

# English Language Speaking Anxiety among Students from Two Public Universities in Sarawak

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Received: 9 April 2020

Accepted: 1 June 2020

Published: 30 June 2020

## ABSTRACT

*This quantitative research studied the anxiety level of university students towards speaking English as a second language (ESL) to examine whether there is any correlation between the university students' ESL speaking anxiety and the demographic factors such as the SPM English results, mother tongue, and parents' academic qualifications. A sample of 592 students was randomly selected from two public universities in Sarawak, Malaysia. Items in the PSCAS questionnaire by Yaikhong and Usaha (2012) were adapted to measure the students' anxiety level in speaking English. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics to identify the students' anxiety level in speaking English. Inferential statistics (Pearson correlation) was used to examine the relationship between the university students' ESL speaking anxiety and demographic factors. The findings indicate that these students experienced a moderate level of speaking anxiety. There was a positive correlation between the university students' ESL speaking anxiety and SPM English Language results. Nevertheless, there was a low negative correlation between the students' ESL speaking anxiety and mother tongue as well as parents' academic qualifications. Findings from this study provide a basis for educators to plan effective teaching strategies to reduce English speaking anxiety among university students.*

**Keywords:** *Speaking anxiety level; ESL university students; English Language results; Mother tongue; Parental academic qualifications*



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## INTRODUCTION

English is a second language in the Malaysian education system and students have been learning this language since their primary school days. Nevertheless, many graduates still encounter fear to communicate in English. According to a recent report of the Education First (EF) English Proficiency Index (EPI), Malaysia is ranked 26<sup>th</sup> in the world and third in Asia for English language proficiency in 2019. Malaysia has dropped several ranks compared to 2018 (at 22<sup>nd</sup> spot) and 2017 (at 13<sup>th</sup> spot) in the world out of 100 countries (EF EPI, 2019). A former Finance Minister of Malaysia, Tun Daim Zainuddin lamented his concern about the deteriorating English communication skills among graduates which pose as hindrance to find jobs (The Independent News, 2019).

This predicament has also brought much concern among educators and the society. Realising the importance to prepare graduates to face the challenges of rapid technological advancement globally, the former Education Minister of Malaysia, Dr. Maszlee bin Malik mentioned the necessity for Malaysia to focus on a learning system with an emphasis on the English language. In line with the aspirations of the former Prime Minister of Malaysia (Tun Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamad), Dr. Maszlee stated that “The importance of people mastering the English language cannot be denied” (Malay Mail, 2018). In language learning, among the four skills (listening, speaking, writing and reading), speaking is the most anxiety provoking skill (MacIntyre, 1995; Price, 1991).

*Language anxiety* is defined as “a distinctive complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviours related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process” (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986, p.128). According to Horwitz et al. (1986), the major causes of language anxiety are communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety. Numerous past studies have investigated the factors that cause speaking anxiety among students (Mustafa Naci Kayaoğlu & Hasan Sağlamel, 2013; Ohata, 2005; Said Muhammad Khan, 2015; Sim, Yeo & Lau, 2018; Tercan & Dikilitas, 2015; Yalçın & İnceçay, 2014). However, limited studies have explored this area of concern among university students in Sarawak. In this regard, this study examined the university students’ anxiety level towards speaking English as a second language (ESL). It also examined whether

there is any correlation between the ESL students' speaking anxiety and the demographic factors (*Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (SPM) English results, mother tongue and parents' academic qualifications).

This study addressed the following research questions:

1. What is the students' anxiety level towards speaking English as a second language?
2. Is there any correlation between the university students' ESL speaking anxiety and SPM English Language result?
3. Is there any correlation between the university students' ESL speaking anxiety and mother tongue?
4. Is there any correlation between the university students' ESL speaking anxiety and parents' academic qualifications?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Factors Contributing to Speaking Anxiety**

Past studies have examined the factors that caused speaking anxiety. Ohata's (2005) study on 5 ESL Japanese College students in the United States found the common types of anxiety that the students faced were fear of negative evaluation (fear of losing face in front of others), lack of confidence in speaking English and lack of knowledge, competitiveness, test anxiety and difficulty to change their self-reserved cultural beliefs to an extrovert culture of those in the United States. Likewise, Mustafa Naci Kayaoğlu and Hasan Sağlamel (2013) found that learners who think that they are inferior to others in terms of their performance may affect their language anxiety.

