

Iraqi EFL Postgraduate Students Anxiety in Speaking English at a Malaysian University

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Abstract

Iraqi EFL postgraduate students who are pursuing their higher education in Malaysia experience anxiety when they speak to their lecturers. This study, therefore, aims to find out the level of their speaking anxiety and to investigate the reasons that cause it. A survey and an interview were employed in the data collection from 20 Iraqi EFL Master in English Language Studies Programme, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities of a Malaysian university. The findings indicated that the majority of EFL postgraduate students experienced moderate anxiety speaking in English specifically in academic settings. The main reasons that caused this speaking anxiety were low competence level in English language, lack of self-confidence and vocabulary, and thinking in Arabic. They fear being insulted by instructors in front of their peers and do not want their instructors to have negative impressions about them.

Keywords: Speaking anxiety, EFL students, postgraduates

1. Introduction

Studying communication skills especially speaking in relation with academic performance is considered a crucial issue as many studies have been conducted to investigate the relation between speaking anxiety and academic performance Aydoğan et al. (2013; Hsu (2012; Idri (2012; Melouah (2013; Öztürk and Gürbüz (2014; Şenel (2012). The findings of these studies indicated that speaking anxiety affects the students' language performance in the classroom. The learners experience difficulty in speaking mostly because of personal reasons, negative self-assessment of ability, high personal expectation, self-comparison to other students and their irrational beliefs about language learning. Most of these studies were conducted on non- native English speakers Aydoğan et al. (2013; Hsu (2012; Melouah (2013; Şenel (2012)).

These studies found that adult ESL language learners especially at an advanced level of study are anxious when speaking that language in front of the others resulted in committing mistakes at a much higher rate Francis and Miller (2007). Similarly, Iraqi ESL postgraduate students who are studying in Malaysian universities also experienced anxiety problems due to their educational environments at home that pay little attention to oral skills to educational environments where communication skills especially speaking are highly emphasized.

2. Statement of the problem

Speaking anxiety is considered a challenge for Iraqi EFL postgraduate students. Although, they spent many years learning English in Iraq where the emphasis is on vocabulary and grammar and as such communication skill especially speaking is neglected during their study as English is

considered a foreign language in Iraq where the aural and oral skills are not given much attention in schools and even in universities. Hence, Iraqi EFL postgraduate students who come to Malaysia to pursue their higher education lack the confidence and ability to speak in English. They become frustrated because learning how to speak in a second language is considered more important than learning to read and write Ya-ni (2007).

Iraqi EFL postgraduate students in Malaysia are required to make presentations in front of their peers and to discuss with their supervisors regarding their assignments, proposals and thesis that require a high level of English speaking skills. Consequently, many problems arise and speaking anxiety is one of them. This study will investigate the level of speaking anxiety among EFL Iraqi postgraduate students and the reasons that trigger such anxiety.

The main objectives of this study, therefore, are to determine the level of speaking anxiety among Iraqi EFL postgraduate students at a Malaysian university and to investigate the reasons that cause this anxiety among these students.

The findings resulted from this study will provide Iraqi educators, teachers and education planners in the Iraqi Ministry of Higher Education with recommendation to design school and university textbooks that are rich in speaking activities and practices that promote learning English speaking skills especially for students who need them when they walk into a job interview or when they study in a foreign country.

3. Literature Review

Communication can be defined as a social systematic process aiming to create symbolic meaning and responding between communicators where it is constructed in a specific context and included three dimensions which are communicators, meaning and context Adler and Rodman (2006). The communicators are divided into speakers and listeners who both must be equipped with past and present stimuli that provided them with information about the world in order to generate meaning and in turn respond to others during the communication process that occurs in changeable various contexts (Tubbs and Moss 1994).

Communication too plays an integral and important role in our daily activities and in our relationship with others as people want to express their feelings, emotions and ideas to others to reach a feeling of satisfaction. It could be carried out by using languages, gestures, facial expressions, body language, eye contact and posture of the body where all play an important role to communicate in the best possible and effective manner (Öztürk & Gürbüz 2014).

