

THE FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS' ANXIETY IN AN ONLINE ORAL ENGLISH CLASS AT THE SCHOOL OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES, THAI NGUYEN UNIVERSITY

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ARTICLE INFO		ABSTRACT
Received:	18/02/2023	The aim of this study was to investigate the anxiety of first-year students in an online oral English class at the School of Foreign Languages, Thai Nguyen University. 263 participants were selected from the School of Foreign Languages and took part in a 4-week online English speaking class with 11 instructors from Hawaii Pacific University. The study was conducted using quantitative data collected through the questionnaires. The data was analyzed using the Statistical Package of the Social Sciences (SPSS) and Excel software. The findings indicate that the predominant factors contributing to anxiety among students were insufficient self-assurance, apprehension of committing errors, uncertainty regarding unfamiliar situations, adherence to strict regulations, dread of correction, apprehension of ridicule, and uncertainty pertaining to questioning. Based on the findings, recommendations for future research, teachers, and students were provided. Future researchers should conduct similar studies; teachers should encourage students to overcome their anxiety, and students should practice speaking and listening more often.
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SỰ LO LẮNG TRONG MỘT LỚP HỌC NÓI TRỰC TUYẾN CỦA SINH VIÊN NĂM NHẤT TẠI TRƯỜNG NGOẠI NGỮ, ĐẠI HỌC THÁI NGUYÊN

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THÔNG TIN BÀI BÁO		TÓM TẮT
Ngày nhận bài:	18/02/2023	Mục tiêu của nghiên cứu nhằm điều tra sự lo lắng của sinh viên năm nhất trong một lớp học nói tiếng Anh trực tuyến tại Trường Ngoại ngữ, Đại học Thái Nguyên. 263 sinh viên của Trường Ngoại ngữ đã tham gia lớp học nói tiếng Anh trực tuyến kéo dài 4 tuần với 11 giảng viên đến từ Đại học Hawaii Pacific. Nghiên cứu được thực hiện bằng việc sử dụng dữ liệu định lượng thu thập thông qua bảng câu hỏi. Dữ liệu được phân tích bằng phần mềm thống kê dữ liệu SPSS và phần mềm Excel. Kết quả cho thấy, nguyên nhân chính dẫn đến lo lắng của sinh viên khi nói tiếng Anh là sự thiếu tự tin, sợ mắc lỗi, sợ những điều chưa biết, áp lực từ các quy tắc, sợ bị sửa sai, sợ bị chế giễu và sợ những điều chưa biết trong đặt câu hỏi. Dựa trên những phát hiện từ nghiên cứu, các nhà nghiên cứu trong tương lai nên tiến hành các nghiên cứu tương tự, giáo viên nên khuyến khích sinh viên vượt qua sự lo lắng bằng cách luyện tập kỹ năng nói và nghe thường xuyên hơn.
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Kỹ năng nói		
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1. Introduction

According to Ur [1], speaking is considered the most significant of the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), as individuals who are proficient in a language are often referred to as its speakers. The capacity to communicate clearly and effectively in English should be the main objective of any English language instruction [2]. Essentially, they should be capable of using English as a means of communication in the foreign language they are studying. However, a significant number of foreign language learners have a fear of speaking English, which prevents them from effectively conveying their ideas through speech. This is despite the expectation that they should be able to express themselves verbally in a systematic manner [3] and engage in communication with others through speech [4].

In reality, while studying to speak, there are some learners who face difficulties, particularly, experiencing anxiety. They are reluctant to seek clarification from their teacher, even when they encounter difficulties. Therefore, when implementing new teaching approaches like Communicative Language Teaching or Task-Based Language, which prioritize listening and speaking skills, student-centeredness, and meaning-based teaching, some students may feel passive in the classroom. As a result, many language learners struggle with feelings of anxiety, nervousness, and apprehension when speaking a foreign language, leading to a less satisfactory outcome in their oral English speaking skills. Thus, it becomes imperative for language teachers to address this issue and provide support to students in overcoming their anxiety and apprehensions in speaking a foreign language. This is crucial in ensuring that students are able to effectively use the language to communicate and express themselves. Therefore, it is important to uncover the issues of anxiety among language learners since anxiety is a complicated and multi-faceted issue [5]. Anxiety is described as a subjective sense of tension, unease, nervousness, and worry that is associated with the activation of the autonomic nervous system [6]. Furthermore, anxiety is defined as an emotional state characterized by feelings of tension, worried thoughts, and physical changes [7].

English speaking anxiety is a common phenomenon experienced by students learning a foreign language. This type of anxiety affects not only their oral communication skills, but also their overall language learning experience. Research on English speaking anxiety has been conducted in various settings and contexts, including traditional classroom-based learning and distance education. Studies have shown that factors such as language proficiency, individual personality traits, and teaching methods can influence the level of speaking anxiety in language learners [8] – [10].