In addition, Muhammad Mukhtar, Shehu Muhammad Korau and Aminu Basiru's (2019) study on 16 undergraduates in a stylistic class in north-eastern Nigeria found that the students faced speaking anxiety due to fear of negative evaluation and social-environmental factors.

Similarly, Said Muhammad Khan's (2015) study on 200 ESL/EFL learners at HITEC University in Pakistan found that the students are highly anxious to communicate in English. Findings in this study revealed that pedagogical factors (such as nature of classroom environment, peers' and

teacher's reaction) are profoundly accountable for the speaking anxiety level among the students. Psychological factor such as the speakers' negative thoughts about their own speech ability also resulted in speaking apprehension. Besides that, socio-economic factor such as meager family background instigates inferiority complex which impedes speech communication. Moreover, fear of evaluation and lack of confidence also make students apprehensive to speak the target language.

A study by Sim, Yeo and Lau (2018) on 592 university undergraduates in Sarawak revealed that the most feared factor that caused speaking anxiety is communication apprehension, followed by fear of negative evaluation, test anxiety and comfort to use English in ESL classrooms.

In another study, Khairilzwan Abdullah and Nurul Lina Abdul Rahman (2010) examined the perceptions of 60 undergraduates in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia towards the feeling of anxiety when speaking in the second language. The findings showed that majority of the students experience communication apprehension when speaking to a group of people in a formal setting. Nevertheless, Yalçın and İnceçay (2014) found that familiarity with the environment reduces students' anxiety to speak the target language. In addition, a study undertaken by Tercan and Dikilitas (2015) indicated that students at tertiary level suffer from speaking anxiety due to several factors such as preparedness, question-answer, test, discussion, public speaking and error correction. They found that students experience less anxiety in non-threatening contexts when they speak. In short, the numerous past studies as mentioned above revealed a number of factors that caused speaking anxiety among second language learners.

## **Speaking Anxiety Levels among Students**

A study by Wan Zumusni, Noriah Ismail, Deepak and Suhaidi Elias (2010) which involved 50 final year students of Bachelor in Business Administration (BBA) programme revealed that 45% of the students have high level of communication apprehension (CA) with scores above 80. 29% of students have low CA as they are comfortable communicating in English, while 30% of the students were found to favour group discussion

as speaking activity to lessen their anxiety. Only 3% of students prefer public speaking, indicating that majority of students fear public speaking.

Likewise, Bunrueng (2008) investigated Thai undergraduates' levels of anxiety and factors affecting language learning anxiety in Loei Rajabhat University. The results showed that speaking anxiety was rated at a high level. Students were anxious to speak English without preparation, they were afraid to answer questions voluntarily, they felt troubled when asked by the teacher and they were embarrassed when making mistakes, and thus lost confidence in speaking. Correspondingly, Gregersen and Horwitz (2002) found that high achievers were anxious about making mistakes as they had high expectations of themselves.

A Malaysian study by Chan, Ain Nadzimah Abdullah and Nurkarimah bt. Yusof (2012) on 700 undergraduate students revealed that 65% of the students had a medium level of anxiety towards speaking English. In addition, the findings indicated that 79% of the students experienced a medium level of test-taking anxiety. Besides that, majority of the students indicated the fear of negative evaluation.

Similarly, findings in studies done by KhairiIzwan and Nurul Lina (2010), Lim and Mardziah bt. Budin (2014) and Siew (2014) showed that majority of the students experienced moderate level of speaking anxiety. Likewise, a study by Çağatay (2015) showed that majority of the 147 Turkish EFL (English as Foreign Language) students at a Turkish State university had a moderate level of Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety (FLSA).