However, communication briefs about communication apprehension which is "individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons (McCroskey, 1984: p. 13). It can be classified the communication apprehension into two types: trait and state apprehension. Trait anxiety can be characterized as a stable permanent feature in the speaker personality. Speakers who are experiencing trait anxiety find difficulties in oral communication at home, in the streets and work place and even in repeated similar contexts and situations. On the other hand, state anxiety can be characterized as a temporary feature evoked as a result of experiencing a certain situation in a certain context so it is not a personality inherited feature. For example, a learner may feel anxious when speaking to his supervisor about his thesis but may not feel that anxiety when speaking to the supervisor about any non-academic topic or when speaking to friends.

Studies have indicated that there is a strong negative relation between speaking anxiety and academic success Francis and Miller (2007; Matthews (2009; McCroskey and Andersen (2006) and

speaking anxiety with language performance Taylor (2011) conducted a study to investigate whether students' speech performance and speaking anxiety are affected by self- and peer-reviews. The findings revealed that there were no significant statically differences among self-review and peer-review groups but there were differences among students speech performance in favour of peer-review. In other words, more speaking practices and activities lead to less communication anxiety which in turn leads to more speaking performance.

Meanwhile, Hamilton (2008) asserted that undergraduate and postgraduate students' speech learning is not like children learning as the former are considered autonomous learners. Instructors should act in speech classes as facilitators rather than dictators and offer the students flexibility to select their speech topics by themselves rather than assigning them the topics. When students select the speaking topics that meet their interests, they will become more confident and experience less anxiety which can elevate their speaking performance.

Two other studies on how speaking anxiety affected the students' academic success, McCroskey and Andersen (2006; Popham (2008) found that anxious speakers obtained low scores on standardized tests, categorized as less intelligent and anxiety in speaking could be reduced by linking the prior knowledge with the topics. Moreover, if the students have a pre vision of what and how to be spoken, the anxiety level will be reduced.

To sum up, the main causes of speaking anxiety are communication competence, fluency and self-confidence (McCroskey and Andersen, 2006) and high level of speaking anxiety has a negative effect on interpersonal behaviour (Hosman and Siltanen, 2006), education (Hamilton, 2008; McCroskey and Andersen, 2006) and interpersonal relationships (Taylor, 2011).

4. Methodology

This study used two instruments: a set of questionnaire and a series of interview to find out the level of speaking anxiety (high, moderate and low) among Iraqi EFL postgraduate students.

The questionnaire adopted from Öztürk and Gürbüz (2014) was found to best serve in answering the research questions. The questionnaire aimed to find the level of anxiety among students and thereasons that causes speaking anxiety (Appendix A). The questionnaire has 18 items describing the situation and reasons that may cause speaking anxiety among students. It followed a 5-graded Likert Scale designation so the total score may range from 18 to 90 (if all answered 1 or 5). To describe the level of speaking anxiety among students, Öztürk & Gürbüz's (2014) scoring guide was used (See Table 1).

Table 1: Level of speaking anxiety

Level of speaking anxiety	Scores
high level of speaking anxiety	72 and above
moderate level of speaking anxiety	54-72
low level of speaking anxiety	54 and below

20 Iraqi EFL postgraduate students who are majoring in English Language Studies at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities for the academic year 2014/2015 of a Malaysian university represented the study sample. Only master students were included in the study as doctoral students' experience in speaking anxiety may be fewer than master students which eventually can affect the findings of this study. Doctorial students may have gained sufficient knowledge and speaking practices which in turn reduces the level of speaking anxiety among

them. Out of the 20 subjects who answered the questionnaire only five were interviewed. The purpose of the interview was to collect data from subjects regarding the reasons that can cause speaking anxiety which finally would be triangulated with the data analysis of the questionnaire.

5. Data collection and analysis

After gaining permission from the students, the questionnaires were handed out to the students with precise explanation on the way to answer the questionnaire.

Regarding the interview, the five were interviewed one to one after getting their consent. All the interviews were audio recorded and then were transcribed. Each interviewer was assigned a number from 1 to 5. The interview questions are:

No.	Question
Question 1	Do you think speaking English is an anxiety provoking factor in language learning process?
Question 2	What kinds of situations cause stress or anxiety on you while speaking English?
Question 3	For you, what are the reasons for this anxiety?
Question 4	Do you worry about making mistakes while speaking?
Question 5	Do you worry about the evaluation and reaction of your friends on your speaking performance?

The data (as shown in Table 2) were analyzed to ensure the usability of study sample. The questionnaire reliability was analyzed to measure the consistency of the response. The descriptive analysis (means and frequencies) were calculated to analyze the speaking anxiety level and in identifying the main reasons causing speaking anxiety. Content analysis was employed for the interviews to categorize the main reasons causing speaking anxiety to triangulate the quantitative analysis.

