

Triggers for Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety: Perceptions of Saudi EFL College Students

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Abstract

The primary aim of the present study is to investigate foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA) levels and the factors triggering language speaking anxiety among Saudi EFL college learners. The study adopted a mixed-method approach to meet the research objectives. A Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) questionnaire was employed. The sample of the study consisted of 39 male Saudi students at Al-Quaiyah College of Technology. Subsequently, eight of the most anxious students were identified based on the questionnaire results. The results revealed that the participants experienced a moderate level of FLSA in their English class. The participants reported several major causes of their speaking anxiety in the language class, such as a lack of preparation and vocabulary knowledge, forced participation, and other teacher-related factors. The study recommends that teachers should inform their students about what will be discussed in advance to help them become more prepared and less anxious. Moreover, teachers should encourage and motivate students to participate in oral activities instead of forcing them.

Keywords: English as a foreign language, FLA, FLSA, foreign language anxiety, Saudi colleges, speaking anxiety

1. Research Background

Emotions influence various aspects of learning. In terms of language learning, negative emotions function as a filter, preventing learners from processing the input in their minds (Krashen, 1981). One emotion that has a significant effect on language learning is anxiety. Language anxiety is considered a complex and multidimensional phenomenon (Young, 1992). Experiencing anxiety while learning a foreign language is very common.

Researchers in second-language (L2) research have paid considerable attention to foreign language anxiety (FLA) (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994; Young, 1990) and continue to do so. Generally, anxiety is defined as “general feelings of uneasiness and distress about unspecified, diffuse, uncertain, and often formless threats or danger” (Zeidner & Matthews, 2010, p. 5). FLA has been found to negatively impact the language learning process and its outcomes (Al-Khotaba et al., 2020; Zare & Riasati, 2012). For this reason, researchers have investigated the debilitating effects of anxiety for decades. MacIntyre and Gregersen (2012) argue that the negative correlation between language anxiety and language achievement is one of the most consistent findings in the literature on second language acquisition.

FLA could influence different aspects of the learner such as cognitive processing (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991b), self-esteem (Zare & Riasati, 2012), and motivation (Khodadady & Khajavy, 2013). It also could influence the language learners’ proficiency as well as their self-confidence (Crookall & Oxford, 1991). FLA can be experienced during learning the four language macro-skills: speaking (Young, 1990), listening (Vogely, 1998), writing (Daud et al., 2016), and reading (Saito et al., 1999). Of these, speaking in a foreign language is the most anxiety-provoking skill for learners (Horwitz et al., 1986). Anxiety has a negative influence on learners’ communication skills and self-confidence (Zheng & Cheng, 2018).

Speaking anxiety manifests in different ways, such as fear of speaking in front of others and fear of misunderstanding others or being misunderstood (Dornyei & Ryan, 2015; Young, 1990). FLA can provoke other negative emotions, such as embarrassment and self-consciousness (Dornyei & Ryan, 2015), which could lead

learners to try to alleviate these negative emotions by making critical decisions to avoid studying the foreign language. This might include changing their majors or dropping out of their foreign language courses (Dewaele & Thirtle, 2009; Horwitz et al., 1986).

Numerous studies have been conducted to investigate the triggers of FLSA in the EFL context. However, research on foreign language speaking anxiety in the Saudi context is scarce. Investigating the causes that trigger foreign language speaking anxiety in EFL classes at Saudi colleges of technology may provide insightful pedagogical information that educators and policymakers may use to create effective solutions for this issue.

1.1 Research Objectives

The two prime objectives of the current study are to

- (1) Identify the levels of FLSA among male students at Al-Quaiyah College of Technology.
- (2) Explore the factors that trigger their speaking anxiety in the language classroom.

1.2 Research Questions

Based on the research objectives, two research questions have been developed:

- (1) To what extent do Saudi EFL college students experience FLSA?
- (2) What are the factors underlying FLSA among Saudi EFL college students?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Foreign Language Anxiety

Anxiety is a complex phenomenon with a critical impact on both learners and learning. Spielberger (1983, p. 1) defined anxiety as “the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system.” Given its pivotal role in language learning, FLA has attracted considerable attention in second language (L2) research (Alnahidh & Altalhab, 2020; Alrabai, 2016; Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre, 1995; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991c; Young, 1991). Over the last three decades, it has become one of the most extensively researched psychological variables in L2 research (Tóth, 2017). In introducing the FLCAS, Horwitz et al. (1986, p. 128) distinguished FLA as a situation-specific anxiety construct that was a discrete variable and defined it 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.” This was supported by MacIntyre and Gardner (1991b), who also distinguished FLA from other types of anxiety.

As a form of situation-specific anxiety, FLA is experienced only during learning a foreign language. FLA may lead some learners to adopt behaviours that facilitate learning, such as better focus, effort, and performance, but it is more likely to hinder the language learning through negative feelings that may result in a short attention span and poor performance (Horwitz, 2017). According to Horwitz (2001), the negative effect of anxiety on the language learning process is not only intuitive but has been empirically proven. Experiencing anxiety in language learning is more strongly associated with formal settings than naturalistic language learning (Clement et al., 1977) and may have a significant effect on learning a foreign language in the classroom (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991c; Young, 1991).

2.2 Factors Triggering Students' Speaking Anxiety

To approach how to deal with FLSA effectively, it is crucial to identify what factors underlie students' speaking anxiety. According to Young (1991), FLA is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon that can be caused by several sources. FLSA may manifest nonverbally in behaviour such as embarrassment, rubbing the palms, reluctance to speak, or avoidance of eye contact (Hashemi & Abbasi, 2013).

