An Investigation into Students' Speaking Anxiety and Classroom Dynamics in ESL at a Vietnamese University

Tran Vu Anh*

*Department of Languages, Hanoi University of Natural Resources and Environment

Abstract: *This research examines the issue of speaking anxiety among first-year ESL students at Hanoi University of Natural Resources and Environment (HUNRE). The study seeks to determine the sources of this anxiety and understand how the dynamics within the classroom influence students' emotions and performance. The data was collected using both qualitative and quantitative approaches from 42 first-year students through surveys and interviews. The results reveal that students' anxiety stems more from the social dynamics of the classroom than from their language ability. Many students are concerned about being negatively judged by their peers, especially when speaking in front of the entire class. The study highlights the significance of a supportive learning environment and suggests ways teachers can help reduce speaking anxiety.*

Keywords: *Difficult speaking anxiety, student, motivation in the ESL classroom*

1. Introduction

Effective communication is central to language learning, but for many ESL students, speaking in class can be a source of stress. This anxiety, commonly referred to as speaking anxiety, often arises from a fear of public speaking or being scrutinized by others. Horwitz et al. (1986) describe foreign language classroom anxiety as "a complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to the classroom learning of a foreign language" (p. 128). The present study focuses on identifying the factors contributing to speaking anxiety among students at HUNRE and the influence classroom dynamics have on this anxiety. It aims to provide insights for educators to foster environments that promote greater confidence in oral communication.

2. Research Methodology

The study utilized a mixed-method research design, combining both quantitative and qualitative methods to analyze speaking anxiety among first-year students at HUNRE. This dual approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding of how classroom social dynamics impact speaking anxiety and the students' experiences.

2.1. Research Design

The study was designed to investigate two main research questions:

What are students' thoughts and experiences regarding speaking anxiety in the ESL classroom?

How do classroom dynamics affect speaking anxiety, according to the students?

To address these questions, the research was conducted in two phases: a survey and in-depth follow-up interviews.

2.2. Participants

Forty-two first-year students, aged 18 to 19, at Hanoi University of Natural Resources and Environment participated in the study. These students were enrolled in ESL courses as part of their academic curriculum. No specific criteria such as gender or academic performance were considered, as the aim was to obtain a broad view of speaking anxiety. From this pool, six students were selected for more in-depth interviews based on their responses to the survey.

Phase 1: Survey

The first phase of the study involved a survey that was distributed to all 42 students. The survey was designed with both closed and open-ended questions to capture quantitative data on the prevalence of speaking anxiety as well as qualitative insights into students' personal experiences. The survey was divided into the following sections:

General feelings about speaking English: Students were asked to describe their comfort level with speaking English in various contexts, including at home, with friends, and in the classroom.

Physical and emotional symptoms of anxiety: Students were prompted to identify any physical symptoms (e.g., trembling, sweating, or blushing) and emotional responses (e.g., fear, embarrassment) they experienced when speaking English in class.

Source of anxiety and coping strategies: Students were asked to reflect on the reasons for their anxiety and whether they had developed any strategies to cope with these feelings.

To measure the intensity of anxiety, students were asked to rate their feelings on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 representing no anxiety and 10 representing extreme anxiety. This quantitative data provided a clear picture of how widespread speaking anxiety was among the students, while the open-ended questions allowed students to elaborate on their personal experiences in their own words.

Phase 2: Semi-Structured Interviews

Based on the survey results, six students were selected for follow-up interviews. The selection was made to ensure a variety of experiences and perspectives, particularly focusing on students who reported high levels of anxiety. The interviews were conducted in Vietnamese to allow the students to express themselves freely without language barriers, and they were conducted individually in a private setting to ensure that students felt comfortable sharing their experiences.

The semi-structured interview format allowed for flexibility, with the researcher following a general guide but adapting questions based on the students' responses. Key topics discussed during the interviews included:

General attitudes towards speaking English: Students were asked to discuss whether they found speaking English difficult or easy and how confident they felt in their speaking abilities.

Social dynamics and peer relationships: The interviews explored how students felt about speaking in front of their classmates, particularly focusing on their fear of judgment or ridicule from peers.

Teacher influence and error correction: Students were asked how they felt about teachers correcting their mistakes during speaking activities and whether the teacher's behavior affected their anxiety levels.

The interviews were recorded with the students' consent and later transcribed for analysis. The qualitative data from the interviews was analyzed thematically, with common themes such as fear of peer evaluation, discomfort in group settings, and perceptions of teacher support emerging from the data.