Table 2 Descriptive data

Speaking English inside University code		Speaking frequency				Speaking English inside University code		Speaking frequency			
		always	often	sometime	rarely			always	often	sometime	rarely
Yes	No	1	2	3	4	Yes	No	1	2	3	4
1	2	1	2	3	4	1	2	1	2	3	4

The reliability value (Cronbach's Alpha) for the whole items in the questionnaire is found to be 90, 8% which indicates a high reliability value so the questionnaire is reliable and the findings for answering the questions are also considered reliable as shown in Table 3.

Table 3 Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.908	.907	18

6. Findings and discussion

All the subjects indicated that they spoke English in the university where their frequency of speaking English varies. 6 students or 30% always spoke English, 10 students or 50% often spoke it and 4 students or 20% sometimes spoke English as shown in Table 4.

Table 4 Frequency of Speaking English inside university

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	always	6	30.0	30.0	30.0
	often	10	50.0	50.0	80.0
	sometimes	4	20.0	20.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

All 20 said that they spoke English outside the university where the frequency of speaking English varies. 2 students or 10% always spoke English, 9 students or 45% often spoke it and 9 students or 45% sometimes spoke it as shown in Table 5.

Table 5 Frequency of Speaking English outside university

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	always	2	10.0	10.0	10.0
	often	9	45.0	45.0	55.0
	sometimes	9	45.0	45.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

While, Table 6 illustrated the anxiety speaking level scores

Table 6 Anxiety speaking level scores

No	Items	SA (1)	A (2)	N (3)	D (4)	SD (5)	Score	Level
1	I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in English.	(1x1)	(1x2)	(8x3)	(7x4)	(3x5)	70	*high
2	I tremble when I know that I'm going to be called on in language class.	(0x1)	(3x2)	(7x3)	(5x4)	(5x5)	72	*high
3	It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in the English language.	(2x1)	(6x2)	(3x3)	(7x4)	(2x5)	58	mode rate
4	I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in language class.	(2x1)	(3x2)	(7x3)	(5x4)	(5x5)	67	mode rate
5	In language class, I can get so nervous I forget things I know.	(2x1)	(5x2)	(6x3)	(4x4)	(3x5)	61	mode rate
6	It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my language class.	(1x1)	(4x2)	(9x3)	(4x4)	(2x5)	62	mode rate
7	Even if I am well prepared for language class, I feel anxious about it.	(0x1)	(7x2)	(7x3)	(4x4)	(2x5)	61	mode rate
8	I often feel like not going to my language class.	(0x1)	(1x2)	(6x3)	(11x4)	(2x5)	74	*high
9	I am afraid that my language teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make.	(2x1)	(7x2)	(4x3)	(7x4)	(0x5)	56	mode rate
10	I can feel my heart pounding when I'm going to be called on in language class.	(0x1)	(4x2)	(6x3)	(8x4)	(2x5)	68	mode rate
11	The more I study for a language test, the more confused I get.	(2x1)	(3x2)	(7x3)	(8x4)	(0x5)	61	mode rate
12	I always feel that the other students speak the English language better than I do.	(1x1)	(4x2)	(7x3)	(7x4)	(1x5)	63	mode rate
13	I feel very self-conscious about speaking English in front of the other students.	(2x1)	(3x2)	(7x3)	(7x4)	(1x5)	61	mode rate
14	I feel more tense and nervous in my language class than in my other classes.	(2x1)	(2x2)	(8x3)	(6x4)	(2x5)	64	mode rate
15	I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my language class.	(1x1)	(2x2)	(5x3)	(8x4)	(4x5)	72	*high
16	I get nervous when I don't understand every word the language teacher says.	(2x1)	(5x2)	(6x3)	(4x4)	(3x5)	61	mode rate
17	I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules you have to learn to speak the English language.	(3x1)	(3x2)	(5x3)	(7x4)	(2x5)	62	mode rate
18	I am afraid that the other students in the class will laugh at me when I speak in English.	(2x1)	(2x2)	(5x3)	(8x4)	(3x5)	68	mode rate

After transcribing all the five interviews, all the reasons that caused speaking anxiety were written down. After omitting all the repeated answers, the reasons were classified and categorized as in Table 7.