## **Demographic Factors and Speaking Anxiety**

Previous studies found conflicting results on speaking anxiety in terms of demographic factors. Çağatay's (2015) study on 147 Turkish English as a Foreign Language students demonstrated that there was no statistically significant difference in Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety (FLSA) in relation to the proficiency level of the students. A number of the students reported that they were anxious when speaking with native speakers as compared to speaking in front of their peers. Results of ANOVA indicated that there was no statistically significant ( $p=.654$ ) difference at the  $p<.05$  level for beginner students ( $m=44.42$ ,  $SD=13.21$ ),

elementary students ( $m=46.29$ ,  $SD=14.86$ ), intermediate students ( $m=42.92$ ,  $SD=12.59$ ) and upper-intermediate students ( $m=42.39$ ,  $SD=15.79$ ). This means students' language proficiency level did not impact students' speaking anxiety level.

Similarly, Balemir (2009) investigated the relationship between language proficiency level and speaking anxiety which involved 234 undergraduates from Hacettepe University. Kruskal-Wallis test indicated that foreign language anxiety level did not vary significantly by proficiency level among the lower level students ( $m=85.63$ ,  $SD=14.05$ ), average level students ( $m=86$ ,  $SD=13.19$ ) and higher level students ( $m=86.02$ ,  $SD=15.27$ ).

On the other hand, the results of the t-test conducted by Debreli and Demirkan (2016) indicated that the students with high proficiency level ( $m=99.64$ ,  $SD=15.4$ ) were more anxious in speaking than students with low proficiency level in Midwestern American University. The results showed that anxiety differed significantly across proficiency levels. The mean score for the beginners was 100.53 ( $SD= 22.85$ ), and 106.47 ( $SD = 20.98$ ) for intermediates, and 113.05 ( $SD= 22.92$ ) for advanced learners. A post hoc Scheffe test also indicated significant differences,  $p<.031$ , between beginning and advanced learners, which suggests that the higher the proficiency level, the higher the levels of students' anxiety.

In addition, findings in studies done by Delbio, Abilasha and Ilankumaran (2018) and Said (2015) indicated that linguistic factors such as direct translation from native language to English and lack of fluency are undeniably causal factors of anxiety to speak the target language. Results in Abraham, Crais, and Vernon-Feagans' (2013) study revealed that there is a correlation between speaking anxiety and parents' educational background in which students' learning is connected to their homes. It was found that children of mothers with higher educational background used complex sentences and vocabularies while children of mothers with lesser education used simple sentences and vocabularies.

## **METHODOLOGY**

A random sample of 592 students was selected from two public universities in Sarawak to participate in this study. The samples were

representative of a total population size of about 8,000 students from both universities. One thousand questionnaires were distributed to the students and 592 completed questionnaires were received. This study employed quantitative research design. It is part of a study which investigated the factors that contributed to speaking anxiety among undergraduate ESL students (Sim, Yeo & Lau, 2018) and another study that investigated whether there is any significant difference in the level of anxiety in terms of gender (Lau, Yeo & Sim, 2019). This study was based on Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope's (1986) Theory of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), with an added factor of 'Comfort of using English' (Yaikhong & Usaha, 2012). This study adapted the five-point Likert Scale of the PSCAS questionnaire by Yaikhong and Usaha (2012) and the responses ranged from (1) "strongly disagree", (2) "disagree", (3) "mildly agree", (4) "agree" to (5) "strongly agree". A reliability test conducted found the PSCAS questionnaire by Yaikhong and Usaha (2012) was highly reliable.

The data obtained from the questionnaires were analysed using descriptive statistics to identify the university students' anxiety level in speaking English. Inferential statistics (Pearson correlation) was used to examine the relationship between the ESL students' speaking anxiety and demographic factors (SPM English Language results, mother tongue and parental academic qualifications).