In the context of EFL, several studies have investigated the causes of FLSA. Learners themselves may cause their own speaking anxiety because of their low self-esteem and incorrect beliefs about language learning. In their study on 348 Arab learners, Dewaele and Al-Saraj (2015) found that a learner's self-perception about their oral performance is the strongest predictor of FLA. In addition, Young (1990) conducted a study on 135 university-level students to examine the sources of speaking anxiety from students' perspective. They found that students experience a high level of speaking anxiety as a response to activity tasks, speaking errors, and their sense of limited preparedness. Young concluded that students' low self-esteem could underlie their speaking anxiety. Fitriani (2021) found a similar result: students' low self-esteem, their beliefs about speaking in front of the class, and their fear of making a mistake significantly trigger speaking anxiety.

Toubot et al. (2018) carried out a study on 300 Libyan EFL undergraduate students to investigate the main factors that increase speaking anxiety. Three factors were identified: communication apprehension, fear of

negative evaluation, and low self-confidence. Corroborating the earlier conclusions of Young (1990), low self-confidence was the most significant factor predicting speaking anxiety. This was found to be the result of a lack of communication and interaction in English among students inside the classroom (Toubot et al. (2018).

Lack of linguistic knowledge, fear of making mistakes, and being criticized are major sources of speaking anxiety. A mixed-method study by Tien (2018) on 658 Taiwanese EFL university students found that a lack of vocabulary and grammar knowledge, as well as students' experiences of their own attempts to make themselves understood, were factors that underpinned their speaking anxiety. Similarly, Debreli and Demirkan (2015) explored the factors that caused students speaking anxiety through semistructured interviews with ten Turkish EFL students. The results revealed that a fear of making mistakes and lack of linguistic knowledge (i.e., pronunciation) are the underlying factors for students' speaking anxiety.

In Saudi Arabia, the causes and effects of FLA have been investigated. Alrabai (2014) argued that anxiety is one of the significant factors that could underlie Saudi learners' generally low English proficiency. FLSA is considered a crucial psycholinguistic barrier that negatively influences the speaking achievement of Saudi EFL students (Al-Khotaba et al., 2020). Several studies have been conducted to examine the level of language anxiety among Saudi students. (Al-Saraj, 2014a; Alnahidh & Altalhab, 2020; Alrabai, 2015; Rafada & Madini, 2017b), demonstrating that students experience moderate to high levels of FLA. Language researchers in Saudi Arabia have identified six underlying causes for the Saudi students' speaking anxiety. These include (1) communication apprehension and limited use of L2, (2) test anxiety, (3) fear of making mistakes, (4) learners' beliefs, (5) lack of vocabulary and (6) teachers' role.

2.2.1 Communication Apprehension and Limited Use

Communication apprehension (CA) is a major cause of FLA (Horwitz et al., 1986). In this respect, Alrabai (2015) explored the causes of speaking anxiety by using the FLCAS in a quantitative study with 1,389 Saudi university students. The results supported Horwitz's earlier findings, indicating CA as the main cause of students' anxiety. This was attributed to inadequate preparation before the English class (Alrabai, 2015). Additionally, limited use of the target language in the classroom can be a source of speaking anxiety. Lack of participation is a main cause of students' low proficiency, which subsequently leads to speaking anxiety (Rafada & Madini, 2017b). Alharbi (2015) argued that Saudi students' passive role as receivers of knowledge in language classrooms negatively affects their learning and improvement.

2.2.2 Test Anxiety

Test anxiety is another component of FLA (Horwitz et al., 1986). Because speaking tests are performed in front of the class, testing is a significant factor that increases speaking anxiety among Saudi students. This situation might conflate the contribution of the fears of making mistakes and negative evaluation, which are discussed next. Tests can be threatening to students because in test-taking situations students feel that they must organise their ideas about specific topics in the foreign language in a short period of time, which leads them to feel pressure (Ohata, 2005). Rafada and Madini (2017b) conducted a mixed-method study exploring the main causes of speaking anxiety on 126 EFL Saudi students, in which 61% were found to suffer from high levels of test anxiety. These results are in agreement with Hamouda (2013) who found that 67.92% of Saudi students experience greater anxiety during oral tests.

2.2.3 Fear of Making Mistakes

The fear of making mistakes in front of a student's peers is one of the main factors contributing to speaking anxiety among Saudi learners. In their qualitative study, Alnahidh and Altalhab (2020) revealed that half the interviewees feared making mistakes because such errors lead them to receive a negative evaluation from their peers. These results are in line with Horwitz et al.'s 1986 study, which found the fear of making mistakes and receiving a negative evaluation to be the main factors causing FLSA (Horwitz et al., 1986). This leads students to avoid participating in foreign language classes to protect their positive image (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002). Fear of receiving a negative evaluation has been found to significantly contribute to students' anxiety in Saudi Arabia (Alnahidh & Altalhab, 2020; Rafada & Madini, 2017b). This is also supported by Asif (2017), whose study revealed that the fear of receiving negative evaluation from teachers and peers is one of the main causes. This fear stems from students' concerns regarding their misunderstanding of questions and their mispronunciation (Al-Saraj, 2014b).

