

# Examining L2 Speaking Anxiety among Malaysian Undergraduates

Ahmad, Adi Afzal<sup>1\*</sup> & Awang Hashim, Rosna<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Cawangan Perlis, Arau, 02600, Malaysia

<sup>2</sup>School of Education, Universiti Utara Malaysia, Sintok, 06010, Malaysia

## Email Address:

adi\_afzal@uitm.edu.my\*, rosna@uum.edu.my

\*Corresponding author: Adi Afzal Ahmad

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**Abstract:** Feeling anxious or experiencing anxiety in the second language (L2) classroom is a common phenomenon among many L2 learners. Studies have found that anxiety can affect learners' language learning process and performance in a negative way. Among the four language skills, the speaking skill which requires the learners to speak in the target language has been shown to be the most anxiety provoking among the learners. However, language-skill-specific anxiety such as speaking anxiety is relatively new compared to the well-known general foreign language anxiety. As such, there is a need to investigate it in the Malaysian context. To achieve that, 298 undergraduates at a Malaysian institution of higher education were involved in the study. A questionnaire was used to collect data from the participants. Statistical analysis indicated that the participants exhibited a moderate level of speaking anxiety. Also, there was a significant difference between the level of speaking anxiety between male and female. Finally, the number one cause of speaking anxiety among the participants was their perception of their competency in the target language.

**Keywords:** second language, language-skill-specific anxiety, speaking anxiety, language learning, undergraduates

## 1. Introduction

Learning a language other than your own native language takes place every day around the world. Some people learn a new or an additional language out of personal interests; others do so out of necessity or for some rewarding outcomes that come from mastering another language. Many language learners aim to become a fluent speaker of the target language since being able to speak fluently is often perceived as the most important and rewarding skill to achieve. Unfortunately, not every learner is able to achieve their dream of becoming a fluent speaker of the target language.

Many reasons have been given to explain why a significant portion of second language learners are not able to become a fluent speaker of the target language even though they are interested and motivated to learn the target language. One of the most popular reasons given is anxiety. According to Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), many learners experienced anxiety when they were learning another language. To differentiate the anxiety that the language learners experience in the language learning classroom from other types of anxiety, Horwitz et al. (1986) proposed the term 'Foreign Language Anxiety' (FLA) to describe this particular situation-specific anxiety. According to them, FLA is "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (p. 128). They also developed an instrument called the 'Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale' (FLCAS) which could be used to identify the type and level of anxiety among foreign or second language learners.

Studies from the field of foreign language anxiety have consistently shown a negative relationship between language anxiety and achievement (Aida, 1994; Elkhafaifi, 2005; Horwitz, 2001; MacIntyre and Gardner, 1994; Saito & Samimy, 1996). In fact, by now, there is a general consensus that language anxiety has a negative impact on all areas of language achievement (Abu-Rabia, 2004; Aida, 1994; Cheng, Horwitz, & Schallert, 1999; Matsuda & Gobel, 2004).

Because of its debilitating nature in relation to foreign or second language learning, FLA is widely considered as a factor that needs to be addressed effectively.

Further research on FLA found that many language learners feel that having to speak in the target language is the most anxiety provoking (Young, 1990). Due to that, many learners choose to keep quiet and do not speak in the target language as much as they should even when they are in a conducive classroom environment. This, inadvertently, affects their second language acquisition process resulting in them not being able to become a fluent speaker of the target language. This is because, in order to become a good user or speaker of a target language, a learner does not only need quality input (Krashen, 1985), he or she also needs to produce quality output of the language (Swain, 1985, 2005). However, due to speaking anxiety, many second language learners appear to be more comfortable receiving input rather than producing output. Due to that, they, ultimately, find it challenging to speak fluently in the target language even after years of learning the language.

Speaking anxiety can be caused by a number of factors. Inada (2022), for example, found that the causes of speaking anxiety among Japanese students were unpleasant classroom environment, peer pressure, and non-ideal class types. Yildiz (2021), meanwhile, found that the factors that caused speaking anxiety among Turkish students were proficiency in the target language, students' own self-evaluation, behaviour and inadequacies, and cultural differences. Finally, Khouni, Gasim, Al-Fahdi, and Al-Naabi (2022) speculated that fear of making mistakes and being ridiculed by their peers were the two factors that prohibited Omani students from taking part in speaking activities in the language classroom. Studies from different countries seem to offer different answers to the problem.