In the context of online language learning, the role of technology, self-esteem, and teacher support have been identified as important factors that can impact the level of anxiety experienced by students [11] – [13]. Additionally, research has also highlighted the impact of online group work and online oral presentations on the development of oral communication skills and the reduction of speaking anxiety [14].

Despite these findings, there had been limited research on the issues of first-year students' anxiety in an online oral English class at the School of Foreign Languages, Thai Nguyen University. Therefore, this study aimed to address this gap in the literature by exploring the experiences and perceptions of these students.

The main aims of the study were to find out the level of anxiety of first-year students in an online oral English class and to identify the main causes of anxiety. The results of this study were expected to contribute to the knowledge of learning anxiety in general and speaking anxiety in particular, as well as provide new insights for further research.

The two research issues below were addressed by the study:

- (1) *What are the levels of anxiety experienced by first-year students in an oral English classroom?*
- (2) *What are the primary causes of anxiety among first-year students in an oral English classroom?*

2. Research methodology

2.1. Subjects of the study

The research involved 263 participants who were first-year students enrolled in the School of Foreign Languages (SFL) at Thai Nguyen University. These individuals exhibited elementary-level proficiency in English and expressed a desire to enhance their English-speaking abilities. These students were chosen because they had registered and decided to take part in an online English speaking class which lasted for four weeks with eleven instructors from Hawaii Pacific University (HPU). All students willingly agreed to participate in the study.

2.2. The English conversation programme

The programme was aimed at enhancing the SFL students' confidence and fluency in peer-to-peer English conversations. For HPU instructors, they had the opportunities of serving as participant observers in fluency-building activities in an EFL environment, experiencing the English teacher role of coach in contrast to instructor/evaluator, and participating in a team-teaching experience. All degree-seeking HPU TESOL instructors take two practicum courses during which they observe language classes, assist language learners, work with language teachers, and finally, complete a student teaching experience. At that time, all the HPU instructors had completed their course requirements and volunteered their time for the TNU project.

The programme consisted of four weeks and guided by the HPU instructors. There were small group conversations with three TNU students and one HPU TESOL facilitator. This meant more interaction with the native or fluent speaker but also opportunity to learn to listen to and support peers. When the SFL students joined this project, they were expected to "play" during the pair/small group activities. That meant turning on their camera and microphone and trying to make conversations with their partners. The goal of the project was to keep the conversation going back and forth, back and forth, as long as possible. There were no points, scores, or competition in this game. When the SFL students got stuck in conversation, their partners could help restart the conversation or extend the conversation with "Tell me more!". It was for building teamwork, confidence, fluency, pleasure, and skill among the SFL students.

2.3. Data collection instruments

The questionnaire was adapted from Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope's Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) [8], which deals with the fear of learning a foreign language in a course. The FLCAS is very popular and has been adopted by many language researchers who conduct studies in the area of language anxiety in different countries. Therefore, the present study is not an exception and would use FLCAS as the data collection instrument to investigate the levels of foreign language anxiety among the SFL students.

There were two parts of the questionnaire: Part 1 asked the students to evaluate their anxiety level during the project ranging from no anxiety to much severe anxiety. Part 2 had seventeen question items and a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5), which focused on the factors that might cause their anxiety.

The collected quantitative data from the questionnaire items were analyzed. The researcher carefully examined the answers from the sample to ensure accuracy, as the corrected data is necessary for the analysis aimed at discovering the level of anxiety and primary causes of anxiety in speaking English among first-year students at School of Foreign Languages, Thai Nguyen University. The collected data was then analyzed using SPSS and Excel software.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Students' anxiety on English speaking in an online speaking classroom

To answer the first research question, the researcher analyzed the survey data using Excel software. The findings indicated that among 263 participants, a majority of students (59%)

reported experiencing mild to moderate anxiety during the last session of the English-speaking course. Of these, 38% reported mild anxiety while 21% reported moderate anxiety. Conversely, only 36% of students reported having no anxiety. The remaining participants reported varying degrees of anxiety, with 21% experiencing moderate anxiety, 4% reporting severe anxiety, and 1% experiencing extremely severe anxiety. These results suggest a considerable prevalence of anxiety among students when speaking English in an online classroom setting. The distribution of anxiety levels among the students is graphically presented in Figure 1.

