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## **A STUDY ON STUDENTS' ANXIETY IN ENGLISH SPEAKING CLASS FROM TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS TO SOLUTIONS**

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### **Abstract**

This paper aims to investigate EFL teachers' perceptions of, observation about and solutions to students' anxiety in English speaking classes. The participants in the study were 10 experienced lecturers who have taught speaking skills to English major students at different levels at University of Foreign Languages, Hue University. The findings showed that the teachers had an adequate understanding about the nature, the causes and the effects of foreign language anxiety on EFL students' success in oral performances. It was also revealed from the teachers' observation that the majority of their students had experienced the typical anxiety symptoms and that the most popular causes of this phenomenon derived from test anxiety and communication apprehension-related issues. The study results also found out the frequency of anxiety-reducing strategies used by the teachers in order to help students be more at ease in speaking classes.

**Key words:** Foreign language anxiety, speaking skills, EFL teachers, EFL students

### **1. Introduction**

The emergence of communicative language teaching has posed more opportunities for EFL learners to learn English in a more meaningful way. More and more communicative activities are integrated in classroom to encourage students to produce the language orally. However, despite the advantages of these activities, many EFL learners still find themselves struggling in speaking classes. Among many barriers that can prevent students from successful oral performance, affective factors referring to such emotional aspects as attitudes, motivation, self-confidence, personality, and anxiety (Young, 1995) have proved to play a significant role. In this light, foreign language anxiety (FLA) which is defined as 'a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of language learning process' (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986, p. 128)' has been regarded as one of the influential elements which can affect students' success or failure in speaking skills. Although a number of studies have been conducted to investigate learners' perceptions of foreign language anxiety as well as its causes and effects (Young, 1990; Von Wörde, 2003), little have they dealt with the phenomenon from teachers' perspectives. Therefore, this study aims to understand what teachers think about students' anxiety in English speaking class, what teachers really observe about students' anxiety in their own classes and how they deal with this problem in their real teaching practice.

### **2. Theoretical framework**

#### **2.1. Foreign language learning anxiety (FLLA)**

According to Howitz et al. (1986), 'anxiety is the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous

system'. They categorized FLLA as a specific anxiety reaction, or state anxiety, which occurs in a particular situation. More specifically, Macintyre (1999) defined language anxiety as the 'worry and negative emotional reaction aroused when learning or using a second language' (p.27).

Bailey (1983) said that anxiety can be caused by learners' competitiveness, tests and relationship with their teachers. Meanwhile, Horwitz and colleagues pointed out three major sources of anxiety including communication apprehension, tests and fear of negative evaluations. Additionally, Ortega (2009) stated that such factors as perfectionist attitudes and high expectations also strongly contribute to students' anxiety. Ellis (2008) agreed that perfectionism can make students 'worry about the opinions of others and more concern about making errors than the less anxious learners' (p. 693).

In order to identify students' level of anxiety in foreign language classroom, Horwitz and colleagues developed a measurement tool called the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) which was built based on three main components of foreign language anxiety: communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of social evaluation (Horwitz et al., 1986).

In this study, foreign language learning anxiety is particularly understood as students' negative feelings such as worry, inconfidence and embarrassment which arise when they participate in speaking classroom activities.

## **2.2. Impacts of FLLA on learners' oral performance**

There appears a consensus among linguistic researchers that anxiety can affect students in both facilitating and debilitating ways. According to Skehan (1989), anxiety seems to be more beneficial for students with high language proficiency than low-level students. Because anxiety has a close relation with motivation, a certain degree of tension can help high-ability students to feel determined and make more efforts to achieve better performance (Gass and Selinker, 2001; Ortega, 2008; Ellis, 2008). However, other authors consider anxiety as a negative factor that can prevent students from success in language classroom, especially in their speaking activities. Ellis (2008) stated that the feeling of nervousness and worry can block students' willingness to communicate in the target language. Gass and Selinker (2001) similarly indicated that anxiety would influence students' outcomes negatively in the activities that particularly focus on meaning rather than form. In their study, Gardner and Macintyre (1993) also shows that students who are anxious seem to have a worse oral performance than those who are not.