In terms of the level of speaking anxiety experienced by the learners, Saudi language learners exhibited a moderate level of speaking anxiety (Alnahidh & Altalhab, 2020). Filipino undergraduates also reported a moderate level of speaking anxiety (Quinto & Macayan, 2019). Chinese students, on the other hand, reported a high level of speaking anxiety (He, 2017; Naudhani, Wu, & Naudhani, 2018). The significance of gender on speaking anxiety, unfortunately, was not reported in these studies. A meta-analysis conducted by Piniel and Zólyomi (2022) on the role of gender in the general FLA did not find any significant influence of gender on the level of FLA among the research participants. However, two studies on language-skill-specific anxiety, namely, writing anxiety, did report a significant gender influence on the level of writing anxiety among Taiwanese (Cheng, 2002) and Indonesian (Salikin, 2019) students, respectively. Since language-skill-specific anxiety is relatively new in the field of second language acquisition, Quinto and Macayan (2019) recommended that studies on speaking anxieties to be carried out to know more about this matter. Chin, Ling, and Yih (2016) also proposed that researchers continue to examine the significance of gender on language anxiety among second language learners.

Based on the recommendations made by the researchers, and the lack of current information regarding L2 speaking anxiety among Malaysian university students, the current study thus aims to fill in the gap by answering the following research questions:

1. What is the level of speaking anxiety experienced by Malaysian undergraduates?
2. Does the level of speaking anxiety differ according to gender?
3. What are the factors that contribute to Malaysian undergraduates' speaking anxiety?

## 2. Methodology

This research used a non-experimental mixed-method research design. A quantitative survey was conducted to determine the level of anxiety among the participants; and a qualitative survey was conducted to identify the causes of speaking anxiety among the participants.

298 undergraduates (Male = 126, 42.3%; Female = 172, 57.7%) at a university campus located in the northern part of Peninsular Malaysia served as the sample for this study. They were in the second semester at the university. The mean age for all participants was 19 ( $SD = .11$ ). All of them were non-English major students and were taking an English language course as part of their academic plan for the semester.

The instrument, in the form of a survey questionnaire, was developed for this study. It had three parts: participant's demographic information, the L2 Speaking Anxiety Scale, and an optional open-ended question. The first part elicited demographic information such as the participants' age and gender. The second part identified the level of speaking anxiety as rated by the participants. There were altogether eight items of typical classroom speaking activities. The participants were required to rate their anxiety level for each item on a six-point scale from 1 (very low) to 6 (very high). The total scores for each individual participant could range from 8 to 48, with higher scores indicating higher level

of speaking anxiety. The third part elicited feedback from the participants on the causes of speaking anxiety. It was in the form of an open-ended question and was optional for the participants to respond to.

The survey questionnaires were administered to the participants during their respective English class. Before administering the questionnaires to the participants, a brief explanation on the purpose of the study was given to the participants. They were also informed that their participations were strictly on voluntary basis. Once the participants had completed the questionnaires, they were returned to the researchers.

Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 25 was used to analyse the quantitative data. To identify the students' level of anxiety, the mean score was computed. To determine whether there was any significant difference between male and female students' level of speaking anxiety, a *t*-test for independent samples was utilised. Finally, to understand the factors that lead to speaking anxiety, the KJ Method (Scupin, 1997) was used.

### 3. Results

This study investigated matters related to speaking anxiety among second semester undergraduates at a Malaysian university campus. All 298 participants filled in their demographic information and rated their level of speaking anxiety. Only 43 participants answered the optional open-ended question regarding the causes of their speaking anxiety. Reliability analysis using SPSS version 25 software on the L2 Speaking Anxiety Scale indicated that the questionnaire was highly reliable ( $\alpha = .92$ ).