3. Findings

The data collected through surveys and interviews provided valuable insights into the causes and effects of speaking anxiety among ESL students. Several key findings emerged:

3.1. Prevalence of Speaking Anxiety: The survey results indicated that a large percentage of students experienced anxiety when asked to speak English in class. Nearly half of the students (48%) reported feeling uncomfortable with speaking activities in front of their peers. Physical symptoms such as trembling, sweating, and a racing heart were commonly reported, indicating the intensity of the anxiety experienced.

Table 1: Common Symptoms of Speaking Anxiety Reported by Students (n=42)

Symptom	Number of Students	Percentage
Nervousness/Feeling tense	20	48%
Trembling/Shaky voice	15	38%
Blushing/Redness in cheeks	13	31%
Sweating	10	24%
Increased heart rate	8	19%
Shortness of breath	6	14%

The table above shows the most common symptoms of speaking anxiety reported by the students. Nervousness and trembling were the most frequently mentioned physical responses, with nearly half of the students reporting these symptoms when asked to speak English in front of their peers. Horwitz et al. (1986) suggest that these physical symptoms are typical indicators of communication apprehension, a form of social anxiety where individuals fear negative evaluation when speaking in front of others. Notably, many students expressed that their anxiety was specific to the classroom setting, as they felt more comfortable speaking English at home or with friends.

3.2. Fear of Negative Peer Evaluation: A dominant theme that emerged from the interviews was the fear of being judged or ridiculed by peers. Several students, particularly girls, expressed anxiety about speaking in front of male classmates, citing fears of being laughed at or seen as incompetent. This aligns with Young's (1990) findings, which indicate that the fear of self-exposure and negative peer evaluation is one of the most significant triggers of speaking anxiety in language classrooms. Students are not just anxious about speaking, but about how their classmates perceive them. This fear of negative peer evaluation was the primary source of anxiety for most students, overshadowing concerns about their actual language proficiency**.**

Table 2: Students' Perceptions of Peer and Teacher Influence on Speaking Anxiety (Interview Data)

Perceived Source of Anxiety	Number of Interviewees (n=6)	Percentage
Fear of negative peer evaluation	5	83%
Worry about making mistakes in front of peers	4	67%
Fear of teacher's correction in front of class	2	33%
Nervousness caused by large class size	3	50%
Lack of confidence in English skills	3	50%

As shown in **Table 2**, fear of negative peer evaluation was the most common anxiety trigger among students interviewed. Interestingly, students were more concerned about peer reactions than teacher feedback, with only 33% expressing anxiety over teacher corrections made in front of the class.

3.3. Classroom Dynamics and Group Cohesiveness: The study found that classroom dynamics played a crucial role in either alleviating or exacerbating speaking anxiety. Dörnyei and Murphey (2003) argue that the internal dynamics of a classroom greatly influence the learning climate. Students who felt a sense of solidarity with their classmates reported lower levels of anxiety, as they felt their peers were supportive and non-judgmental. In contrast, students in classrooms with fragmented social groups or tension between classmates were more likely to experience heightened anxiety when speaking. These findings suggest that group cohesiveness and a positive classroom atmosphere are key to reducing anxiety.

3.4. Teacher Influence and Error Correction: The role of the teacher was another significant factor in shaping students' experiences with speaking anxiety. Students expressed that teachers who corrected mistakes in a supportive and constructive manner helped to reduce their anxiety. In contrast, teachers who focused heavily on mistakes during speaking activities made students more self-conscious, exacerbating their anxiety. As MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) point out, anxiety can often interfere with cognitive processing, making it more difficult for students to focus on the speaking task at hand. Several students suggested that feedback should be provided after class or in smaller groups to minimize embarrassment.

3.5. Lack of Coping Strategies: Despite their anx*i*ety, few students had developed effective strategies for managing their fear of speaking. Some students mentioned practicing speaking at home or using deep-breathing techniques, but the majority felt helpless to reduce their anxiety. This finding reflects the need for educators to provide students with tools and strategies for coping with anxiety, such as structured speaking exercises and gradual exposure to public speaking. Woodrow (2006) also suggests that helping students develop a repertoire of coping strategies can significantly reduce anxiety in language learning contexts.

4. Recommendation

To reduce speaking anxiety, it is essential for teachers to create a supportive and cohesive classroom environment where students feel safe from judgment. Additionally, teachers should be mindful of how they provide feedback during speaking activities, ensuring that corrections are made in a way that minimizes embarrassment.

5. Conclusion

This study sheds light on the significant role that speaking anxiety plays in the ESL classroom. The fear of negative peer evaluation emerged as the most prominent cause of anxiety, with classroom dynamics and teacher feedback also influencing students' experiences. By addressing these emotional barriers, educators can help students overcome their speaking anxiety, leading to improved language acquisition and a more positive learning experience.

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