2.2.4 Learners' Beliefs

Learners' beliefs play a significant role in their feelings of anxiety. According to Young (1991), unrealistic beliefs that EFL learners hold, such as that they can achieve the pronunciation of a particular kind of native

speaker, constitute the most important part of learning a language. Their own expectations, for instance that to be fluent in a language requires just 24 months, could contribute in a major way to their high anxiety. In a qualitative study, Price (1991) argued that instructors should address these unrealistic expectations of learners because such beliefs might lead to their FLA. One important belief relevant to the current research is that being capable means that one does not make mistakes. Instructors must help their learners to develop realistic expectations and encourage them to make mistakes, which is a normal aspect of their language learning (Price, 1991). Alrabai (2016) noted some faulty beliefs held by EFL Saudi learners. One was that English language is not needed after finishing schooling, whereas it is required in all Saudi universities and colleges. Other such beliefs include that learners should understand every word they read or hear and pronounce English without a first-language-influenced accent. These contribute significantly to learners' anxiety because when they cannot meet these unrealistic expectations, they feel anxious.

2.2.5 Lack of Vocabulary

A lack of vocabulary has a negative impact on students' ability to speak and produce the language (Hamad, 2013; Khan et al., 2018). The vocabulary knowledge of Saudi EFL students is considerably low, a point emphasised by Al-Hazemi (1993) and Al-Bogami (1995), who both found that Saudi students graduate from high school with very limited English vocabulary. Saudi EFL learners are expected to know around 3000 English words, as reported by the Saudi Ministry of Education, but unfortunately the majority of students finish high school with fewer (Milton & Al-Masrai, 2012). Rafada and Madini's study (2017b) showed that more than half of participants felt shy and nervous regarding speaking in the class because they lacked sufficient vocabulary, which led them to feel anxious and avoid participating orally.

2.2.6 Teachers' Role

Teachers play a vital role in raising and reducing students' anxiety (Al-Saraj, 2014a; Alrabai, 2016; Rafada & Madini, 2017b). Teachers' behaviours, methods of teaching, and evaluation can contribute to students' speaking anxiety (Mukminin et al., 2015; Sadiq, 2017). Teacher's behaviours towards students, such as aggressive criticism, overcorrecting of students when they speak, and comparing the performance of different students, were found to increase students' anxiety (Alrabai, 2016). Al-Saraj (2014a) conducted a case study on ten Saudi college students and found that teacher's behaviour and interaction with students were the main factors that provoked students' anxiety. These participants reported various factors related to their teachers that triggered their anxiety: the teachers' explanations of the subjects, their overcorrecting of mistakes, and their tendency to show favouritism.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants and Data Collection Methods

This study adopted a mixed-method approach and included 39 male Saudi undergraduate students studying at Al-Quaiyah College of Technology. To identify the students' speaking anxiety levels, the 33-item Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) devised by Horwitz et al. (1986) was adapted and administered. The scale items involved a five-point Likert scale, with 1 indicating "strongly disagree" and 5 indicating "strongly agree." To avoid misinterpretation of the items, the original English version was translated into Arabic. Additionally, the causes for speaking anxiety from the students' perspective were explored via semistructured, face-to-face interviews with eight students (i.e., those who reached high levels of anxiety based on their FLCAS scores). Semistructured interviews are flexible and adaptable, which gives participants the opportunity to express themselves freely and helps the researcher obtain more information (Mackey & Gass, 2015). The relevant literature was used to inform the construction of the interview questions (He, 2018). Interview participant selection was based on criterion sampling. Dörnyei (2007, p. 128), describes criterion sampling as a strategy that helps a researcher choose participants who satisfy particular predetermined criteria. Students with high levels of anxiety based on their FLCAS scores were invited to the interview. The interviews were conducted in Arabic to overcome any language barrier that could negatively affect data validity and reliability.

3.2 Validity and Reliability of the Instruments

Validity is calculated by the correlation coefficient between the item of each dimension, the dimension to which it belongs, and the dimension's correlation with the total questionnaire. The correlation coefficient statistical analysis results, as shown in tables (1) and (2), indicate a statistically significant correlation at the level of 0.05 between the scores of each item and the final score of the dimension to which it belongs, as well as between each dimension and the total score of the questionnaire. This shows that the questionnaire is highly valid. Cronbach's alpha test is used to check the questionnaire's reliability. Its value normally ranges between 0.0 and 1.0. In this

study, the result was 0.932, as shown in table (2), which indicates excellent reliability, and thus we can be confident of the scale's credibility in achieving the study's objectives. To ensure the qualitative data's validity and reliability, an expert bilingual translator thoroughly reviewed the interview questions and translated them into Arabic. Before the main interviews were conducted, a pilot study of the interview process was performed. This involved a Saudi EFL student in a Bachelor of Arts course who was interviewed to ensure that the interview questions were appropriate and clear. According to Dörnyei (2007), this is an essential step to ensure that the questions convey the intended meaning. Feedback after the interview was taken into consideration. Based on this, three questions were modified to enhance their clarity.

Table 1. The correlation coefficient between the item of each dimension and the dimension to which it belongs

Communication apprehension		Test anxiety		Fear of negative evaluation	
Item	Pearson Correlation	Item	Pearson Correlation	Item	Pearson Correlation
1	.698**	3	.780**	2	.663**
4	.853**	5	.855**	7	.909**
9	.752**	6	.678**	13	.923**
14	.848**	8	.866**	19	.687**
15	.762**	10	.753**	23	.921**
18	.822**	11	.700**	31	.755**
24	.889**	12	.837**	33	.711**
27	.611*	16	.910**		
29	.595*	17	.733**		
30	.870**	20	.846**		
32	.641*	21	.792**		
		22	.653**		
		25	.838**		
		26	.711**		
		28	.635*		

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level. * Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level.