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

### **Speaking Anxiety Level among University Students**

In this study, Baharuddin's (2009) three levels of anxiety with mean 3.67-5.00 (high anxiety level – HLA), mean 2.34-3.66 (moderate language anxiety – MLA) and mean 1.00 – 2.33 (low language anxiety – LLA) were used to measure the students' speaking anxiety levels. Findings of this study revealed that the university students encountered moderate level of speaking anxiety. This is illustrated in Figure 1 which shows the overall mean of 3.31, revealing that students in public universities in Sarawak are experiencing an average level of ESL speaking anxiety.

Among the four main components of students' ESL Speaking Anxiety as shown in Figure 2, it was found that communication

apprehension ranked the highest ( $m=3.37$ ), followed by fear of negative evaluation ( $m=3.36$ ), test anxiety ( $m=3.35$ ) and comfort of using English in ESL classrooms ( $m=3.14$ ).

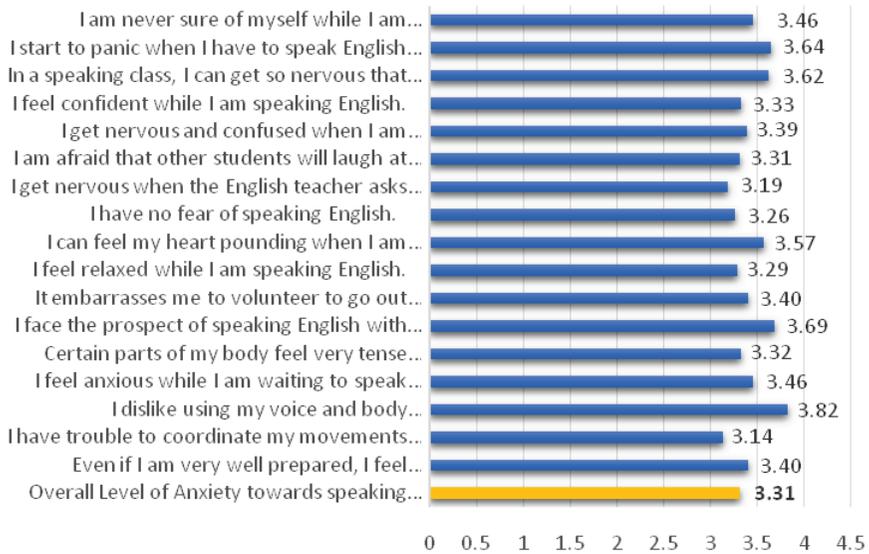


Figure 1: Overall Mean of Speaking Anxiety Level among the Students

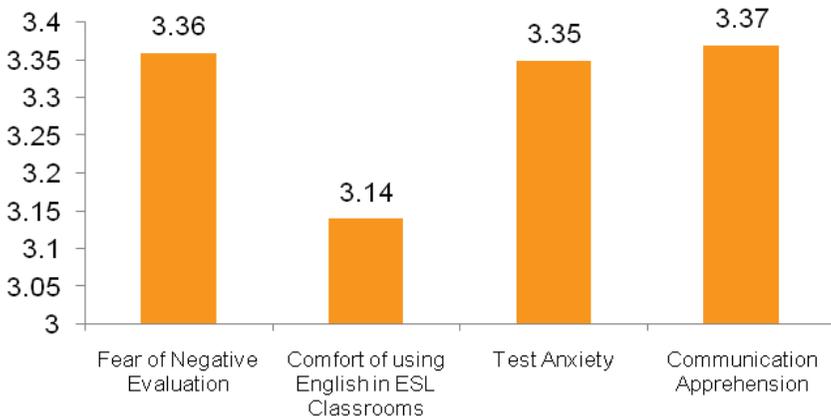


Figure 2: Mean Scores of Main Components of the Speaking Anxiety

Generally, according to the items, the university students encountered communication apprehension ( $m=3.37$ ) due to lack of self-assurance and self-esteem (such as panic, nervous and confused). Thus, students who faced communication apprehension tend to be more reserved and avoid using English to interact in class.

