



An Investigation into College Students' Anxiety in EFL Speaking Classes

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Abstract: Speaking is one of the most important skills in learning English. However, a lot of students are anxious about speaking in classrooms. Therefore, the aim of this study is to investigate the levels of anxiety and find out the factors causing anxiety in English speaking classes. The study employed a mixed-methods research design through the use of two questionnaires and the semi-structured interviews with the participation of 5 English teachers and 210 freshmen students at a college in Dalat, Vietnam. The findings of the study revealed that students experienced a high level of anxiety and six major factors that caused speaking anxiety were teachers' manner, lack of language knowledge, lack of confidence and preparation, and feeling of shyness, fear of being laughed at, inability to express ideas, and fear of making mistakes. Based on the findings, some recommendations were provided for both teachers and students to help students reduce the anxiety in speaking English.

1. INTRODUCTION

Language is a means of communication. Through communication, people can exchange information, ideas and express their thoughts, opinions, and feelings. People use languages to communicate in many different situations such as: in business, people use language to present a project or to persuade someone to invest money into a new project, in traveling, to ask the directions, buy ticket, ask for food, so on. If there is no speaking skill, communication cannot happen, so speaking skill is very important. It seems that it is a desirable goal for people when they learn English. It is very important for the students to speak, and topics should focus on meanings, values, collaboration, social development and provision of a rich context (Celce-Murcia, 2001). According to Ur (1996), four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) in English, speaking skill is one of the most important skills. A person who learns a language is considered as a speaker of that language.

From the importance of speaking skill, it is clear that students should get over anxiety in speaking. Speaking Anxiety (SA) is referred to as fear of experience of learners in speaking a foreign language. SA which related to learners' psychology has a great impact on learners' self-confidence to speak out sentences. FL anxiety is a specific anxiety that happens during learning a second language which relating to psychological, cognitive and social aspects; or it 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 (Foss & Reitzel, 1991). Similarly, Horwitz, E. K., & Young, D. (1991) showed that the concept of Foreign language anxiety is a phenomenon that falls into the specific anxiety reaction of category and this term is used to show a difference about people who are generally anxious and those who have anxious only in particular situations.

At Da Lat College (DLC), after graduation students of tourism management apply for jobs and they are interviewed in English. Besides, they use a lot of English in their jobs. Some mechanic or electricity students go abroad to find good jobs with high salary. English is really necessary for the students at DLC, especially speaking skills. Actually, at DLC, the students can listen, read and write but they cannot speak English fluently and exactly. Nonetheless, many students only like learning grammar, reading, writing instead of speaking because they have some anxiety while they speak English. Four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) in English, speaking skill is one of the most important skills. However, students at DLC after three years studying English cannot

communicate fluently and accurately because they find it difficult to speak English. To help the students overcome this difficulty, it is necessary to discover what factors cause anxiety. Moreover, teachers need to know language anxiety that affects their students' communicative competence so that they can deal with it to help their students improve their speaking English skill as well as adjusting themselves to have good results in teaching the English language. At DLC, as observed, the students are afraid of speaking English in the English classroom and they are even unwilling to take part in speaking activities or very anxious to do oral tests. Some students said that they accept to fail the examination because they cannot speak English and they are very anxious about speaking English. For the above reasons, it is imperative that a study is conducted to find solutions to help students overcome speaking anxiety. The main aim of this study is to investigate foreign language speaking anxiety in English Classrooms among Vietnamese Students at DLC. More specifically, it attempts to:

- + explore the levels of speaking English anxiety among students at DLC.
- + discover the main anxiety causes that affect students' speaking English skill; and based on the findings, it is expected that the findings of the study will help EFL students reduce the impact of speaking anxiety during the process of learning English speaking skills.

So far, in the Vietnamese context, very few studies have been found related to this field of study; especially, in Da Lat City and at DLC, no studies have been conducted to investigate EFL students' speaking anxiety. The current study will fill this gap. It attempted to address the two following research questions:

- To what extent are the students anxious in their English-speaking classes at Da Lat College?
- What are the causes of students' anxiety in the English-speaking classes at Da Lat College?