Table 2. Cronbach's Alpha Test

Dimension	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Communication apprehension	11	0.924
Test anxiety	15	0.952
Fear of negative evaluation	7	0.904
Questionnaire	33	0.932

3.3 Data Analysis

For the sake of the questionnaire data analysis, SPSS was employed to obtain the mean, percentages, standard deviation, and frequencies of participants' responses. To analyse the qualitative data, the interviews were recorded, transcribed, and then thematically analysed. The interview data were analysed in Arabic. Then, the findings were translated into English. As suggested by Merriam (2009), this strategy can save time and effort in analysing the data.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

In the present study, the participants' rights were protected. Before data collection, the students were given a research information sheet to read as well as an informed consent form. The researcher also presented these guidelines orally to the participants at the beginning of the interview. In addition, the participants were advised that their information would be confidential and anonymous. Participants' names were not used in data analysis;

instead, pseudonyms were assigned. Participants' privacy was highly respected and maintained, and the data were securely sorted in a password-protected computer that only the researcher could access.

4. Results and Discussion

As mentioned previously, the current study aims at (1) identifying the levels of speaking anxiety among Saudi EFL college students and (2) exploring the factors that trigger their speaking anxiety in the language classroom. Whereas a 33-item questionnaire was administered to achieve the first objective, face-to-face interviews were conducted to accomplish the second.

4.1 Level of Speaking Anxiety among Saudi EFL Students

As Table 3 shows, the lowest possible score was 33 (if a respondent scored one point on each item), and the highest was 165 (if a respondent scored five on every item). Based on the classifications provided by earlier studies (e.g., Alshahrani and Alandal (2015)), three FLA levels were distinguished.

Table 3. Levels of Foreign Language Anxiety

Level	Scores	Level of FLA	Mean
1	33-89	Low anxiety	1.00-2.70
2	90-108	Moderate anxiety	2.71-3.29
3	109-165	High anxiety	3.30-5.00

Students' speaking anxiety was measured using the mean score derived from the FLCAS questionnaire (Horwitz et al. (1986)). The FLCAS includes four scores: the total questionnaire score and subscales for communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Table 5 presents a descriptive analysis of the means and standard deviations of the FLCAS questionnaire and its subscales.

Table 4. The Level of FLSA for the Total Sample

Levels of anxiety	Frequency	Mean
Low	12	74.58
Medium	10	98.00
High	17	122.47
Total	39	101.46

The mean (M) FLSA level for the whole sample (N=39) is 101.46 with a minimum score of 60 and a maximum of 147. This result indicates a moderate level of speaking anxiety among the participants (as shown in Table 4). The table indicates that 17 participants were considered highly anxious (M = 122.47), whereas 12 had low speaking anxiety (M = 74.58) and ten experienced a moderate level of speaking anxiety (M = 98.00). This distribution reveals that more than half the participants reported moderate to high levels of speaking anxiety.

The overall total mean score of all FLCAS questions (M = 3.07, SD = 0.681) was moderate, which indicates that the students in the present study generally have a moderate level of FLSA. The total means of all subscales were moderate as well: the communication apprehension subscale (M = 3.21, SD = 0.672), test anxiety subscale (M = 2.91, SD = 0.67), and fear of negative evaluation subscale (M = 3.20, SD = 0.955).

Table 5. Means and Standard Deviations of FLSA

Dimensions	M	SD
Total	3.07	0.681
Communication apprehension	3.21	0.672
Test anxiety	2.91	0.670
Fear of negative evaluation	3.20	0.955

For a better understanding of the questionnaire's results, the items related to these three sources of FLA were analysed. These are presented and discussed in the following subsections.

4.1.1 Communication Apprehension

Eleven items (1, 4, 9, 14, 15, 18, 24, 27, 29, 30, and 32) constituted the first component of the FLCAS (i.e., communication apprehension). The descriptive statistical analysis of means, standard deviations, and percentages was used to analyse this component. For each item, the mean of the level of communication apprehension was ranked from the most anxious to the least anxious.

Table 6. Percentages, Means and Standard Deviations of Communication Apprehension

R	Item	A	SA	M	Std. Dev	Level
7	1. I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my foreign language class.	33.3	10.3	3.05	1.234	Moderate
6	4. It frightens me when I do not understand what the teacher is saying in foreign language.	10.3	28.2	3.13	1.418	Moderate
1	9. I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in language class.	28.2	43.6	3.92	1.222	High
9	14. I would not be nervous speaking the foreign language with native speakers.	23.1	20.5	2.97	1.495	Moderate
2	15. I get upset when I don't understand what the teacher is correcting.	28.2	35.9	3.72	1.297	High
10	18. I feel confident when I speak in foreign language class.	17.9	7.7	2.69	1.173	Moderate
5	24. I feel very self-conscious about speaking the foreign language in front of other students.	25.6	20.5	3.26	1.229	Moderate
8	27. I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my language class.	28.2	17.9	3.10	1.353	Moderate
4	29. I get nervous when I don't understand every word the language teacher says.	38.5	17.9	3.38	1.227	High
3	30. I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules you have to learn to speak a foreign language.	28.2	33.3	3.64	1.308	High
11	32. I would probably feel comfortable around native speakers of the foreign language.	17.9	10.3	2.49	1.374	Moderate

Note. R= Rank.