## **2.3. Strategies to cope with foreign language classroom anxiety**

As students' anxiety can derive from internal causes inside students or external causes from teachers and learning environment, it should be handled by both students and teachers. In their study on anxiety-coping strategies used by ESL students in Japan, Kondo and Yang (2004) summarized those strategies into five categories: preparation, relaxation, positive thinking, peer seeking and resignation. In their article, Hashemi and Abbasi (2013) also

contributed some important suggestions for language teachers to cope with anxious students. Accordingly, teachers can relieve students' anxiety by creating a friendly and supportive learning environment, encouraging students to make mistakes, giving formative instead of summative feedback, reducing the sense of competition among students, avoiding frustration-enhancing activities and creating a sense of friendship and cooperation among students.

#### **2.4. Previous studies and research gaps**

Tran, Moni, and Baldauf Jr. (2013) conducted a study at Hue University to find out both teachers' and students' perceptions of the causes and effects of foreign language anxiety with the participation of nearly 420 non-English majors and eight English lecturers. The findings showed that the reasons why students are anxious in foreign language classroom mainly originate from themselves, rather than from teachers or learning contexts, and that students found they suffered from anxiety much more than benefitting from it. In terms of teachers' perceptions, the study also indicated that although they were well aware of students' anxiety in class, they had not paid enough attention to their students' actual situations. Moreover, this study did not focus on how teachers solve the problems related to students' anxiety in their classrooms, which leaves some gaps for further research on this issue.

#### ***Research questions***

1. What is teachers' perception about students' English speaking classroom anxiety?
2. What is teachers' observation about students' English speaking classroom anxiety?
3. What strategies do teachers use to reduce students' English speaking classroom anxiety?

### **3. Methods**

#### **3.1. Research approach**

A mixed research method was adopted to conduct this study with the aims to collect both qualitative and quantitative responses from the survey participants.

#### **3.2. Participants**

A group of 10 experienced English lecturers at Hue University of Foreign Languages who have been in charge of teaching speaking skills for English majors. To guarantee the confidentiality of participants' information and responses to the survey, these 10 participants were named as P1 to P10.

#### **3.3. Instruments**

A questionnaire with various items clustered in three parts was employed to collect both qualitative and quantitative data. The first part consisted of four open-ended questions to determine teachers' perceptions about students' anxiety in speaking class. In the second part, 15 four-point Likert scale items were used to identify teachers' observation about students' anxiety symptoms with 'all' coded as 1 and 'none' coded as 4 at the poles. The third part included 17 three-point Likert scale items to find out the frequency of anxiety-reducing

strategies used by teachers in speaking class with the poles were ‘never/rarely’ coded as 1 and ‘often/always’ coded as 3.

### **3.4. Data collection**

The questionnaire was created on Google Form and then sent to the participants via their Gmail or Facebook addresses. The respondents accessed to the questionnaire through the link, then answered and submitted it. All the data were automatically collected and saved on the researcher’s Google Drive database.

### **3.5. Data analysis**

Qualitative data collected from part 1 of the questionnaire were particularly described and discussed on the basis of respondents’ opinions. Quantitative data collected from part 2 and 3 were computed with the employment of SPSS software and presented in tables to show the central tendency of responses; hence, to understand the typical behaviour of the participants.

## **4. Findings and Discussions**

### **4.1. Teachers’ perception about students’ English speaking classroom anxiety**

All the participants showed a good understanding about students’ speaking classroom anxiety. They defined anxiety as ‘students’ feelings of nervousness’ (P1), ‘the unpleasant feelings’ (P2), ‘the feeling of uneasiness’ (P6) or ‘students’ reluctance’ (P10) when they are in speaking class. Some reasons why students become anxious were also mentioned in the participants’ sharing. Accordingly, students are nervous ‘when they need to speak in English to other students or in front of the class’ (P7), ‘when they cannot put thoughts into words’ (P8) and when they are afraid of ‘peers’ criticism’ (P4).

Discussing the effects of anxiety on students’ speaking performance, 4 out of 10 participants said that anxiety can affect students’ oral performance negatively while the other 6 teachers admitted that it may influence students both negatively and positively. In terms of negative impacts, anxiety can make students ‘underestimate their own ability’ (P1), ‘slow students’ interaction with English’ (P3), ‘prevent them [students] raising their voices in class’ (P6), ‘affect [students’] fluency’ (P9), ‘prevent students from taking part in classroom activities’ (P7) or make ‘students feel demotivated’ (P4). However, most respondents also acknowledged that anxiety can ‘encourage more careful preparation prior to the speaking situations’ (P2); therefore, limit students’ errors and make them more understandable (P3), ‘make them try their best to " perfect" their language’ (P6) or ‘boost them to do better’ especially in public speaking (P10). More noticeably, all of the lecturers taking part in the survey showed a strong agreement on the importance of teachers’ attention to students’ anxiety in English speaking class and the necessity of using strategies to help students feel less anxious.