2. RESEARCH METHODS

2.1. Research Site and Participants

The research site of this study was conducted at DLC located in Da Lat City, Lam Dong Province. The school has a population of about 3100 students and 200 teachers. 13 of them are English teachers and all of them are qualified with BA and MA degrees and 8 to 20 years' teaching experience. There are 9 major faculties in the school. Students major in tourism, mechanics, information technology, English, electricity and electronics, agriculture and economics. Basic English Subject is compulsory for all students in the first semester and in the second semester they have to learn specialized English subject.

The sample of the study was 205 non-English majored students aged 18-22 years. Each class at DLC has from 25 to 30 students depending on the number of students applying to the school. They were the freshmen and were conveniently chosen. In addition, 5 English teachers aged from 35 to 45 at DLC were selected to be the participants of this study.

The selection criteria for teacher interviewees were that those who were teaching English at various faculties and had more than 5 years of teaching experience and were willing to be interviewed. The 20 student participants were chosen among the ones who took part in the completion of the questionnaire. All of students took part in this study just after they finished the second semester of the first year.

2.2. Research Instrument

The two main research instruments used in this study were a questionnaire and the semi-structured interview which were partly adapted from Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz et al. (1986). The questionnaire had three sections: the first section was about the demographic information of the participants. The second section of the questionnaire consisted of 10 items about the level of anxiety about speaking English. The third section of the questionnaire was 19 statements to measure the causes of SA. Cronbach's Alpha indexes of the questionnaire were at **.902** for 10 items of the second part and **.809** for 19 items of the third part, so the reliability of the questionnaire was very high. Another instrument that the researcher used to conduct the survey was two interviews. There were 10 questions in the interview to ensure that causes contributing to SA were correctly identified. Moreover, interviews were used to ask directly students about their personal experiences and they helped the researcher collect and analyze data quickly and exactly.

2.3. Procedures for Data Collection and Analysis

Data for this study was collected at DLC in July 2023 after finishing the final examination of English Subject. It took them around 30 minutes to complete the questionnaire; among 210 copies of the questionnaire administered to students, 201 copies were returned and 200 of them were valid. 5 teachers joined the semi-structured interview. The researcher used SPSS to analyze close-ended questionnaire to gain percentages and frequencies of students' responses to each item of the questionnaire. A questionnaire comprised 10 items was used to examine the level of SA. Descriptive statistics such as means (M) and standard deviations (St. D) were used to analyze the level of SA.

It can say that when the mean score is from 1 to 2.25, FLSA level is "no anxiety", the mean score is from 2.26 to 3.0, FLSA level is "low anxiety", the mean score is from 3.01 to 3.75, FLSA level is "moderate anxiety" and finally, mean score is from 3.76 to 5.0, FLSA level is "high anxiety".

All the qualitative data from student and teacher interviews were analyzed through exploratory content analysis. The teachers were coded as T1, T2, T3, T4, and T5; and the students who participated in the interviews were coded as S1...S20.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Results of the Study

3.1.1 The Level of the Students' Anxiety in their English-speaking Class at Da Lat College

A questionnaire comprised 10 items was used to examine the level of SA. Data were typed and analyzed quantitatively by using SPSS, version 22. Descriptive statistics such as means (M) and standard deviations (St. D) were used to analyze the level of SA. The participants who scored from 1 to 2.25, FLSA level is "no anxiety", from 2.26 to 3.0, FLSA level is "low anxiety", from 3.01 to 3.75, FLSA level is "moderate anxiety" and finally, from 3.76 to 5.0, FLSA level is "high anxiety". Most of the students feel very anxious when they speak English without preparation in advance (item 1) with M=3.92. For item 2, a majority of the students are worried and shy when they speak English in front of the others with M=3.68. Similarly, a great number of students realized that they feel very nervous when they communicate with the teachers and friends in English in classrooms (item 3) with M= 3.80. Moreover, they are also anxious when they cannot understand what the teacher is saying (item 4) with M=3.83. Meanwhile, regarding items 5, 6, 7, students have moderate anxiety; they are anxious when they raise their hand to answer the teacher's question; their heart will pound if the teacher calls them to answer the question; and while they are waiting to speak English with M=3.42, 3.44 and 3.60 respectively.

