (Arnaiz and Guillén, 2012). Nonetheless, some gender-related anxiety studies on the other hand, discovered that males were more prone to language anxiety than their female counterparts (Capan and Simsek, 2012; Zhang, 2001) or there is no significant between males and females in language learning anxiety (Aida, 1994 as cited in Yashima et al., 2009; Matsuda and Gobel, 2004 as cited in Wang, 2010; Wu, 2011; Yamat and Bidabadi, 2012). The conflicting results could be caused by socio-cultural differences (Chiang, 2012; Lowe and Ang 2012 as cited in Capan and Simsek, 2012), different measures employed in the studies (Elliot and Chong, 2004; Occhipinti, 2009) and unknown variables (Wang, 2010).

In answer to the third research question, the descriptive statistics was used to find out the average mean score for each factor being studied. Then the independent-samples t-test was used to examine if there is a significant difference between genders in terms of the contributory factor of ESL speaking anxiety. The results are summarised in Table 6.

Table 5
Descriptive statistics of the speaking anxiety experienced by ESL students

Contributory Factor of ESL Speaking Anxiety	Number of Items	Mean	SD
Psychological Anxiety	1, 2, 11, 12, 13, 16, 17, 18, 20, 26	3.08	0.69
Fear of Negative Evaluation	10, 14, 15	2.72	0.75
English Classroom Speaking Anxiety	3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 19, 21, 22, 23	3.26	0.66
Social-Environmental Factor	27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32	2.74	0.75
Perception Factor	24, 25	4.23	0.75

Table 6
Factor that contribute to ESL speaking anxiety in terms of gender

Contributory Factor of ESL Speaking Anxiety	**Mean**		**SD**		**Sig. (p)**
	Male	**Female**	**Male**	**Female**	
Psychological Anxiety	2.96	3.12	0.60	0.59	0.043*
Fear of Negative Evaluation	2.48	2.86	0.66	0.77	0.000**
English Classroom Speaking Anxiety	3.16	3.32	0.67	0.65	0.061
Social-Environmental Factor	3.37	3.20	0.81	0.70	0.093
Perception Factor	4.22	4.24	0.71	0.77	0.798

** $p<0.01$
* $p<0.05$

The results in Table 5 shows that the major contributory factor of ESL speaking anxiety is the perception factor (*M*=4.23, *SD*=0.75). This means that students are more concerned about their ability to communicate in English as good oral communication skills is a key employability skill (i.e. perception factor). Results from Table 6 indicate that both male and female students were in agreement on the importance of communication skill as one of the main criteria for employability. Besides, English classroom speaking anxiety (*M*=3.26, SD=0.66) also caused the ESL learners to feel anxious in speaking in English. As highlighted by Maclntyre and Gardner (1991 as cited in Yahya,

2013), communication apprehension may exist both outside and inside of the classroom; inside the classroom there are other types of anxiety: the worries about being evaluated and the worries of looking foolish in front of peers. In the literature, some of the reasons why students tend to be silent listeners rather than active speakers in oral English classes are psychological pressure of making mistakes in the presence of their classmates, and performing poorly during their oral performance due to poor English proficiency (Chan, Yusof and Abdullah, 2012; Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope, 1986; Tunaboylu, 1993 as cited in Yahya, 2013). The findings in Table 6 reveal that the gender did not have significant impact on this affective variable, i.e. English classroom speaking anxiety. Both gender become anxious when participating in activities that require them to speak in **English. Further, r**esults in Table 6 depict that female students are more worried about negative evaluations from their instructors or peers compared to male students.

As can be perceived through Table 5, the third influential factor on the ESL speaking anxiety is the psychological anxiety (*M*=3.08, *SD*=0.69). As regards psychological anxiety, examples of items that evaluate students' level of self-esteem in speaking in English include "I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in English", "I always feel that the other students speak English better than I do", and "I would be nervous speaking in English with native speakers". In a nutshell, the psychological anxiety was caused by a combination of self-doubt and communication anxiety, and is experienced more by females than by males.

Conclusion

Some researchers (Chastain, 1975; Scovel, 1978; Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993; Young, 1999 as cited in Zhang, 2001) revealed that the L2/FL learning language anxiety can be either a facilitating factor which can stimulate learners, or a debilitating factor, which could hinder the learners' performance. Therefore, it is crucial to determine the level of ESL speaking anxiety among tertiary ESL students, as well as to identify the contributory factor of the ESL speaking anxiety. Moreover, the research also examined the impact of gender on the ESL speaking anxiety in order to help the instructors to prepare effective instructional materials which could enhance students' communication skills acquisition in the tertiary ESL context. The findings from this research should have profound pedagogical implications to the ESL practitioners at the university. This research could potentially help L2/FL instructors in embracing a less anxiety-inducing atmosphere in the classroom, which in turn can result in better learning outcomes.

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