From the findings above, it can be said that the English lecturers at University of Foreign Languages, Hue University are well aware of the existence of anxiety among students in speaking class as well as its impacts on students’ speaking performance. This has an

important meaning because teachers' conscious perception of language classroom anxiety can lead them to necessary actions in order to understand students' problems and find possible solutions.

#### 4.2. Teachers' observation of students' English speaking classroom anxiety

The following table shows the tendency of students' anxiety in different situations in speaking classroom based on the teachers' observation. The responses to the question *How many students in your speaking class have the following anxiety symptoms?* are coded as 1 for *All*, 2 for *Most*, 3 for *Some* and 4 for *None*. Therefore, that the mean value of each item response is ranked in ascending order means the smaller the mean value is, the more students have that symptom.

**Table 1:** Descriptive Statistics of Students' Anxiety Symptoms Based on Teachers' Observation

Students' anxiety symptoms	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
5.starting to panic when having to speak without preparation	10	2.2000	.78881
11.being stressed during speaking tests	10	2.2000	.78881
15.being worried about speaking test format.	10	2.4000	.96609
6.feeling ashamed about being left behind	10	2.5000	.52705
8.being reluctant to volunteer to answer questions	10	2.5000	.52705
9.feeling embarrassed when speaking in front of class	10	2.5000	.52705
14.being afraid that teacher and other students don't understand them	10	2.5000	.70711
4.thinking that other students speak better	10	2.6000	.51640
1.being laughed by other students	10	2.7000	.48305
13.being worried when talking about an unfamiliar topic	10	2.7000	.67495
7.being anxious because of teacher's high expectation	10	2.9000	.56765
2.trembling when being called	10	2.90000	.316228

12.being unwilling to talk to other students to whom they haven't talked before	10	3.0000	.94281
3.being frightened when not understanding what teacher says	10	3.1000	.56765
10.becoming nervous when teacher corrects mistakes	10	3.1000	.99443
Valid N (listwise)	10		

As can be seen from the table, the most popular anxious-provoking situation is when students do not have time to prepare for their speech. It is also evident that test pressure and fear of failure contribute considerably to students' anxiety. In addition, from the teachers' observation, the next influential factor that leads to students' anxiety is related to communication apprehension such as feeling reluctant / embarrassed to speak in front of people and feeling afraid of not being understood. Surprisingly, the other factors related to competitiveness, fear of negative evaluations such as being laughed, being corrected or not meeting teacher's expectations and being unfamiliar with the speaking topics or speaking partners play a less popular role in causing students' anxiety. Therefore, it can be concluded that test anxiety and communication apprehension seem to be the most popular barriers for English major students in speaking class.

### 4.3. Teachers' strategies to reduce students' English speaking classroom anxiety

In the table below, the frequency of anxiety-reducing strategies used in speaking class is summarized and ranked in descending order. The bigger the mean value means the more frequently the strategy is used.

**Table 2:** Descriptive Statistics of the Frequency of Anxiety-Reducing Strategies Used by Teachers

Anxiety-reducing strategies	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
16.familiarizing students with speaking test format	10	3.0000	.00000
5.motivating students' extrinsically	10	3.0000	.00000
4. giving students' advice on improving speaking skills	10	2.8000	.42164
15.focusing on formative assessment	10	2.8000	.42164
12.instructing students to relax	10	2.8000	.42164

9.suggesting students to try self-talk	10	2.7000	.48305
2.encouraging students to feel free to make mistakes	10	2.7000	.48305
1.giving constructive feedback	10	2.7000	.48305
17.creating a sense of friendship and cooperation among students	10	2.6000	.69921
7.asking students' to share their anxiety with peers	10	2.6000	.51640
3.creating a friendly and informal atmosphere	10	2.6000	.69921
14.avoiding comparing students' speaking performance	10	2.2000	.42164
6.increasing the degree of interpersonal interaction	10	2.2000	.63246
13.encouraging students to share their anxiety with the teacher	10	1.8000	.63246
10.asking students to write diaries about their worries	10	1.6000	.51640
8.providing students with useful vocabulary and structures	10	1.6000	.69921
11.praising students for what they have done well	10	1.2000	.42164