In addition, most students feel high nervous when their group members ask them to represent the group to talk when they attend an oral English examination in class, and they are afraid that they will fail in the final oral English examination, (items 8,9,10) with M=3.88, 3.82 and 4.07 respectively, the rate of students feels nervous if they fail in the final oral English examination is the highest and the lowest anxious level is when they raise their hand to answer the teacher's question. With respect to data collected from the interview, all the 5 interviewees expressed that the anxiety affects the students' foreign language learning, all of the teachers said "yes". Most of them believed that anxiety affects learn the foreign language of students. Similarly, 20 students also agreed that anxiety has an effect on their foreign language learning. For example: T1 "*Most of the students are anxious...*"; or S1 "*I always get nervous*". In terms of the levels of speaking anxiety, the students have a "high" level of anxiety; The students had similar opinions as the teachers. For example: T1 "*I believe that many students experience the high level ...*" and S1 "*.....I think that my level of FLSA is high.....*"

All of the five teachers and most of the students identified the following factors, including the teacher's manner in language classrooms, students' lack of language knowledge, students' lack of confidence, students' lack preparation, students' feeling of shyness, students' fear of making mistakes, students' inability to express ideas and fear of negative attitudes. For example: T1 "... many factors may cause students' SA ..." & S1 "the role of the teachers is very important.....".

3.1.2 The Causes of Students' Anxiety in the English-speaking Class at Da Lat College

Bổ sung dữ liệu từ interviews?????

The causes of students' anxiety include teachers' manner, lack of language knowledge, lack of confidence and preparation, and feeling of shyness, fear of negative attitudes, inability to express idea factor, fear of making mistakes through the data collected from the questionnaire and interviews.

3.1.3. Teachers' Manner

Regarding quantitative data, relating to teacher's manner in the language classroom, three causes of anxiety are illustrated including: the English teacher interrupts students to correct the mistakes with $M= 2.66$, $SD=1.41$; the English teacher creates a stressful atmosphere in the English class with $M= 2.17$, $SD=1.41$, and the teacher does not encourage students to learn English in class with $M=1.61$, $SD=.991$.

Data collected from the interviews are consistent with the quantitative data. All the 25 interviewees reported that teachers' manner also causes the anxiety of speaking English. For instance, S2 "Teachers' attitudes may cause students' SA.....".

3.1.4. Lack of Language Knowledge

Five items were made for lack of language knowledge. Most students thought that the factor "When I want to speak a sentence in English, I do not how to arrange the position of the words" (item5) causes high SA with $M=4.01$, $SD=1.09$. Coming second is "lack of vocabulary" (item 1) with $M=3.90$, $SD=1.03$; three-fourths of the students considered that these factors caused anxiety for them. The other three causes also obtained rather high mean scores including item 2 is about the grammar knowledge with $M=3.85$, $SD=1.01$; item 3 is their wrong pronunciation with $M=3.78$, and item 4 is about low English proficiency with $M=3.87$.

3.1.5. Lack of Confidence and Preparation, and Feeling of Shyness

In terms of *Lack of confidence and preparation, and feeling of shyness*, four items were investigated and without preparation in advance is the most anxious reason in four reasons with $M=3.92$, $SD=1.10$, while a great number of them believed that unconfident about voice, ancient, pronunciation with $M=3.70$, $SD= 1.13$ and get stressed when communicating with people with $M=3.55$, $SD= 1.12$. However, regarding "their faces turn red and they cannot remember anything to communicate" with $M=3.08$, $SD=1.26$ caused the lowest anxiety for students.