Fear of negative evaluation ranked second ( $m=3.36$ ). The university students were nervous as they felt their heart pounding, anxious while waiting to be called on, faced inferiority complex as they feared being laughed by others and they were shy to volunteer to speak in ESL classes.

Test anxiety ranked the third ( $m=3.35$ ). The contributing reasons to the students' test anxiety are that they felt nervous as they have problems in expressing themselves in English and they have fear of inadequate performance although they have prepared in advance.

Comfort of using English in ESL classes ranked the last ( $m=3.14$ ). The university students are less stressed to speak English in ESL classrooms due to familiarity with the teacher and their own coursemates. However, they lack self-confidence and self-esteem to anticipate their ability to speak English confidently in the future.

The findings from this study that students encountered moderate level of speaking anxiety substantiate the findings of past studies done by Çağatay (2015); Chan, Ain Nadzimah Abdullah and Nurkarimah bt Yusof (2012); Khairilzwan and Nurul Lina (2010); Lim and Mardziah bt. Budin (2014) and Siew (2014). Nevertheless, this is contrary to findings in earlier studies done by Bunrueng (2008) and Wan Zumusni et al. (2010) which found that undergraduates demonstrated high level of speaking anxiety.

### **Correlation between the University Students' ESL Speaking Anxiety and SPM English Language Results**

Table 1 shows the relationship between the university students' ESL speaking anxiety and SPM English Language results. As hypothesised, Pearson correlation analysis demonstrated that there was a positive correlation between the two variables ( $r = .510$ ),  $p < 0.01$ . The  $p$ -value is 0.000 and less than 0.01, thus it is statistically significant. The

correlation index indicated that there was a moderate significant relationship between the students’ ESL speaking anxiety and SPM English Language results. This indicates that better SPM English Language results increased ESL speaking anxiety among the university students. This finding concurs with the findings in studies done by Debreli and Demirkan (2016) and Gregersen and Horwitz (2002) that the higher the proficiency level, the higher the level of students’ anxiety.

The finding in this study that the university students’ SPM English results have a positive influence on their ESL speaking anxiety is contrary to findings in previous studies by Balemir (2009) and Çağatay (2015) which demonstrated that there was no statistically significant difference in Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety (FLSA) in relation to the proficiency level of the students.

**Table 1: Correlation of University Students’ ESL Speaking Anxiety and SPM English Language Results**

|                              |   | ESL Speaking Anxiety  | English Language Results |
|------------------------------|---|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| ESL Speaking Anxiety         | Pearson Correlation<br>Sig. (2-tailed)<br>N | 1<br><br>592          | .510**<br>.000<br>592    |
| SPM English Language Results | Pearson Correlation<br>Sig. (2-tailed)<br>N | .510**<br>.000<br>592 | 1<br><br>592             |

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

### **Correlation between the University Students’ ESL Speaking Anxiety and Mother Tongue**

Table 2 shows the relationship between the university students’ ESL speaking anxiety and mother tongue. Pearson correlation analysis in Table 2 illustrates that there was a low negative correlation between the university students’ ESL speaking anxiety and mother tongue ( $r = -.243$ ),  $p < 0.01$ . The p-value is 0.000 and less than 0.01, therefore the value is statistically significant. This suggests that mother tongue will not have much influence on the ESL students’ speaking anxiety. This contrasts with the findings in studies done by Delbio, Abilasha and Ilankumaran (2018)

and Said Muhammad Khan (2015) that influence of native language is one of the causal factors of anxiety to speak the target language.