As revealed in the table, the most popular remedies for students' anxiety are getting them familiar with test format, motivating them extrinsically by good marks, advising them to improve speaking skills, focusing on formative assessment and instructing students to relax before speaking tasks. Additionally, some other techniques to build up students' positive thinking such as self-talk, positive attitudes toward mistakes and constructive feedback were also adopted quite frequently. Occasionally, to deal with anxiety that comes from classroom procedure, the lecturers created an anxiety-free learning environment by encouraging cooperation and sympathy among students. However, such strategies as discussing with students about their anxiety, asking students to write about their worries, providing useful language before each speaking task and praising students were rarely or even never employed by these participants.

As mentioned in the previous section, test anxiety and communication apprehension were observed to make most students anxious in speaking class. As a result, among the anxiety-reducing strategies used by the teachers, those which dealt with these two more popular causes of anxiety were more frequently adopted than others. These findings mean that there is a correlation between teachers' observation about students' anxiety and their frequency in using anxiety-reducing strategies. However, that the strategies related to self-reflection as well as teacher-student discussions on students' anxiety were almost not used in



the speaking classes implied that teachers should encourage students to think and share about their problems more frequently.

## 6. Conclusion

Understanding about EFL students' anxiety in foreign language, especially in speaking class, is necessary because it can help teachers to have suitable solutions to improve the situation. The study showed that the teachers at University of Foreign Languages, Hue University had a clear perception as well as observation of the phenomenon in their real teaching contexts. Accordingly, students were found to be more anxious in speaking class when they were unfamiliar or unprepared for the speaking assessment and when they had to express themselves in front of others. Moreover, the teachers also adopted a variety of strategies in order to reduce students' anxiety and make them feel more relaxed in speaking class. The frequency of using these anxiety-reducing strategies were showed to be different as the ones which dealt with students' test anxiety and communication apprehension were more popularly used than the others. This finding showed a correlation between what problems the teachers observed in their classroom and what they did to solve those problems. Although the study was conducted on a small scale with the participation of a limited numbers of teachers, it still had some significant meanings in showing the reality of students' anxiety in EFL speaking class and the effort of teachers in making their classroom a more relaxing and environment for students to develop their speaking skills.

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## SỰ CĂNG THẰNG CỦA SINH VIÊN TRONG CÁC GIỜ HỌC NÓI: TỪ NHẬN THỨC CỦA GIÁO VIÊN ĐẾN GIẢI PHÁP

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### Tóm tắt

Bài viết nhằm khảo sát nhận thức của các giáo viên Tiếng Anh về sự căng thẳng của sinh viên trong các giờ học Nói tiếng Anh, cũng như sự quan sát của giáo viên đối với các biểu hiện liên quan đến sự căng thẳng của sinh viên và các biện pháp giúp sinh viên cải thiện tình hình. Tham gia khảo sát là 10 giáo viên Tiếng Anh có kinh nghiệm giảng dạy kỹ năng Nói cho sinh viên ngành Tiếng Anh thuộc các cấp độ khác nhau tại Trường Đại học Ngoại ngữ, Đại học Huế. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy các giáo viên có hiểu biết đầy đủ về bản chất, cũng như nguyên nhân và tác động của sự căng thẳng lên sự thành công của sinh viên trong kỹ năng nói Tiếng Anh. Thông qua sự phản ánh của các giáo viên về những gì họ quan sát được trong các lớp học của mình, hầu hết các sinh viên đều có các biểu hiện tiêu biểu của sự lo lắng và nguyên nhân chính dẫn đến tình trạng đó xuất phát từ sự lo lắng về kiểm tra đánh giá kỹ năng Nói và khả năng diễn đạt trong giao tiếp của bản thân sinh viên. Ngoài ra, nghiên cứu cũng chỉ ra tần suất mà giáo viên sử dụng các chiến lược nhằm giúp sinh viên giảm căng thẳng và thoải mái hơn trong các giờ học Nói.

**Từ khóa:** Sự căng thẳng trong lớp học ngoại ngữ, kỹ năng nói, giáo viên Tiếng Anh, sinh viên ngành Tiếng Anh