Table 7: Interview Findings (Reasons for speaking anxiety)

Question	Answers	Percentages
Do you think speaking English is an anxiety provoking factor in language learning process?	-Yes, because English is not our native language	20%
	-Yes, especially in academic setting	80%
What kinds of situations cause stress or anxiety on you while speaking English?	-speaking with lecturer	60%
	- academic setting	40%
For you, what are the reasons for this anxiety?	-Negative feedback from instructors	80%
	-Lack of vocabulary.	60%
	-Thinking in Arabic while speaking English.	20%
	-Fear of committing mistakes.	80%
	-Lack of confidence.	80%
	-Don't use English outside academic setting.	40%
Do you worry about making mistakes while speaking?	-Choosing the right vocabulary while speaking.	80%
	With friends no but with lecturer yes	80%
Do you worry about the evaluation and reaction of your friends on your speaking performance?	Not at all.	100%

All students(100%) experienced moderate anxiety speaking level. However, 23% experienced high anxiety speaking level when they spoke English in a language class. Table 8 illustrates the reasons for the high level of speaking anxiety among the subjects.

Table 8: Reasons causing high level in speaking anxiety

I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in English.	(1x1)	(1x2)	(8x3)	(7x4)	(3x5)	70	high
I tremble when I know that I'm going to be called on in language class.	(0x1)	(3x2)	(7x3)	(5x4)	(5x5)	72	high
I often feel like not going to my language class.	(0x1)	(1x2)	(6x3)	(11x4)	(2x5)	74	high
I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my language class.	(1x1)	(2x2)	(5x3)	(8x4)	(4x5)	72	high

The above four reasons were related to academic settings and were consistent with the interview findings as one student says "when instructor speaks, there are some words missing in my mind. So, I'm afraid of asking him/her the meaning because I'm a Master degree".

60% of the interviewees emphasized that they experienced anxiety when speaking to their lecturers specifically while 40% of them experienced anxiety when speaking in academic settings generally. This finding is similar to the findings of Aydoğan et al. (2013), Melouah (2013), Öztürk and Gürbüz (2014). There appears to be a strong relation between academic performance and speaking anxiety. Iraqi EFL postgraduate master students speaking competence was low so they avoided speaking to lecturers in academic settings. They did not expect negative feedback due to their poor speaking skills. On the contrary, the students did not feel embarrassed or anxious when they were speaking with their friends as one student says, *“but the problem is not making mistakes with any person, for example, with your friends is okay but with your lecturers it is forbidden”*.

The reasons that caused such speaking anxiety from students' perspective may be divided into two parts; one is related to instructors and another is related to the students themselves, Table 9 illustrates the division of the reasons.

Table 9: The reasons cause speaking anxiety among students

Teachers related	Students related
Negative feedback	Lack of vocabulary
teacher impression about student speaking may affect their final course evaluation	Thinking in Arabic while speaking English
	Fear of committing mistakes
	Lack of self confidence
	Choosing the right vocabulary

The reasons that provoked student speaking anxiety related to students may be considered as a cause and that is related to teachers from the students' perspective. Students' lack of confidence and vocabulary led to fear of speaking in the class or when they were expected to their instructor would engage them in discussion inside the class. Hence, they expressed their desire to not attend such classes in which the students must participate in discussions and speak in any form. This sentiment was emphasized by all the interviewed students (100%) as they were either not confident or were afraid to interact with their instructors. 80% felt that they lack language competence and were fearful of committing errors while 60% thought in Arabic while they spoke English.

The reasons that were related to students created an expectation among them that if they spoke poor ungrammatical English inside classroom, they would get negative feedback from their lecturers and then the lecturers would form a negative impression of them which might affect their final course evaluation as one student says, *“because they (lecturers) will tease you (student) by saying “what a loser! You're a master degree student”*.

To sum up, all the Iraqi EFL postgraduate students experienced moderate speaking anxiety level and in some cases high speaking anxiety level which is consistent with Finn et al. (2009; Matthews (2009) findings that the majority of students experienced speaking anxiety. The main reasons that cause high level of speaking anxiety among Iraqi students are mainly related self-confidence and academic setting as they are experiencing linguistic incompetence such as lack of vocabulary, grammatical error, inappropriate selection of the suitable vocabulary and a lack in practicing speaking lead them to be unconfident speakers that eventually cause anxiety among them. This finding is consistent with Hsu (2012; Idri (2012; Melouah (2013; Şenel (2012) findings

that indicated linguistic incompetence and self-confidence are key reasons causing speaking anxiety among students.