3.1.6. Fear of Making Mistakes

A great many students reported that "they are not confident in communicating English because they are afraid that they will make mistakes" with $M=3.58$, $SD=1.18$ and the peers and teacher will laugh at them when they make mistakes with $M=3.37$, $SD=1.43$.

3.1.7. Inability to Express Idea Factor

Similarly, three items were investigated for *Inability to express idea factor*, most students believe that they do not know how to express their ideas so that everybody can understand easily with $M=3.99$, $SD=1.02$. Specifically, they feel nervous because they do not know what to say or even if they know what to say, they cannot switch it into English or speak it smoothly $M=3.92$, $SD=1.09$, and it will lead to students will speak nothing because of their anxiety with $M=3.60$, $SD=1.16$ respectively.

3.1.8. Fear of Negative Attitudes

Not many students are afraid that other students will laugh at them while they are speaking English with $M=2.93$, $SD=1.26$; and more than half of the students are afraid of losing face if their teacher and friends have negative attitudes towards their poor speaking with $M=3.16$, $SD=1.36$.

Based on the data of the questionnaire, it can be said that students at DLC are really anxious in speaking English. Especially, 6 factors cause most anxiety among students. The ranking highest factors causing SA is that when they want to speak a sentence in English, they do not how to arrange position of the words, 80.2 % students agreed with this factor. Besides, they do not know how to express their ideas so that everyone can understand them easily was also believed to be one of the most important reasons causing students' FLSA. Next, the factors that students do not know what to

say or even if they know what to say, they can't switch it into English or speak it smoothly and If there is not any preparation in advance, they feel nervous to speak English are considered plays a significant role in creating speaking anxiety (78.4%). According to the results, 78% of students agreed that their SA comes from the factor that they are afraid of speaking English because their vocabulary knowledge is not good enough. Finally, students are afraid of speaking English because their English proficiency is low is one of top factors of SA (77.4%).

Another instrument was used to identify factors causing students' SA was the interview. The interview was carried out with 5 English teachers and 20 students after two weeks of completing the questionnaire survey. The aim of the interview is to verify the findings gathered from the questionnaire. The results are displayed below.

Regarding the factors that cause students' SA, one general question was raised for both teachers and students "What factors do you think cause students' SA in an English-speaking class?" All of the five teachers and most of the students identified the following factors, including the teacher's manner in language classrooms, students' lack of language knowledge, students' lack of confidence, students' lack preparation, students' feeling of shyness, students' fear of making mistakes, students' inability to express ideas and fear of negative attitudes. For example:

T1 said: "... many factors may cause students' SA such as lack of vocabulary or being afraid of making mistakes. They don't believe in their ability, they think they can't speak English so they never try..."

Or, T3 answered "...without preparation in advance, students may be not confident when they speak. They can't find ideas to express. I think students should practice speaking more and more at home or outside in the street when they have a foreigner to improve their confidence, language, and pronunciation as well as vocabulary knowledge..."

In addition, some students also gave their opinions about factors that cause their SA. For example:

S1 stated "Motivation is one of the other important factor causing SA, if you have the motivation to study English, you think that you will have a good and stable job in the future if you are good at English or when you are good at English, people will respect and admire you; at that time you will try your best to practice English all the time and it is easy to get success in learning English".

And S9 supported her ideas that "teachers' attitudes may cause students' SA. Teachers' positive attitudes may motivate me to practice more English in the classroom. I feel comfortable, confident and want to join in speaking activities if the teacher is friendly, easy-going and ready to help me in studying"

Similarly, (S16) said:

"A barrier between teacher and student should be removed; sometimes, the teacher should also be strict, but if the teacher is humorous and friendly, I feel relaxed too. The teacher's sweet words to talk will always be better than harsh words".