To answer the first research question, descriptive statistics were used. The following cut-offs were used to interpret the level of speaking anxiety: 1.0-1.99 = very low, 2.0-2.99 = low, 3.0-3.99 = moderate, 4.0-4.99 = high, and 5.0-6.0 = very high. Table 1 summarises participants' responses to all eight L2 Speaking Anxiety scale items. The mean score for each item is also provided to indicate levels of anxiety across the items.

**Table 1.** Responses on the L2 Speaking Anxiety Scale

Item	Mean	SD
1 Answering my friend's question.	3.22	1.078
2 Doing a group presentation in front of the class.	3.58	1.259
3 Giving an individual presentation in class.	4.10	1.411
4 Sharing my opinion in a formal discussion in class.	3.72	1.206
5 Speaking without enough preparation.	4.21	1.366
6 Answering the teacher's question.	3.65	1.279
7 Giving my opinion in class.	3.80	1.229
8 Answering a question by a friend who is better than me in English.	3.26	1.335
Total	3.70	1.016

According to Table 1, the mean score that represented the overall level of speaking anxiety among the participants was 3.70 ( $SD = 1.016$ ). This indicates that the overall level of speaking anxiety among the participants was moderate. Among the eight typical classroom speaking activities, two of them were rated as inducing high anxiety level (Items 5 and 3); the rest were rated as moderate. While still rated as inducing moderate level anxiety, the least anxiety provoking speaking activity was Item 1.

To answer the second research question on whether the level of speaking anxiety differs according to gender or not, an independent *t*-test analysis was conducted. The significance level was set at .05. The results are shown below.

**Table 2.** Group Statistics

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
L2 Speaking Anxiety	Male	126	3.4792	1.03014	.09177
	Female	172	3.8488	.97887	.07464

According to Table 2, the mean score for male participants was 3.48 ( $SD = 1.03$ ). As for the female participants, the mean score for them was 3.85 ( $SD = .98$ ). This suggests that female participants had a higher speaking anxiety level compared to the male participants.

**Table 3.** *t*-test

		Independent Samples Test									
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means							
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		
										Lower	Upper
L2 Speaking Anxiety	Equal variances assumed	.074	.786	-3.150	296	.002	-.36967	.11736	-.60064	-.13870	
	Equal variances not assumed			-3.125	261.439	.002	-.36967	.11829	-.60260	-.13674	

As presented in Table 3, there was a significant difference in scores for male ( $M=3.47$ ,  $SD=1.03$ ) and female participants ( $M=3.84$ ,  $SD=.97$ ;  $t(296) = -3.15$ ,  $p = .002$ , two-tailed). This suggests that gender did influence the level of speaking anxiety among the participants.

Finally, to answer the third question on the factors that contribute to the participants' speaking anxiety, a thematic analysis based on the KJ method (Scupin, 1997) was conducted. Here, similar responses from the participants were grouped together and a theme (interpretation of the responses) was assigned to each cluster. There were altogether three clusters. Table 4 shows the themes and the number of responses from the participants that made up each cluster.

**Table 4.** Causes of L2 Speaking Anxiety

Causes of L2 Speaking Anxiety		No. of responses
1	Perceived L2 competency	26
2	Fear of negative evaluation	11
3	Introversion	6

As can be seen in Table 4, the number one cause of L2 speaking anxiety was competency in the language. 26 participants wrote about this in their response to the open-ended question in the survey questionnaire. At a distant second place was fear of negative evaluation, presumably, by other people. Finally, the third cause of speaking anxiety among the participants was their own personality trait of introversion.

## 4. Discussion

The first objective of this study was to identify the level of L2 speaking anxiety among Malaysian undergraduates. Findings indicated that Malaysian undergraduates had a moderate level of speaking anxiety. This suggests that, in general, the students' speaking anxiety is not too high – to the extent that it might block them from being able to speak at all – and not too low to the extent that it might make them take things for granted and lose focus on the lesson. This finding is similar to Alnahidh and Altalhab's (2020) and Quinto and Macayan's (2019) findings in which the students in their studies also exhibited a moderate level of speaking anxiety. However, this finding differs from Naudhani, Wu, and Naudhani (2018), in which the Chinese students exhibited a high level of speaking anxiety. The difference could be due to the individual person's own mindset and expectation, and maybe even the learning culture at the place. Interestingly, even though the overall level of L2 speaking anxiety among Malaysian undergraduates was moderate, their level of L2 speaking anxiety for having to speak without ample preparation and having to do a solo presentation in class was high. This shows that some speaking activities can cause high anxiety among the students.