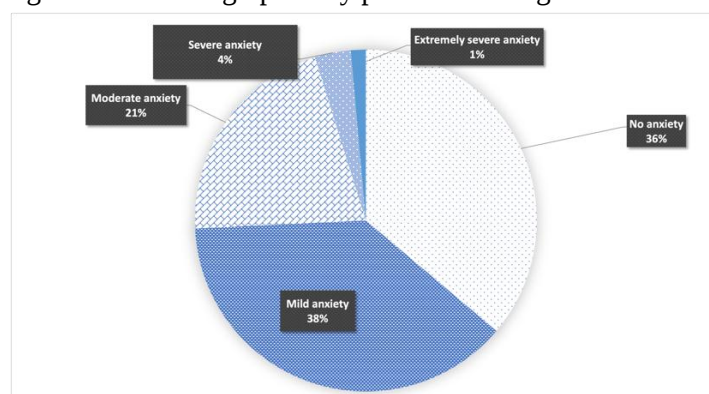


Figure 1. Students' anxiety level

According to the information presented in Table 1, it is evident that the students encountered different degrees of anxiety during English-speaking activities in an online environment. As evidenced by the mean scores presented for various statements in Table 1, a significant number of students experienced feelings of nervousness, fear, and tension while engaging in English-speaking activities with foreign classmates or volunteers, particularly when utilizing Zoom as the mode of communication. Notably, statement 1, "I get nervous when I have to speak English with foreign volunteers or classmates," had a mean score of 3.2243 and a standard deviation of 1.10129. Additionally, statement 7, "I feel my heart beating fast when I'm about to speak English with foreign volunteers or classmates," had a mean score of 3.2357 and a standard deviation of 1.02522. These findings suggest that a substantial proportion of students experienced anxiety while participating in online English-speaking activities.

Table 1. Results of the students' anxiety on online English speaking

Statements	N Valid	Mean	Std. Deviation
S1. I get nervous when I have to speak English with foreign volunteers or classmates.	263	3.2243	1.10129
S2. I think other students speak English better than I do.	263	3.8935	0.77907
S3. While talking with foreign volunteers or classmates, I'm so scared that I forget all the English knowledge I have.	263	3.0304	1.11505
S4. I feel bewildered when answering questions from foreign volunteers or classmates.	263	3.4144	1.02604
S5. I'm not afraid to speak English with foreign volunteers or classmates.	263	3.4297	0.90892
S6. I feel confident when speaking English with foreign volunteers or classmates.	263	3.2548	0.92862
S7. I feel my heart beating fast when I'm about to speak English with foreign volunteers or classmates.	263	3.2357	1.02522
S8. I feel unnatural when speaking English over Zoom with foreign volunteers or classmates because they are not physically present during the conversation.	263	2.8403	1.06880
S9. I feel more scared and tense when speaking over Zoom.	263	2.6388	1.07839
S10. I worry when I don't understand every word the foreign volunteer or classmate speaks in a conversation.	263	3.2015	1.03067

However, the data also suggests that some students felt more confident and comfortable speaking English in an online setting. For instance, the mean score for statement 5, "I'm not

afraid to speak English with foreign volunteers or classmates," was 3.4297, with a standard deviation of 0.90892. Similarly, the mean score for statement 6, "I feel confident when speaking English with foreign volunteers or classmates," was 3.2548, with a standard deviation of 0.92862.

3.2. Main causes of the students' anxiety on English speaking in an online speaking classroom

The findings presented in Table 2 below shed light on the answer to the second research question. Specifically, the results of the Likert scale questionnaires demonstrate that the anxiety experienced by students during online English-speaking activities was complex and had diverse origins. Based on the data, the primary sources of anxiety among the students were as follows:

The Likert scale questionnaires revealed that students in the online speaking classroom experienced anxiety with various sources. The data demonstrated that the students' lack of confidence in speaking English with foreign volunteers and classmates was evident with a mean score of 3.5399. This could lead to elevated anxiety levels, as the students may perceive themselves as unable to communicate effectively in English.

Furthermore, the mean score of 3.3384 for the fear of making mistakes while speaking English suggests that the students experienced anxiety and nervousness in their attempts to speak fluently. Additionally, the fear of the unknown was evident with a mean score of 3.1901, with students feeling scared when they did not understand what was being said. The pressure to adhere to English language rules, as indicated by a mean score of 2.6958, was found to be a source of anxiety, as students may feel incapable of participating in a conversation without following these rules.

Fear of being corrected during conversations was another factor in the students' anxiety levels, as evidenced by a mean score of 2.5437. Moreover, the students' fear of being mocked when speaking English was apparent, with a mean score of 2.7452. Lastly, a mean score of 3.0722 indicated that students were scared of being asked questions that they had not prepared for, leading to anxiety levels from the fear of the unknown in questioning.