As Table 6 shows, the statement that attracted the highest level of communication apprehension was statement #9, "I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in language class," to which 71.8% of the participants either agreed or strongly agreed. This result provides clear evidence that spontaneous speaking without preparation is considered highly anxiety provoking for the students in this study.

Furthermore, 64.1% either strongly agreed or agreed on #15, "I get upset when I don't understand what the teacher is correcting." The result shows that the way the teacher provides the feedback can trigger students' speaking anxiety. Teachers need to simplify the way they speak English and provide feedback to students. Also, they should assess students' understanding and avoid presuming that students understand everything they say.

Moreover, 61.5% of participating students stated that they feel anxious about a teaching method that focuses on grammar rules. This might not allow students to engage in oral activities, resulting in their feeling anxious when they speak in the class (item 30).

4.1.2 Test Anxiety

Fifteen items (3, 5, 6, 8, 10, 11, 12, 16, 17, 20, 21, 22, 25, 26, and 28) constituted the second FLCAS component (i.e., test anxiety). Table 7 shows the percentages, means and standard deviations of the items in this category.

Table 7. Percentages, Means and Standard Deviations of Test Anxiety

R	Item	SA	M	Std. Dev	Level
5	3. I tremble when I know that I'm going to be called on in language class.	20.5	3.10	1.314	Moderate
15	5. It wouldn't bother me at all to take more foreign language classes.	10.3	2.15	1.309	Low
2	6. During language class, I find myself thinking about things that have nothing to do with the course.	28.2	3.62	1.184	High
3	8. I am usually at ease during my tests in my language class.	23.1	3.13	1.380	Moderate
1	10. I worry about the consequences of failing my foreign language class.	48.7	4.10	1.165	High
9	11. I don't understand why some people get so upset over foreign language class.	10.3	2.74	1.251	Moderate
7	12. In language class, I can get so nervous I forget things I know.	12.8	2.79	1.341	Moderate
11	16. Even if I am well prepared for language class, I feel anxious about it.	10.3	2.64	1.287	Moderate
13	17. I often feel like not going to my language class.	17.9	2.54	1.553	Moderate
4	20. I can feel my heart pounding when I'm going to be called on in language class.	10.3	3.13	1.196	Moderate
14	21. The more I study for a language test, the more confused I get.	10.3	2.54	1.232	Moderate
8	22. I don't feel pressure to prepare very well for language class.	7.7	2.77	1.202	Moderate
10	25. Language class moves so quickly I worry about getting left behind.	10.3	2.74	1.251	Moderate
6	26. I feel more tense and nervous in my language class than in my other classes.	23.1	3.05	1.432	Moderate
12	28. When I'm on my way to language class, I feel very sure and relaxed.	12.8	2.64	1.308	Moderate

Regarding this category, Item 10, "I worry about the consequences of failing my foreign language class," had strong responses. As Table 7 shows, 79.5% of participants agreed to this statement. This result indicates the high possibility that the evaluative situations presented in Saudi classroom environments, which are typically strict and formal, make students feel anxious. This result is supported by Alrabai (2014) who found that Saudi EFL students are anxious because their performance in the classroom is continuously evaluated.

The second highest rated item in this category was #6, "During language class, I find myself thinking about things that have nothing to do with the course," to which 56.4% either agreed or strongly agreed. This indicates that the level of student engagement is low, which could be the result of the traditional teaching methods in the Saudi EFL classroom.

Furthermore, 48.7% of students agreed or strongly agreed with #20, "I can feel my heart pounding when I'm going to be called on in language class." This indicates that asking students to participate by naming them provokes anxiety.

4.1.3 Fear of Negative Evaluation

Seven items (2, 7, 13, 19, 23, 31, and 33) reflected the third component of the FLCAS (i.e., fear of negative evaluation). Table 6 shows the percentages, means, and standard deviations of the items in this category.

Table 8. Percentages, Means and Standard Deviations of Fear of Negative Evaluation

R	Item	A	SA	M	Std. Dev	Level
5	2. I do not worry about making mistakes in language class.	33.3	12.8	3.08	1.326	Moderate
3	7. I keep thinking that the other students are better at language than I am.	23.1	23.1	3.21	1.399	Moderate
7	13. It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my language class.	28.2	12.8	2.79	1.399	Moderate
4	19. I am afraid that my language teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make.	20.5	23.1	3.15	1.348	Moderate
2	23. I always feel that the other students speak the foreign language better than I do.	30.8	28.2	3.41	1.428	Moderate
6	31. I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak the foreign language.	12.8	33.3	3.08	1.645	Moderate
1	33. I get nervous when the language teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance.	33.3	30.8	3.69	1.239	High

As Table 8 shows, 64.1% of participants agreed with Item 33, "I get nervous when the language teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance." The result for this item and for Item 9 from the CA category clearly indicate that involvement in speaking activities without preparation effectively triggers students' speaking anxiety.

Furthermore, more than half of participants (59.0%) gave affirmative responses to Item 23, "I always feel that the other students speak the foreign language better than I do." This suggests that students feel anxious because of their low self-perceptions regarding their language proficiency as compared with other students in the classroom. Also, 46.2% agreed to Item 31, "I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak the foreign language." This result demonstrates a low sense of self-confidence among students in this study.