The students also mentioned the topic used for speaking. They prefer interesting topics for speaking. For example:

S14 said "In my opinion, the teacher should give us the interesting and hot topics in speaking lessons. It is very useful because many students know those topics, they have the motivation to debate and take part in speaking activities, the class will vivid and exciting".

Regarding to the strategies have to do in order to reduce speaking anxiety.

T1 revealed that "students should communicate and practice English more and more outside class such as at home, English club or in the street or some coffee shops where having many foreigners and try to learn a lot of vocabulary"

T2 suggested that "students should take part in speaking exercises in classroom including asking and answering the questions, discussing assignment in groups or in pairs, giving opinion, information and ideas for the topics, telling stories in English or presenting the topics..."

T5 stated that "teacher's attitude to students is also gentle and ethical, they should not scold students when they make mistakes".

For students when were asked about the strategies have to do in order to reduce speaking anxiety:

S1 said “In my opinion, the role of the teachers is very important, teachers should create a favorable learning condition and opportunities for students’ learning English speaking. They should develop activities such as dialogues, role play, debating, storytelling for students to practice English”.

S4 answered that “Language club should be acted and opened more often as well as increase the quality of the club to give chances for students to use the English language as a mean of communicating and improve speaking ability.”

S10 revealed that “teachers should use active teaching methodologies and aids such as radio, telephone, records and visual materials such as TV, video, DVD, pictures...etc. to motivate students to learn as well as to help students remember the lesson longer and quicker”.

Besides, S12 also suggested that “students should have awareness of the responsibility of learning English, they have to try their best to cultivate the language knowledge by learning more and more about vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation through English book, internet, TV or from friends and they join in speaking activities in English classroom”.

It is evident that the findings of the interviews are consistent with most of the findings of the questionnaire. Accordingly, many factors that cause SA in their speaking classes were raised by both teachers and students.

3.2. Discussion

To be able to speak English well, it is necessary for students to get over anxiety in speaking English. Anxiety has a great effect on learning a speaking skill which is one of the most important skills in learning English. The results of this study showed that most students were found to experience a high level of FL anxiety when speaking English, accounting for 60%. Besides, there were also lots of students experiencing a moderate level of FL anxiety, accounting for 40%. These students may feel extremely anxious in any speaking activities. FL anxiety can greatly influence their language achievement and performance. The results of this study are in agreement with the theory stated by Horwitz et al. (1986).which shows students who suffer from high anxiety may be afraid of speaking a foreign language. Anxiety certainly affects students’ learning performance and achievement. Similarly, the results of the study are also consistent with those of the study conducted by Alshahrani, M. A. (2016) that showed students experienced a moderate level of speaking anxiety while learning English. Besides, the FLA’s levels of students had a negative effect on their achievement. Tanveer. M. (2007) showed that there is the existence of high levels of language anxiety in most of the learners who are learning English, even through the use of modern communicative language teaching techniques from highly experienced language teachers.

What is more, it is evident that EFL students get anxious in different speaking situations. The level of speaking anxiety of students is high especially when they speak English without preparation in advance, so they were worried about making mistakes when they speak English in front of the class; they feel nervous when they cannot understand what the teacher is saying, or they feel nervous when their group members ask them to represent the group to talk. These result of the study are in alignment with those of Toubot, A.M, Seng, G.H and Abdullah, A. A (2018) which was conducted in Lybia. In addition, most of the students are anxious when they attend an oral English examination in class. That might be because so much pressure is placed on them. It may be that many students’ parents expect that their children will get good results in studying, or with good marks, they hope to gain a scholarship.

