

Situation-Specific Speaking Anxiety: University-Level Students' Experiences

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Abstract

Second language (L2) learners are very keen to master speaking in their L2, and this is among the most important of all language skills. However, speaking anxiety is a major obstacle to successful L2 learning. This study was designed to investigate university-level students' attitudes towards speaking in English and their experience of anxiety. 81 participants who majored in English with an average age of 21.8 years were recruited. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews and administered a four-point Likert-scale questionnaire with 18 items, designed to address three constructs: a) fear of speaking in English; b) fear of making mistakes in English; and c) fear of being judged by others. The findings showed that although the participants were generally unconcerned about speaking English, their attitudes were different when they were asked about specific situations. When asked about their fear of making mistakes in front of their classmates, or of being judged by them, they agreed that in those circumstances they would experience anxiety.

Keywords: anxiety, English, second language, speaking, students

1. Introduction

It is not controversial to suggest that English has become a globally important language and that an ability to speak it can connect people around the world (Arifin, 2017; Dincer, 2017; Jannah & Fitriati, 2016; Tridinanti, 2018). According to Gardner and MacIntyre (1992, 1993), both cognitive and psychological factors can affect L2 learners' language success. Cognitive factors include a learner's level of intelligence, the extent of their aptitude for languages, and their language learning strategies, while psychological factors include a positive or negative attitude to learning a second language and a learner's degree of motivation, as well as the amount of anxiety they experience.

Someone who is anxious may feel worried, tense, apprehensive and nervous (Zheng, 2008). Nervousness, anxiety and shyness are all feelings expressed by L2 learners. The great demand for an L2 and the pressure to find a suitable job following a degree are the main culprits (Tanveer, 2007). Feeling anxious is not exclusive to using an L2, however, but can also apply to using one's first language, especially when speaking in public in front of an audience. It is easy to understand, then, that speaking in front of an audience in an L2 is an even more anxiety provoking experience. This is because L2 learners are not as competent in their L2 as they are in their first language (Tanveer, 2007).

Speaking is an oral production skill, and becoming proficient at speaking an L2 is considered to be an indicator of successful L2 language acquisition (Haidara, 2016). Speaking an L2 does not depend just on a speaker's ability to open their mouth and move their tongue, as with a first language, but also on understanding the culture and context of the L2 (Ariyanti, 2016). Speaking an L2 is thus challenging at both cognitive and psychological levels.

My observation as an English teacher is that students tend to have difficulty with speaking tasks and speaking English in general. This could be because they fear making mistakes, which may result in being laughed at by their classmates (Ali, Shamsan, Guduru, & Yemmela, 2019; Jannah & Fitriati, 2016). This research has therefore been designed to address anxiety as a psychological variable that could hinder speaking in English. The significance of the study is to help English instructors and students around the world discover psychological factors that affect the ability to speak fluently in English, as this will help improve L2 English-speaking. The

main research question was:

1) What attitudes do Saudi students have towards:

- a. fear of speaking in English;
- b. fear of making mistakes in English, and;
- c. fear of being judged by others.

2. Literature

2.1 L2 Speaking and Anxiety

When we speak, we use verbal and non-verbal symbols in various contexts to create and share meaning (Chaney & Burk, 1998). Speaking an L2 in class is the most significant way to provoke foreign language anxiety (Mak, 2011) because speaking is the most spontaneous of productive communication skills. Where a writer can edit and improve their writing productions before others see them, with the exception of formal speeches speaking cannot be planned in the same way (Mustafa, 2015). Students who carry out speaking tasks in the classroom usually also speak in front of their classmates, which is not the case with writing tasks, which are usually just between students and their teachers (Jannah & Fitriati, 2016).

According to Scovel (1978), there are three types of anxiety: a) trait; b) situation-specific; and c) state anxiety. Trait anxiety is related to a permanent personality characteristic that is present regardless of the situation and context. Situation-specific anxiety occurs in particular situations. State anxiety refers to the momentary feeling of anxiety that is provoked by stimuli. The anxiety experienced by L2 learners has been well-documented, and is known to have negative effects on the ability to acquire an L2 successfully (Kayaoğlu & Sağlamel, 2013; Mak, 2011). The phenomenon is called 'foreign language anxiety'; it is an obstacle to learning a second or foreign language (Subasi, 2010, p. 29).

Kayaoğlu and Sağlamel (2013) proposed that foreign language anxiety can be categorised under situation-specific anxiety in general. However, I suggest that some L2 learners suffer from anxiety regardless of situations. According to Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), the anxiety experienced by some students in a classroom can be traced to three main sources: a) tasks that require communication; b) tests; and c) a fear of negative evaluation. With regard to the first, students who undertake speaking tasks feel anxious due to the pressure of such spontaneous and challenging tasks. With tests, many students are anxious before and during tests due to their fear of failure. Conversely, a number of students suffer from a fear of being negatively assessed, and it is this that makes them anxious.