**Table 2: Correlation of University Students' ESL Speaking Anxiety and Mother Tongue**

|                      |                     | ESL Speaking Anxiety | Mother Tongue |
|----------------------|---------------------|----------------------|---------------|
| ESL Speaking Anxiety | Pearson Correlation | 1                    | -.243**       |
|                      | Sig. (2-tailed)     |                      | .000          |
|                      | N                   | 592                  | 592           |
| Mother Tongue        | Pearson Correlation | -.243**              | 1             |
|                      | Sig. (2-tailed)     | .000                 |               |
|                      | N                   | 592                  | 592           |

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

### Correlation between the University Students' ESL Speaking Anxiety and Parents' Academic Qualifications

Table 3 displays the relationship between the university students' ESL speaking anxiety and parents' academic qualifications. Pearson correlation analysis in Table 3 shows that there was a low negative correlation between the students' ESL speaking anxiety and parents' academic qualifications ( $r = -.268$ ),  $p < 0.01$ . The p-value is 0.000 and less than 0.01, therefore the value is statistically significant. This implies that

**Table 3: Correlation of University Students' ESL Speaking Anxiety and Parents' Academic Qualifications**

|                                  |                     | ESL Speaking Anxiety | Parents' academic qualifications |
|----------------------------------|---------------------|----------------------|----------------------------------|
| ESL Speaking Anxiety             | Pearson Correlation | 1                    | -.268**                          |
|                                  | Sig. (2-tailed)     |                      | .000                             |
|                                  | N                   | 592                  | 592                              |
| Parents' academic qualifications | Pearson Correlation | -.268**              | 1                                |
|                                  | Sig. (2-tailed)     | .000                 |                                  |
|                                  | N                   | 592                  | 592                              |

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

parents' academic qualifications will not have much influence on ESL speaking anxiety among the university students. This differs from the finding yielded in Abraham, Crais and Vernon-Feagans' (2013) study that there is a correlation between students' speaking anxiety and parents'

educational background, indicating that students' learning is linked to their homes.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

In summary, findings from this study indicated that the university students encountered average level of ESL speaking anxiety. Among the major factors that contributed to students' English speaking anxiety in public universities in Sarawak, 'Communication Apprehension' ranked the highest, followed by 'Fear of Negative Evaluation', 'Test Anxiety' and 'Comfort of using English in ESL Classroom'.

The correlation analyses revealed moderate positive correlation between the university students' ESL speaking anxiety (dependent variable) and SPM English Language results (independent variable), indicating a moderate influence between both the variables. However, there was a weak negative correlation between the university students' ESL speaking anxiety (dependent variable) and the mother tongue and parents' academic qualifications (independent variables). Taken together, the findings from this study are significant in that mother tongue and parents' academic qualifications have little influence on the students' ESL speaking anxiety; thus adding new insights to the existing body of literature which lacks research in this area in the local context. The findings indicate that rich diversity in cultural background and differences in mother tongue do not hinder second language learning, particularly to converse in English.

Findings from this study imply that educators need to provide a stress-free environment that is more conducive for students to have ample and engaging learning practices to converse in English. In due course, this will boost their self-confidence to communicate using English language. In addition, students need to be encouraged by educators, parents and the society to read not only printed materials but also online English materials to enable them to expand their vocabulary and to achieve better academic performance; hence, attain oral fluency in the English language.

Generally, findings from this study are important as they provide a basis for educators to conduct speaking anxiety management programmes

and plan effective teaching strategies to reduce students' speaking anxiety. Ensuang this study, a Speaking Chess game was developed to provide a pleasurable avenue for students to express their thoughts using the English language. It helps to instil confidence in the students as they are given the opportunity to present their thoughts as they play the game. This innovative board game will help students to be more eloquent and hence, eliminate their anxiety of speaking in English. A comparative study to examine the speaking anxiety level between public and private university students can be considered in the future to enrich the present research data and to further enlighten educators as to the underlying cause of speaking anxiety among university students.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The study was sponsored by *Dana Kecemerlangan UiTM Sarawak 2017 600-RMU/DANA SS 5/3 (20/2017)*.

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