Table 2. Results of the main causes of students' anxiety on online English speaking

Statements	N Valid	Mean	Std. Deviation
S11. I don't feel confident about myself when I speak English with foreign volunteers and classmates.	263	3.5399	0.93558
S12. I'm not worried about making mistakes while speaking English with foreign volunteers or classmates.	263	3.3384	1.09280
S13. I'm scared when I don't understand what foreign volunteers or classmates are saying in English.	263	3.1901	1.09212
S14. I feel pressured by the rules I have to learn when speaking English	263	2.6958	1.04053
S15. I'm scared that foreign volunteers or classmates will correct all the mistakes I make while speaking English.	263	2.5437	1.02869
S16. I fear that the foreign volunteer or classmate will mock me when they hear my English	263	2.7452	1.05558
S17. I'm afraid when the foreign volunteer or classmate asks questions that I haven't prepared for.	263	3.0722	1.10796

To sum up, the data indicates that the students' anxiety on English speaking in an online speaking classroom was primarily caused by a lack of confidence, fear of making mistakes, fear of the unknown, pressure from rules, fear of correction, fear of being mocked, and fear of the unknown in questioning.

3.3. Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that anxiety is prevalent among students when speaking English in an online classroom setting. The majority of the participants reported experiencing mild to moderate anxiety during the last session of the English-speaking course. These results are

consistent with previous research indicating that anxiety is a common issue among language learners, particularly in oral communication situations [8], [15] - [17].

The data revealed that students experienced anxiety for a variety of reasons. The primary sources of anxiety were identified as the students' lack of confidence in speaking English with foreign volunteers and classmates, fear of making mistakes, fear of the unknown, pressure from language rules, fear of correction, fear of being mocked, and fear of the unknown in questioning. These findings are in line with previous studies that have identified similar sources of anxiety among language learners [8], [15] - [17].

Interestingly, the data also indicated that some students felt more confident and comfortable speaking English in an online setting. This suggests that online environments may offer certain advantages, such as a perceived level of anonymity or reduced pressure from face-to-face interactions. However, it is important to note that the prevalence of anxiety among students in the online speaking classroom was still considerable, indicating that further research is needed to identify effective strategies for reducing anxiety in this context.

The results of this study have implications for language educators and policymakers. Specifically, instructors should be aware of the potential sources of anxiety among students in online speaking classrooms and take steps to address these issues. Effective strategies may include establishing a positive and supportive learning atmosphere, fostering active involvement of students through incremental increases in confidence levels, providing personalized feedback and guidance, conducting training sessions on listening and communication competencies, addressing the limitations of virtual classrooms by leveraging interactive resources, incorporating multiple speaking activities, including group and pair work, facilitating interactions with native English speakers, and supplying students with resources to augment their vocabulary and grammar skills.

Future research should focus on developing and evaluating interventions that can effectively reduce anxiety among students in online speaking classrooms. Additionally, more research is needed to examine the impact of online environments on language learning outcomes and the effectiveness of different instructional strategies in these contexts. Ultimately, a better understanding of the factors that contribute to anxiety in online language learning environments will be critical for improving the educational experiences and outcomes of language learners.

3.4. Recommendations

The significance of this study lied in its contribution to the understanding of the factors causing anxiety among first-year students in an online oral English class at Thai Nguyen University. With the rapid growth of technology and the shift towards online education, it is becoming increasingly important to understand the challenges that students face in this context. By identifying the main causes of anxiety, such as nervousness when speaking English in front of others, lack of confidence, lack of vocabulary, and fear of making mistakes, the study provides valuable insights for future research, teachers, and students.

Firstly, for future research, similar studies should be conducted to further explore the factors causing anxiety among students in online learning environments. Research should also focus on developing effective strategies for reducing anxiety and promoting a positive learning experience for students.

Secondly, to help students to improve their English speaking skill and address their anxieties in online speaking classrooms, virtual speaking classrooms, it is advisable for instructors to adopt the following strategies: establish a positive and supportive learning atmosphere; foster active involvement of students through incremental increase in confidence levels; provide personalized feedback and guidance; conduct training sessions on listening and communication competencies; address the limitations of virtual classrooms by leveraging interactive resources; incorporate multiple speaking activities, including group and pair work; facilitate interactions with native English speakers; and supply students with resources to augment their vocabulary and grammar

skills. By executing these recommendations, teachers can facilitate the improvement of students' English speaking abilities and ameliorate their anxieties.

Lastly, for students, they should practice speaking and listening more often to build their confidence and overcome their anxiety. They should also seek support from their teachers and classmates to reduce their feelings of nervousness and fear of making mistakes.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the transition to online classes has caused stress and anxiety for many students, particularly for first-year students in an online oral English class at the School of Foreign Languages, Thai Nguyen University. To reduce anxiety, it is important for students to understand that the challenges they are facing are common, and to reach out for support when needed. Additionally, instructors can help by creating a supportive online environment and by being available to address students' concerns and technical difficulties. Although the findings of this research were specific to the students at Thai Nguyen University, and the results may not be generalizable to students in other universities or settings, the results provide insights into how teachers can help students overcome their anxiety and improve their speaking skills. Further research is needed to explore the impact of anxiety on language learning and how to effectively support students in the language classroom.

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