2.2 Previous Research on L2 Speaking and Anxiety

Anxiety about speaking in an L2 has a negative effect on language acquisition. Overcoming this issue is therefore essential for successful learning (Ariyanti, 2016; Tercan & Dikilitaş, 2015). Difficulties in learning how to speak effectively in English stem from two main sources (Nijat, Atifnigar, Chandran, Selvan, & Subramonie, 2019). The first of these is a material difficulty related to the difficulty of the English language itself; the second is psychological and is related to anxiety and other factors. Below is a summary of studies of the effects of anxiety on L2 English speaking.

Mak (2011) conducted a study of 313 freshmen in a Hong Kong university taking English courses, to investigate the causes of their anxiety. Using both a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview to collect his data, he found that students' anxiety was linked to: a) their negative attitudes towards language classes; b) negative self-evaluation; c) the correction of their mistakes in front of their peers; and d) being asked to speak in class without preparation.

Kayaoğlu and Sağlamel (2013) recruited 30 Turkish university-level students who majored in different subjects to study the effects of anxiety on speaking English as an L2. The researchers collected data using semi-structured interviews. The students reported a number of reasons for their anxiety: a) the difficult nature of the English language; b) their low level of proficiency in English; and c) fear of making mistakes.

Ariyanti (2016) studied the relationship between anxiety and speaking English in 22 second year Indonesian students in an English department. She designed a qualitative study that used observation and interviews to collect her data, and found that it was not only the students who had to speak in English who felt anxious, but also those who were their audience.

Another study (Akkakoson, 2016) on anxiety and speaking English as an L2 recruited 282 Thai university-level students who specialised in English. Analysis of data collected by questionnaires and semi-structured interviews

indicated moderate levels of anxiety among the participants, who blamed their anxiety on their limited knowledge of English vocabulary.

Tridinanti (2018) investigated the relationship between anxiety and success in English L2 speaking. The participants were 28 third year undergraduates majoring in English. Using questionnaires and interviews, Tridinanti found no correlation between anxiety and success at speaking English. However, he also found that the more confident students were more successful at speaking English.

Ashraf's (2019) study was designed to explore the causes of Saudi students' anxiety when performing oral activities. The participants were 38 university-level students who did not major in English. Using questionnaires and semi-structured interviews as data collecting instruments, the researcher found that students' anxiety was linked to their low levels of proficiency in English, which made them self-conscious about their limited ability.

Al-Hnifat, Ab Rashid and Al-Smadi (2020) also investigated Saudi students' L2 English speaking anxiety. They adopted a qualitative approach interviewed 20 undergraduate students studying at different colleges in Saudi Arabia. They found that students blamed a lack of confidence and their pre-university experiences for their anxiety.

From the studies reviewed above, it becomes clear that anxiety is a global problem that a large number of students experience more or less severely. It is not linked to race or nationality, but does seem to have a number of different causes, according to the results of studies carried out by different researchers. This article describes a study designed to investigate whether university-level Saudi students who majored in English experience anxiety when speaking in English.

3. Methodology

The research was conducted with 81 male Saudi university-level students majoring in English, recruited randomly and aged between 18 and 25 (average age 21.8), who consented online to participate in the study. The participants were studying at the same university. Due to male-female segregation in the Saudi education system, female participants were not recruited. The participants were informed that their identities would remain confidential. There were originally 83 participants, but two were screened out because they had learned English in English-speaking countries at a young age (below the age of 10). The researcher thought such participants might have different attitudes towards anxiety and speaking in English.

The research adopted a data collection design triangulated to minimise systematic bias, as recommended by Dörnyei (2007). The first instrument was an 18-item questionnaire that addressed three constructs: a) fear of speaking in English; b) fear of making mistakes in English; and c) fear of being judged by others. The questionnaire used a four-point Likert-scale (strongly disagree, disagree, agree, strongly agree). The rationale for adopting a four-point rather than five-point scale that included 'uncertain or undecided' was to make the participants commit themselves to a position (Mak, 2011). The questionnaire was administered online due to university and school closures during the Covid-19 pandemic. The second data collection tool was semi-structured interviews. Only 12 participants out of the 83 participants took part in the interviews, which were conducted online. The participants were told that their interviews would be audio recorded, and the researcher spoke with them in Arabic (even though they majored in English) to allow them to express their ideas more freely. The interviews lasted between five and nine minutes and were subsequently translated into English.