To conclude, Saudi EFL college students clearly have a moderate level of speaking anxiety. This finding is in line with those of other researchers reporting a moderate level of speaking anxiety among EFL learners in both the Saudi context (Alnahidh & Altalhab, 2020; Alrabai, 2014) and the EFL context (Toubot et al., 2018).

4.2 Factors Underlying FLSA among Saudi EFL College Students

To explain the primary causes of the students' speaking anxiety in English language classes, semistructured interviews were carried out. As explained earlier, the FLCAS questionnaire results were used to select the most anxious participants, who were invited to semistructured interviews. Eight anxious students were selected and interviewed. Based on the interviews, five themes were identified, including (1) a lack of preparation and vocabulary knowledge, (2) forced participation, (3) fear of making mistakes and negative evaluation, (4) a lack of practice, and (5) teacher-related factors.

Table 9. Main themes and frequencies of coded extracts

Main Themes	Frequency of coded extracts
Lack of Preparation and Vocabulary Knowledge	15
Forced Participation	8
Fear of Making Mistakes and Negative Evaluation	12
Lack of Practice	5
Teacher-Related Factors	7

4.2.1 Lack of Preparation and Vocabulary Knowledge

The data from the interviews showed that lack of preparation is a major source of students' speaking anxiety. This lack of preparation might lead students to avoid participating orally in the English language classroom. Interviewed students explained that not being prepared for participating or speaking English provokes their anxiety. Student 2, for example, stated, "I prefer to know what we will discuss before the class because it will

help me prepare for the lesson. If we discuss anything without preparation, I feel anxious and try to avoid participation or involvement in the class discussions.” Thus, allowing students to prepare before starting the lesson can be an effective strategy to reduce student anxiety in the classroom. Student 7 illustrated this: “I had a teacher who was asking us to prepare for 15 minutes before starting the lesson and he was allowing us to ask him any questions. This strategy helped me to feel more comfortable during the class because I knew about the topic and the meaning of key words.”

The necessity of preparation can be related to the lack of vocabulary knowledge. In other words, students must prepare in advance because their vocabulary knowledge is limited, which could affect their oral performance negatively, leading them to feel nervous. Student 3 reported, “Preparing in advance plays a role in my anxiety so that when I am prepared, I feel more confident and less anxious because I have practised and studied the vocabulary.” He further added,

I feel anxious when I speak in the language classes because I do not know many English words. I am a beginner, so when I prepare and study the words of the lessons before classes, I will be more comfortable to participate in speaking activities.

In the same vein, Student 6 emphasised the role of vocabulary:

“From my experience, the most important thing in learning a language is to know many words because it helps me to convey the message I want to say, even if my grammar knowledge is not good. This helps me to stay relaxed when I speak English because I can see the other person understands me... Each lesson had many words I did not know, so I think it is necessary for us to be prepared and ready before the teacher asks us to participate in speaking.”

These results indicate that students’ need to prepare before the class might result from their lack of vocabulary knowledge. Also, this limited vocabulary can be a cause of students’ speaking anxiety.

The interviews revealed that inadequate preparation and lack of vocabulary knowledge are the major causes of speaking anxiety among the Saudi college students in this study. These students indicated numerous words in each lesson with which they were not familiar, requiring them to prepare before classes. One possible reason for this is that the English language curriculum in Saudi colleges of technology is designed for the intermediate level, whereas most students enter the colleges as English language beginners. In this respect, students might feel that they do not know enough vocabulary to help them participate orally, which could lead to speaking anxiety. Accordingly, preparation before language classes helps students understand the lesson and feel less anxious during the class. These findings are consistent with the quantitative results that 71.8% of participants agreed that participating without preparing in advance makes them feel anxious (Item 9).

The results of the current study are in agreement with other studies in which lack of preparation was found to be a significant factor in students’ reluctance to participate in English language class, leading to FLSA (Alrabai, 2015; Hamouda, 2013). In addition, the findings show that lack of vocabulary might be another source of students’ speaking anxiety. This is consistent with other research results where a lack of vocabulary has been found to be a main source of speaking anxiety among Saudi EFL learners (Alnahidh & Altalhab, 2020; Rafada & Madini, 2017b).

4.2.2 Forced Participation

Forced participation was another notable cause of students’ speaking anxiety in this study. Most interviewees expressed concerns regarding being compelled by their teachers to participate orally in the class. Student 1, for example, stated, “One of the things that makes me anxious is when the teacher finishes explaining the lesson and starts calling our names to ask questions and forces us to answer. When I do not answer and stay silent, he criticizes me aggressively.” He added “One of the situations that made me extremely anxious was when our teacher forced us to take turns to participate. While I was waiting for my turn, my anxiety was destroying me from inside.” This result is in line with that of Young (1991), who found that calling students one by one to participate evokes students’ speaking anxiety. This is further supported by Item 20, where 48.7% of students agreed that when they are called on in the language class, their hearts start beating fast. Similarly, forcing students to participate can affect their ability to recall information, resulting in feelings of discomfort. Student 4 said, “I would like teachers to allow voluntary participation, because sometimes I am not paying attention to the teacher, and he suddenly asks me to stand up and answer a question or explain something for the whole class. If this happens, I start trembling and forget the words I want to say.”

These results indicate that forcing students to participate orally in the classroom can be a significant source of their speaking anxiety. Also, it shows how anxiety negatively affects students emotionally and cognitively.