Besides, the main causes of speaking anxiety which were found in this study are lacking language knowledge, lacking confidence and preparation, and feeling of shyness, fear of making mistakes, Inability to express idea factor, fear of negative attitudes, and the teacher’s manner in language classrooms. Of all the above factors, the factor of lacking language knowledge is one of the main factors that caused the highest anxiety among students. Linguistic difficulties including grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation knowledge prevent students from actively involving learning activities. Some students reported that sometimes they always felt nervous about speaking English because I did not have enough vocabulary. It is evident that, without knowledge of vocabulary and grammar, how

can students express their feeling or opinions in a group; or how can they dare to speak in front of the teacher and other students. This finding may also reveal that it is not easy for the students to follow the English course because they might be not very good at English in high school. Next, the inability to express ideas is the second factor that made speaking anxiety. Most students believed that their linguistic knowledge is not good enough for them to be confident to speak English; they do not know how to arrange the position of words in a sentence as well as what vocabulary to use. That is why they feel difficult to express their idea. These findings of the study are in line with those of previous researches conducted by Tanveer. M. (2007), Pal. S. (2015), Toubot, A.M, Seng, G.H and Abdullah, A. A (2018) in different contexts. All showed revealed that linguistic knowledge is the key factor of FLSA.

In addition, the findings of the study also revealed several other factors that caused students' speaking anxiety such as strict and formal classroom environment, motivation, speaking topics and activities, a barrier between teacher and student, teacher attitude, fear of making mistakes and apprehension about others' evaluation, the role of language teachers. These results also have a close correlation with Horwitz et al. (1986)'s opinion shows that the academic and social context may cause foreign language anxiety among students. Obviously, in the context of the study, the teachers may not be very good at creating a friendly learning environment for the students. When the students say something, they may make mistakes but the teachers may not have a good way of correcting mistakes, leading to students' anxiety.

Finally, it is evident that many factors may cause students' speaking anxiety in their classes. The factors that cause the most anxious students SA are lack of knowledge including vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation, and inability to express ideas which may be caused of lack of confidence and belief in the students themselves.

4. CONCLUSION

This current study highlights the level as well as the causes of the speaking anxiety in English classrooms. The findings of the study show that most students feel high anxiety when they speak English in classrooms and it also reveals 6 factors causing students' speaking anxiety including teachers' manner; lack of language knowledge; lack of confidence, preparation, and feeling of shyness; fear of negative attitudes; inability to express idea factor; fear of making mistakes and students' confidence.

This study has exposed interesting information about the teachers and students' perception of FLSA, the levels of FLSA and factors causing of FLSA. The findings of the study imply that the students at DLC have low English proficiency. Most of them might be not good at English in high school. At the college, they did not have much time for learning English. Apart from insufficient time, they almost never have any chance to speak English outside the class. That is why getting confident in speaking English is not easy for them. It cannot be obtained in a short time. Those above reasons lead to several recommendations for the stakeholders at DLC.

For EFL teachers: Teachers need to adjust their attitude and how to correct the mistakes of students. In addition, teachers also should create a friendly, comfortable and relaxing learning environment to encourage and motivate students' learning. Besides, teachers should find interesting and relevant topics in speaking activities and apply multi teaching methods in their instruction.

For EFL students, students need to cultivate their linguistic knowledge and try to practice speaking English daily more and more at home, at school or outside such as communicating with foreigners in the street or some coffee shops. Besides, they have to try their best to omit shyness; they should be confident, believe themselves, think active things. They should not force achievement on their learning. Furthermore, they should overcome the fear of making mistakes. Mistakes are a natural part of learning English, so don't be afraid of them instead, take mistakes as learning opportunities that will help them to improve their spoken English language skills.

For the board of administrators, they should invest more and more equipment for teaching and learning the foreign language as well as they have to create many good chances and conditions for the students to gain the better results.

By doing so, both teachers and students gradually overcome difficulties in English speaking learning at DLC; both of them can adjust their learning and teaching to get better results.

Eventually, limitations cannot be avoided in doing research. This study was conducted at only DLC in Vietnam with the participation of 210 students and 5 teachers, so it can be said that the scale of the study is so modest; more extensive research is needed in the future. More samples drawn from other college should be made available so that the findings can be generalized to more similar EFL contexts.

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