4. Results

This section reports the results of the questionnaire administered. The results for the semi-structured interviews are examined in the discussion section. Each of the following three tables displays the results of one of the three questionnaire constructs: a) fear of speaking in English; b) fear of making mistakes in English; and c) fear of being judged by others. The tables report descriptive statistics concerning frequency and percentages.

Table 1. Fear of speaking in English results

Statements		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Means	SD
1. I am afraid to speak in Arabic during class.	n=	42	34	3	2	1.57	.68
	%	51.9%	42%	3.7%	2.5%		
2. I am afraid to speak in English during class.	n=	29	34	16	2	1.89	.80
	%	35.8%	42%	19.8%	2.5%		
3. Speaking in any language other than Arabic is terrifying.	n=	21	42	17	1	1.98	.72
	%	25.9%	51.9%	21%	1.2%		
4. I don't like it when my teacher asks me to speak in front of my classmates.	n=	24	43	10	4	1.91	.79
	%	29.6%	53.1%	12.3%	4.9%		
5. I don't feel confident when I speak in English.	n=	19	43	17	2	2.02	.74
	%	23.5%	53.1%	21%	2.5%		
6. I feel more nervous during English classes than other classes.	n=	32	40	8	1	1.73	.69
	%	39.5%	49.4%	9.9%	1.2%		
7. I'm not competent at speaking in English, and this makes me afraid of speaking in English.	n=	18	48	12	3	2.00	.72
	%	22.2%	59.3%	14.8%	3.7%		
8. Regardless of how fluent I am in English, I'm afraid of speaking in front of my classmates.	n=	14	46	18	3	2.12	.73
	%	17.3%	56.8%	22.2%	3.7%		

The table shows that the participants did not generally fear speaking in English. They also expressed that English classes are similar to other classes in terms of the level of anxiety they induce.

Table 2. Fear of making mistakes in English

Statements		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Means	SD
9. I feel nervous during English classes because I do not want to make mistakes when I speak in English.	n=	12	32	22	15	2.49	.96
	%	14.8%	39.5%	27.2%	18.5%		
10. I do not want to make mistakes in English as this is embarrassing.	n=	6	27	31	17	2.73	.88
	%	7.4%	33.3%	38.3%	21%		
11. When I'm nervous, I make more mistakes than when I'm not.	n=	5	5	43	28	3.16	.79
	%	6.2%	6.2%	53.1%	34.6%		
12. I think that my classmates make fewer mistakes than I do.	n=	15	49	8	9	2.14	.84
	%	18.5%	60.5%	9.9%	11.1%		
13. I don't like it when my English teacher corrects my mistakes in front of my classmates.	n=	36	33	7	5	1.77	.85
	%	44.4%	40.7%	8.6%	6.2%		
14. I don't like it when my classmates correct my mistakes in front of my teacher.	n=	15	14	18	34	2.88	1.15
	%	18.5%	17.3%	22.2%	42%		

The participants' views were split regarding whether making mistakes makes them nervous. However, this was not the case with statement 11 where the majority agreed that nervousness makes them make more mistakes. They also did not like their classmates correcting their errors although they appeared not to mind when their teachers did so.

Table 3. Fear of being judged by others

Statements		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Means	SD
15. I am afraid that my classmates will laugh at me if I make mistakes while speaking in English.	n=	8	6	25	42	3.25	.96
	%	9.9%	7.4%	30.9%	51.9%		
16. I care about my classmates' impressions of me when I speak in front of them in class.	n=	11	14	49	7	2.64	.82
	%	13.6%	17.3%	60.5%	8.6%		
17. I care about my teachers' impression of me when I speak in front of him.	n=	5	4	30	42	3.35	.83
	%	6.2%	4.9%	37%	51.9%		
18. I prefer not to speak in front of the class, so I won't be judged by my classmates.	n=	21	42	12	6	2.04	.84
	%	25.9%	51.9%	14.8%	7.4%		

In relation to Table 3, participants expressed a fear of being laughed at or judged by others when they speak in front of them.

5. Discussion

This section is organised to address the participants' attitudes in relation to each of the three constructs: a) fear of speaking in English; b) fear of making mistakes in English; and c) fear of being judged by others. Each of the following three paragraphs discusses one construct along with the semi-structured interview data.

Concerning their fear of speaking in class, the vast majority of the participants disagreed with statement 1, regarding their fear of speaking in Arabic (93%) and statement 2, about their fear of speaking in English (77%). A greater number of participants suffered from a fear of speaking in English (more than 20%). Most participants (76%) disagreed with statement 3, regarding the fear of speaking in languages other than Arabic. In relation to statements 4, 5, and 6, which addressed whether they lacked confidence, or were nervous during English classes, at least 77% disagreed that they felt nervous or uncomfortable during these classes. For statements 7 and 8, which asked about the relationship between competence in English and fear of speaking the language, again, the majority (more than 74%) believed that they would feel comfortable speaking English regardless of their fluency. These results are supported by the following quotes from their interviews:

'I do not feel nervous when I speak in English or Arabic.'