Numerous studies have discussed the harmful effects of anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre, 2002; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991b). Therefore, teachers should allow voluntary participation, encouraging students to participate rather than forcing them. These findings are in agreement with those of other researchers who identified that obligating students to participate is a factor that contributes to FLSA (Alnahidh & Altalhab, 2020). Williams and Andrade (2008) claim that pressuring students to participate before they are ready causes FLSA.

4.2.3 Fear of Making Mistakes and Negative Evaluation

Several researchers have reported that fear of making mistakes and fear of receiving negative evaluation are significant factors underlying students' speaking anxiety. Consistent with previous research (Al-Saraj, 2014b; Horwitz et al., 1986; Rafada & Madini, 2017b), the participants in this study claimed that they worry about making mistakes in front of their teachers and colleagues because this might lead them to receive a negative evaluation. They agreed that committing mistakes underpins their fear of participating in oral activities, which leads them to avoid it in language classes. Student 4, for example, stated "Speaking in the class is anxiety-provoking to me because when I make a mistake the teacher will stop me and correct me. If he does this, all students will stare at me and some of them will laugh. This makes me unwilling to take part in oral activities." These results reveal that teachers' overcorrecting of students' oral mistakes and how they correct mistakes might play an effective role in their anxiety. These findings reinforced the results of previous studies such as those by Young (1991) and Horwitz et al. (1986) that students' fear of making mistakes might result from how teachers correct their mistakes. This is also supported by the result of Item 19; 43.6% of students agreed that they feel anxious when their teachers correct every mistake they make.

In agreement with Gregersen and Horwitz (2002), the participants in the current study illustrated concerns regarding making mistakes because this might affect their positive image as a good learner. Student 6 said, "As a beginner learner, I make many mistakes when I speak in the classroom, and this makes me anxious. Unfortunately, students in my class laugh at any student who makes mistakes rather than giving their opinions politely." Also, it was clearly indicated in the interviews that speaking in front of a large number of students as well as their reactions when a student makes a mistake are effective causes of students' speaking anxiety. Student 3 said, "When the teacher asks me to speak, I become nervous because I have to speak in front of around 30 students." He added "I try to avoid participating orally because I have seen many situations in my class when the teacher asked students to participate and if they made mistakes the other students started laughing." Interestingly, Student 5 expressed his concerns regarding the negative evaluation of his peers, but these concerns decreased significantly in online classes: "I liked the English classes during the pandemic of COVID-19 because when we spoke, we could not see each other, so I did not worry about receiving negative reactions from other students."

The results of the qualitative data in this study show that students' fear of making mistakes might result from their fear of receiving negative evaluations from both their teachers and peers. This is a significant factor that might trigger students' speaking anxiety. This factor was also identified as the second highest anxiety-provoking factor, with a mean score of 3.20 among Saudi EFL students in this study. This is consistent with conclusions by various researchers who have found that learners' fear of negative evaluation is a major cause of FLSA (Asif, 2017; Horwitz et al., 1986; Kitano, 2001).

4.2.4 Lack of Practice

The limited use of English is another factor triggering students' speaking anxiety. Students in the interviews stated that they do not have the opportunity to practise the language outside the classroom or sometimes even inside it. Student 3 stated, "One of the reasons I get anxious when I speak is because there is no practising." Interestingly, he added, "Even though I have started learning English from the first grade, it was not very beneficial to me because after the class I spoke Arabic everywhere. So, I could not practise what I learnt." This indicates the importance of giving students ample time to practise the language in the classroom because outside opportunities are scarce. Moreover, when teachers do not give their students sufficient time for oral language practice, this might lead them to feel anxious when they must speak in the classroom. Student 7, for example, said, "We do not practise speaking very often in the class, therefore when I speak English, I feel my tongue cannot say what I want, or pronounce the words correctly."

In addition, the teachers' teaching style and their interaction with their students play a crucial role in this issue. Student 6 illustrated "I had a teacher who made me hate the English language class because he was not interacting with us at all. He was speaking most of the class time with no chance to us to practise speaking, so it is normal to feel apprehensive when we speak English."

These findings indicate that a lack of oral practice can lead to FLSA. Teaching English as a subject in Saudi Arabia with a limited number of classes during the week results in insufficient time to practise oral English, which, in turn, negatively affects students' oral performances. In addition, there are few opportunities to use English outside the classroom. These results are in line with Al-Saraj (2014a) and Alnahidh and Altalhab (2020), who found that a lack of English speaking practice resulting from limited classes and limited chances to speak English in daily life are major factors of FLSA among Saudi students. Also, the traditional teaching method underpinning students' passive role can be a crucial part of the problem because it reduces students' opportunities to interact and use the language in the classroom. This is consistent with different studies such as those by Al-Saraj (2014a) and Alrabai (2015).

4.2.5 Teacher-Related Factors

The impact of language teachers on students' speaking anxiety has been mentioned in the literature on language speaking anxiety as a substantial factor affecting students' speaking anxiety (Alrabai, 2014; Faqih, 2023; Horwitz et al., 1986; Young, 1991). Likewise, the interviews with students in this study show that students' speaking anxiety was triggered by the critical role played by their teachers in the classroom. Teachers' personalities, behaviours and attitudes towards students' oral mistakes were factors that provoke student's anxiety in the current study. Student 1, for example, reported that his teacher did not tolerate students' speaking mistakes, which created a stressful environment affected all students in the classroom. He said:

“I had a teacher who criticized us [the students] aggressively when we did not answer his questions or answered them incorrectly. He kept saying negative expressions such as ‘You are college students, yet you are unable to answer a question that can be answered by kids in primary schools.’ This really affected me, and I became unwilling to improve my language skills because of him.”