Linguistic incompetence leads to low-confident students and both make the students avoid speaking to their lecturers in academic settings for two main reasons. The first reason is students' fear of receiving negative feedback from their lecturers due to their poor speaking ability while the second reason is that if their lecturer made a negative impression regarding their poor speech it may affect their final course evaluation. This finding is consistent with those of Finn et al. (2009), Hsu (2012), Idri (2012), Matthews (2009), Melouah (2013), and Şenel (2012) that academic performance is linked to speaking anxiety.

7. Conclusion and recommendation

Iraqi postgraduate students are experiencing mostly moderate speaking anxiety level and sometimes high anxiety level. The common situation where Iraqi students facing speaking anxiety is in academic situation inside classes that demand them to participate, discuss and present in front of their peers and instructors, this finding found to be consistent with Francis and Miller (2007; Matthews (2009; McCroskey and Andersen (2006).

The reasons that caused speaking anxiety in academic settings according to students' perspectives may be divided into two parts; students and teachers. The former were low competence level in English language, a lack of self-confidence and vocabulary and thinking in Arabic while speaking English. These reasons were found to be consistent with those of McCroskey and Andersen (2006). The latter were generated as a result of students' expectation such as fear from being insulted by instructors in front of their peers and most importantly they did not need their instructors to make negative impressions about them as a result of committing speaking mistakes and errors in class which might affect their study progress. These reasons too were found to be similar to Hamilton's (2008) findings which seemed to indicate that students experienced more speaking anxiety in academic settings when speaking with their instructors.

The findings of the present study could be adapted by the Iraqi Ministry of Higher Education to plan and design textbooks rich in speaking practices and to make speaking one of the core courses for all students regardless of their discipline at the university. The speaking courses may be graded from level 1 to 4 where the students in each year enrol in the speaking course until their fourth year.

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Appendix (A)

Questionnaire

Part 1: Demographical data:

Please, tick (X) inside the box that indicates the correct data about you

1. Gender: (Male female
2. Age :(under 25 -from 26-36 -from 37-47 - 48 and above).
3. Current semester: (First - Second - Third - Fourth).
4. Is English generally spoken at university by you?
(Yes No)
5. If yes, how frequent does English spoken daily?
(Always often sometimes rarely)
6. Is English generally spoken outside university by you?
(Yes No)
7. If yes, how frequent does English spoken daily?
(Always often sometimes rarely)

Part II: levels of foreign language speaking anxiety

Since the questionnaire is a 5-graded Likert scale, the total score ranged from 18 to 90. A total Score of more than 72 demonstrated a high level of speaking anxiety; a total score ranged from 54 to 72 presented a moderate level of speaking anxiety, and participants who had a total score less than 54 showed a low level of foreign language speaking anxiety.

Each of the following items refers to how you feel about your English language class.

Please mark the most appropriate option with (X).

(1=strongly agree; 2=agree; 3=neutral; 4= disagree; 5=strongly disagree)

No	Sentences	Strongly agree	Agree	neutral	disagree	Strongly disagree
1	I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in English.	1	2	3	4	5
2	I tremble when I know that I'm going to be called on in language class.	1	2	3	4	5
3	It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in the English language.	1	2	3	4	5
4	I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in language class.	1	2	3	4	5
5	In language class, I can get so nervous I forget things I know.	1	2	3	4	5
6	It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my language class.	1	2	3	4	5
7	Even if I am well prepared for language class, I feel anxious about it.	1	2	3	4	5
8	I often feel like not going to my language class.	1	2	3	4	5
9	I am afraid that my language teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make.	1	2	3	4	5
10	I can feel my heart pounding when I'm going to be called on in language class.	1	2	3	4	5
11	The more I study for a language test, the more confused I get.	1	2	3	4	5
12	I always feel that the other students speak the English language better than I do.	1	2	3	4	5
13	I feel very self-conscious about speaking English in front of the other students.	1	2	3	4	5
14	I feel more tense and nervous in my language class than in my other classes.	1	2	3	4	5
15	I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my language class.	1	2	3	4	5
16	I get nervous when I don't understand every word the language teacher says.	1	2	3	4	5
17	I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules you have to learn to speak the English language.	1	2	3	4	5
18	I am afraid that the other students in the class will laugh at me when I speak in English.	1	2	3	4	5