The second objective of this study was to determine whether gender plays a significant role in determining the level of speaking anxiety among the students. Initial analysis indicated that female students had a higher level of speaking anxiety compared to male students. Further analysis using *t*-test showed that the difference between the two gender was significant. In other words, gender does affect the level of speaking anxiety among the students. While studies on general FLA tend to show that gender is not significant; recent publications on language-skill-specific anxiety seem to suggest that gender can play a significant role in influencing the level of anxiety. For example, research on writing anxiety did report a significant difference between the level of writing anxiety among male and female Taiwanese students (Cheng, 2002) and among male and female Indonesian students (Salikin, 2019).

The third objective of this study was to discover the potential causes of speaking anxiety. Thematic analysis following the KJ Method (Scupin, 1997) was used to sort the students' qualitative data. It was found that the main cause of speaking anxiety among the students was their own doubts about their language competence. In other words, they experience high speaking anxiety because they feel that their competence in the language is not good or not up to the standard. This finding is similar to Yildiz's (2021) finding in which the students listed proficiency as one of the causes of their speaking anxiety.

There are several implications derived from this study. First, while the overall level of L2 speaking anxiety among Malaysian undergraduates was moderate, they still experienced high speaking anxiety when they were required to give an individual presentation and when they felt that they were not given enough time to prepare for the speaking activity. Since these are the types of speaking or communication activities that happen frequently in the language classroom, for them to still experience high speaking anxiety after formally learning the language for more than ten years is rather unexpected. As such, there is a need for the language curriculum and syllabus to be evaluated and even modified to include more speaking related lessons, activities, and assessments to build up students' speaking competence and confidence. Second, since developing speaking competence takes time, there is a need to change the students' mindset from "I need to be good in the language in order to speak" to "I need to speak in order to be good in the language". Educators need to instill the confidence to speak in the students by encouraging them to speak and express themselves. In addition, grammatical errors could be addressed in the next class, for example, when the lesson is on language and structure, rather than on the spot when the students are speaking or attempting to speak in the target language. Third, more research is needed to identify the factors that hinder Malaysian students from speaking in the target language and the potential solutions to the problem.

This study is important in several ways. First, it acknowledges and addresses the issue of speaking anxiety that plagues many L2 students. By doing so, this study hopes to raise awareness that speaking anxiety exists and, if left unchecked, could be detrimental to the L2 learners' speaking proficiency development. Second, this study identifies the level of speaking anxiety among the university students and even the particular speaking activities that create much anxiety among the learners. This would be of value to both researchers and classroom practitioners because effective support and guidance can be provided to the learners since we now know exactly their level of speaking anxiety and the types of speaking activities that cause high level anxiety to them. Third, this study demonstrates that gender affects the level language-skill-specific anxiety significantly. As such, there probably is a need for classroom practitioners and interested parties to be more cognizant of the approach that they use to address male versus female students' speaking anxiety. Finally, this study uncovers the main cause of speaking anxiety among Malaysian undergraduates which is the students' perception of their own L2 competence. Whether their perception of their own L2 competence is true or not, it has undeniably discouraged them from speaking in the target language. Due to that, it is imperative for some kind of intervention to be carried out to change the students' mindset so that they would speak in the target language at whatever level of proficiency and competency that they are currently at. Finally, the knowledge derived from this study helps to add further information on speaking anxiety in the field of Individual Learner Differences in Second Language Acquisition.

## 5. Conclusion

This study examined L2 speaking anxiety among Malaysian university students. It was found that the level of speaking anxiety among the students was moderate. In addition, gender played a significant role in influencing the level of speaking anxiety among the students with female students experiencing a higher level of anxiety compared to the male students. Lastly, the number one cause of speaking anxiety was the students' perception of their own competence in the target language. More research on language-skill-specific anxiety is needed to truly understand its relevance in the field of Second Language Acquisition.

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