'I have never felt nervous when I speak in any language.'

However, some participants expressed different views:

'Sometimes I feel more comfortable when I speak in Arabic than when I speak in English, but I do not feel nervous when I speak in English.'

'When I do not know the word in English, I feel nervous, and this does not happen when I speak Arabic as it is my first language.'

The interviews showed that in general the participants did not feel anxious about speaking English.

In relation to their fear of making mistakes, the results for statements 9 and 10 showed that about half the participants or more agreed that making mistakes when speaking English is embarrassing. About 84% thought nervousness was to blame for their mistakes (statement 11). Concerning statement 12, only 21% believed that their classmates made fewer mistakes than them. For statement 13, relatively few participants (less than 15%) had a problem with their teacher correcting their mistakes. However, when it came to their peers (statement 14), the majority (64.2%) disliked being corrected by their classmates. Their attitudes to the source of corrections (teachers vs classmates) indicate that they were sensitive about intervention or feedback from their classmates. Overall, the participants' responses to construct two contradicted their responses to construct one, which used more general statements. The responses to construct two suggested that the participants do suffer from anxiety about speaking in English. This can also be seen in their interview responses:

'The number of mistakes I make in English depends on how nervous I am.'

'Some of my classmates correct my mistakes and I do not like this. I think that they do this to show the teacher that they are good students.'

'Some of my classmates say to me that they do not feel nervous when they speak in English, but I do not think that they say the truth.'

A few participants said things which showed that they trusted their classmates.

'I like my classmates, and I do not feel bad when they correct my errors.'

'I correct my classmates' mistakes, and they thank me for this.'

In relation to their fears about being judged by others, 81.9% of the participants agreed that they feared being laughed at by their classmates when they make mistakes (statement 15). This is consistent with their responses to statement 16, where 69.1% indicated that they cared about their classmates' impressions of them. This increased to 88% for statement 17, in relation to their teachers' impressions. For statement 18, about 77% indicated that they were comfortable speaking in front of their classmates. This supports the findings for construct two, in which the participants agreed that they experienced anxiety in specific contexts and situations. That is, for construct one, most participants claimed to have no fear of speaking in English, but when they were asked to say whether they were anxious about being laughed at, their attitudes were different. It seems clear that the participants experienced discomfort when they thought about their classmates' reactions. This is confirmed by the following quotes:

‘One of my classmates laughed at me when I made a mistake in pronouncing an English word. I did not forgive him, and I always think about his reaction when I speak in English.’

‘My classmates think that I am stupid when I make mistakes.’

‘Some of my classmates like me to make mistakes because I think that this makes them feel good about themselves.’

‘I regret specialising in English as I feel nervous every time I speak in English.’

‘We do not speak in English out of class, as some students mock each other’s accents.’

The results above support the claim that participants were generally unconcerned about speaking in English. However, their attitudes were different when they were asked to respond to statements about specific situations, or when the word ‘classmate’ was included in any statement. This shows that the participants’ views were affected by the way statements about anxiety were phrased; that is, being reminded that their classmates sometime made fun of them, changed their views about the extent to which they felt anxious about speaking. Their interview statements are in line with this. In fact, the interview data indicated that some of the participants had had a number of embarrassing moments when classmates laughed at them which led to at least one regretting that he had specialised in English.

These findings support those of other studies that found different levels of anxiety in students (e.g., Akkakoson, 2016; Ariyanti, 2016; Kayaoğlu & Sağlamel, 2013; Mak, 2011; Tridinanti, 2018). However, the study’s results showed no link between proficiency and anxiety, which contradicts some other findings (for example, Ashraf, 2019; Tridinanti, 2018).

This study was conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic. Consequently, the researcher was unable to recruit a large number of participants of different genders. This is a major limitation of the study and means that it is impossible to generalise from these results. For future research, researchers should also be careful about the way statements are phrased, as this can affect participants’ views.

6. Conclusion

L2 learners can find it difficult to express themselves effectively in English for various reasons, including shyness and lack of confidence. This study investigated the views of university-level students about speaking in English and whether this made them anxious. Analyses of the results from an 18-item questionnaire and semi-structured interviews showed that while the participants reported little anxiety about speaking English in general, they agreed that they felt anxious in specific situations, especially if they thought about how their classmates might react to their mistakes. This suggests that teachers need to be aware that some confident students can feel anxious in some situations. English teachers should therefore make it a priority to create the right environment for students, as this may have a positive impact on their L2 English fluency.

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