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Insights into first-year students' English-speaking anxiety and solutions: A case in a private university in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the English-speaking anxiety levels of first-year university students in a private university in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam. A mixed-methods approach was employed, utilizing questionnaires administered to 200 students and semi-structured interviews conducted with 20 students. Quantitative analysis revealed a moderate overall level of English-speaking anxiety among the participants, with test anxiety significantly higher than communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation. No statistically significant differences in anxiety were found between male and female students or between English-majored and non-English-majored students. Qualitative data provided in-depth insights into students' experiences and solutions related to different anxiety domains. The study suggested pedagogical recommendations focused on reducing test-related pressure and fostering a more supportive learning environment to mitigate speaking anxiety. Limitations included the small interview sample and reliance on self-reported data. Future research should explore intervention effectiveness and broaden the scope of investigation.

Keywords: Anxiety, English-speaking, First-year students, Solutions.

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1. Introduction

English has gained international status as the most widely spoken language, with an increasing number of learners. No one can deny its significance across various aspects of life, including scientific research, commerce, medicine, and technology. In the field of education, particularly in the Vietnamese context, enhancing the quality of teaching and learning English is one of the top priorities for educational purposes. The National Foreign Languages Project was launched and implemented on a national scale, aiming to promote all four skills among Vietnamese learners. Among these, speaking is considered the most essential, as it plays a crucial role in learners' personal growth and future career opportunities. As a matter of fact, many higher education institutions in Vietnam have emphasized implementing international programs,

exchanging students, and reinforcing scientific research or globally recognized publications. Hence, the demand for effective English-speaking skills for better communication and interpretation is higher than ever [1]. Furthermore, in many universities, as more subjects are instructed and integrated with English learning materials, students are encouraged to equip themselves with proficient speaking abilities so that they can have better interactions with instructors or peers during the teaching and learning process. With good proficiency in English speaking skills, university students can not only master and achieve excellent results in the subjects taught in the curriculum, but they can also have a closer approach to a global learning community. Nevertheless, Vietnamese university students tend to encounter many difficulties when speaking English or have trouble mastering this language as an effective communication tool. This results in some limitations in English language acquisition among students and hinders their opportunities for global exchanges and the promising job market in the long run. Among various elements restricting university students' proficiency, English speaking anxiety is regarded as one of the most significant factors impeding their speaking ability. Thus, this study aims to provide insights into the reasons underlying first-year university students' speaking abilities and explore the solutions employed to overcome this type of psychological issue. The findings of this study, in particular, can not only contribute to the improvement of teaching and learning English in the university of research in the Mekong Delta but also for other regional and national tertiary institutions in Vietnam in general.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Definition Of Speaking

It is known that language communication involves several language skills which are interrelated: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Among the four macro skills, listening and speaking are considered as the oral skills, whereas reading and writing are called the literacy skills [2]. They are all divided according to the manners by which they are formed. The skills related to articulator organs are called the oral skills, and the ones connected with manual script are called the literacy skills. Of the four skills, speaking is considered to play a very important role in language learning. As for Pattison [3] if a person who knows a language, it means that he or she can speak that language.

According to Brown [4] as well as Burns and Joyce [5] speaking is *"an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing, receiving and processing information"*. Its form and meaning depend on the context in which it occurs. Therefore, speaking requires that the learners not only know linguistic competence such as grammar, pronunciation or vocabulary, but they also need to understand when, why and in what ways to produce language (sociolinguistic competence).

Moreover, Mackey [6] states that speaking *"involves not only the use of the right sounds in the right patterns of rhythm and intonation, but also the choice of words and inflections in the right order to convey the right meaning."* (cited in Bygate [7])

From another view, Chaney and Burk [8] reveals that *"speaking is the process of building and sharing meaning through the use of verbal and nonverbal symbols in a variety of contexts"* (cited in Kayi [9]). This is in line with Mead and Rubin [10] saying that speaking is considered as an *"interactive process in which an individual alternatively takes the roles of speaker and listener, and which includes both verbal and nonverbal components"*.

Different researchers have different definitions of speaking, but through these definitions, we all can easily recognize that speaking is a two-way process between the listeners and speakers, and it is considered as a key to human communication.

2.2. The Importance of Speaking

It seems obvious that being able to speak in a second or foreign language plays an utmost important role among the four language skills. In our daily lives, most of us speak more than write. In comparison with writing, speaking is the essential form of language, and writing is ranked second after it and derived from it, Wilkins [11]. When discussing the importance of speaking, Bygate [7] states that: *"It is the vehicle of social solidarity, of social ranking, of professional advancement and of business"*. To support his ideas, Bygate [7] stresses that speaking: *"is also a medium through which much language is learned, and which for many is particularly conducive for learning"*. This means that the importance of speaking is put on the top. When speaking skills is mastered, other skills like listening, writing, and reading can be improved effectively. Sharing the same opinions with Nunan [12] confirms that *"mastering the art of speaking is the single most important aspect of learning a second or foreign language, and success is measured in terms of ability to carry out a conversation in the language"*. More than these, Ur [13] shows that knowing a language is referred as the *"speakers"* of that language.

It can be inferred from researchers' viewpoints that speaking plays a vital part in learning a second language. If the learners have the right understanding about the importance of speaking, it is easy for them to achieve their goal in learning a second language, especially English.