All students in the interviews demonstrated a high level of agreement that an authoritarian, strict attitude or the antagonistic behaviour of the teacher can influence them negatively, resulting in communication apprehension. Also, when the teacher is not supportive, this causes FLSA. Student 8 stated, “My English teacher was very strict, and he was not even smiling at us. He was blaming us when we made mistakes and made us feel that we are not capable learners. Unfortunately, some of the teachers forget that they were students like us and making mistakes is something natural during learning.” This indicates that a teacher's negative behaviours and attitude are significant anxiety triggers in the classroom. These results reinforce the findings of previous research (Alrabai, 2014; Hamouda, 2013).

The students in the present study claimed that traditional teaching methods that focus only on teaching grammar can be a source of their speaking anxiety. Student 6 stated:

“What provokes my anxiety is when the teacher only focuses on the grammar and the book's topics, without giving us a space to talk about interesting topics or discuss our opinions. On the other hand, I had a teacher who was allowing us to choose any interesting topic we liked and then discuss it with each other in the classroom. This was a lot of fun because we prepared the topics we liked and it allowed us to practise speaking together.”

Similarly, Student 8 said, “I had a teacher in the third semester who was just teaching grammar and tried to cover all the content regardless of whether you [the students] understood or not. I was feeling anxious during the entire class time.” These results are in agreement with Alrabai (2015), who argued that the ready-made EFL curriculum in Saudi Arabia prioritises quantity over quality, pressuring teachers to “cover” all the content on time, regardless of the actual benefits for students. Also, the results indicate that traditional teaching practices that focus mostly on teaching grammar, as well as underpinning a teacher-centred approach that limits students' oral engagement in the classroom, can be a prominent source of FLSA. This is in line with Al-Saraj (2014a), who found that English language teachers in Saudi Arabia adopt traditional instructional practices that do not encourage students to talk or participate in oral activities.

5. Implications of the Study

Several pedagogical implications arose from the results. Even though the results indicated that the students experience a moderate level of speaking anxiety, this could negatively affect these students' speaking skills in the classroom. As a result, it is crucial for language instructors to acknowledge their students' language anxiety and help their students cope with it. The results of this study showed that speaking without preparation evokes learners' anxiety; therefore, teachers should inform their students about what will be discussed in advance to help them become more prepared and less anxious. Moreover, teachers should encourage and motivate students to participate in oral activities instead of forcing them. As discussed previously, the fear of making mistakes and receiving negative evaluation are prominent sources of speaking anxiety; therefore, teachers should help learners

to accept that making mistakes is natural when learning a language. Also, they should create a friendly and respectful environment in the classroom where students accept each other's mistakes and provide feedback politely. In addition, it is important that teachers do not correct errors aggressively because this may lead students to feel intimidated when speaking in the classroom. Lack of speaking practice was a cause of speaking anxiety as expressed by students in this study. Therefore, teachers should provide communicative tasks and encourage students to work collaboratively in pairs or groups so that they have more opportunities to practise the language. As Price (1991) suggested, such a strategy is effective to help anxious learners practise speaking because they will not have to perform in front of the entire class. Furthermore, teachers should focus on helping learners build their vocabulary knowledge and assist their independent learning, both of which have a positive impact on their language learning.

6. Conclusion

This study is an investigation of two research questions. First, the level of speaking anxiety among Saudi EFL college students was examined. Secondly, the factors underlying FLSA among Saudi EFL college students were explored. The results of the first research question revealed that Saudi EFL students at a college of technology experienced a moderate level of foreign language speaking anxiety. The interviews with students revealed several factors that trigger their speaking anxiety in the English classroom. The eight students agreed that speaking without preparation in advance and a lack of vocabulary are highly anxiety-provoking factors. Moreover, students' feelings of anxiety become heightened when their teachers force them to participate in speaking in the classroom. The fear of making mistakes was a prominent factor promoting speaking anxiety in students because it may lead them to receive negative evaluations from their teachers and peers, which could affect their positive image among other students in the classroom. Furthermore, students reported a lack of speaking practice as another source of speaking anxiety. The participants explained that various factors related to their English language teachers also trigger their speaking anxiety. Namely, the teachers' negative behaviours and attitudes, aggressive feedback and comments, and teaching methods contribute to such anxiety.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

Warm-up activities

1. Explain who I am and why I am conducting the interview briefly, assure the interviewees the issue of confidentiality, and ask for their permission to record the interview.
2. The interviewees introduce themselves simply.

A. Questions concerning general foreign language learning

3. Can you tell me something about your learning experiences in learning English?
4. Many students think that oral English is the most important among the five skills (i.e., listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation) concerning English learning. Do you agree? Why?

B. Questions related to foreign language anxiety

5. How anxious do you feel when using English, reading, writing, listening, speaking? Which activity is more anxious to you? Why?
6. How does anxiety affect one's language learning?

C. Questions about foreign language speaking anxiety

7. Do you feel anxious when speaking English? If yes, what are your physical or psychological reactions?
8. What are the reasons leading to your anxieties in speaking English?
9. Which is more anxiety-arousing to you: speaking English in front of your classmates or teachers? Why?
10. Do you have any strategies to reduce your anxiety when speaking English?
11. What features should an English teacher have to help reduce students' speaking anxieties?

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