2.3. Speaking Proficiency and Its Components

To speak the target language fluently and appropriately, it requires not only knowing its grammar and semantic rules but also understanding how native speakers use the language in the right context. Therefore, to help learners have a deep understanding of speaking proficiency so that they can perfect their skill of speaking skills. Shumin [14] points out speaking proficiency and its components as can be seen in the following figure:

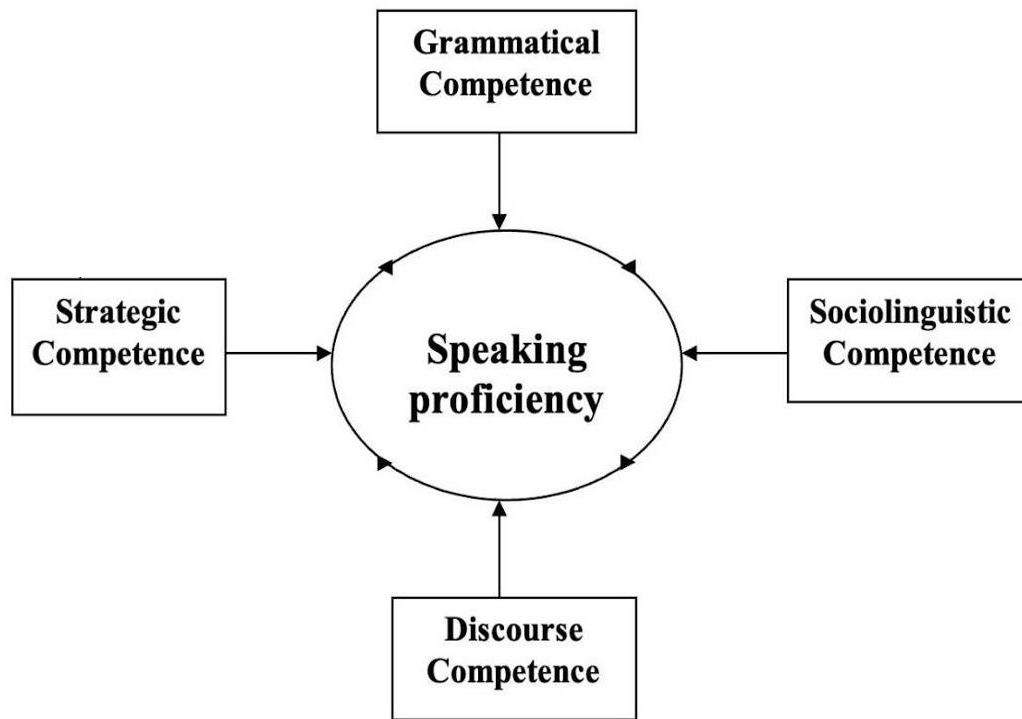


Figure 1.
Speaking proficiency and its components.

The figure shows that speaking is influenced by all four interrelated components:

Grammatical competence: the ability to recognize the lexical, morphological, syntactic, and phonological features to form words and sentences. This enables learners to use and understand English language structures accurately and unhesitatingly, which contributes to their fluency.

Sociolinguistic competence: Knowledge of language alone does not adequately prepare learners for effective use of the target language. The learners must understand the social context in which language is used to achieve successful conversations with others.

Discourse competence: The connection of a series of sentences or utterances. This helps learners hold the communication together in a meaningful way.

Strategic competence: Ability to employ strategies to compensate for imperfect knowledge of rules. This means the speakers can keep conversation going in any situation despite a lack of vocabulary or insufficient knowledge of grammar.

2.4. Anxiety and Language Anxiety

In his study, Scovel [15] defined the term “anxiety” as a state of “uneasiness, frustration, self-doubt, or worry”. In addition, language anxiety is a phrase demonstrating a distinguished multipart of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning derived from the uniqueness of language learning process” [16]. Later, Gardner and MacIntyre [17] further developed the term as the adverse emotions related to reactions that learners experience when uttering a second or foreign language. According to Horwitz, et al. [16] language anxiety is composed of communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. To be more specific, communication apprehension is considered as a type of shyness by fear of anxiety when communicating with others [16] and the unwillingness to talk [18]. Test anxiety is described as the fear of academic evaluation caused by the apprehension of failure [16]. In his study, Horwitz and his colleagues defined fear of negative evaluation as the apprehension about others’ judgments and avoidance of evaluative situations. Anxiety leads to passive manners in the classrooms as students tend to hinder themselves from getting involved in speaking activities or volunteering to present in front of the whole class [1].

2.5. Speaking Anxiety

According to Horwitz et al. [16], speaking is thought to be a skill most significantly affected by anxiety. Öztürk and Gürbüz [19] complied with that statement when advocating that speaking is observed as the most anxiety-affected skill and the most transparent source of anxiety in the language learning process. Several studies have been conducted to determine the level of speaking anxiety, and they were carried out in various teaching contexts. Liu and Jackson [20] examined the unwillingness in communication and speaking anxiety among Chinese first-year freshmen. The findings indicated that over thirty percent of the students in the study encountered anxiety in the English-speaking lessons. Anxiety was found to be one of the factors causing difficulties in English speaking, including fear of making mistakes, shyness, and lack of confidence. Those are the findings from Al Nakhalah [21] using observations and interviews as research instruments to investigate fourth-grade university students’ reasons behind their speaking anxiety. In Malaysian educational contexts, Miskam and Saidalvi

[22] conducted research on undergraduate students to figure out their level of anxiety in their speaking performances, and results showed that the participants had a moderate level of anxiety when speaking English. Later, Gumartifa and Syahri [23] contributed to the literature of the examined subject research, stating that most undergraduate participants were depressed when practicing or starting to speak in front of a crowd.

3. Related Studies

3.1. Causes of Speaking Anxiety

3.1.1. In Asian contexts

Studies investigating the factors underlying English learners' speaking anxiety have been conducted on a wide scale in a wide range of Asian education systems. In Korean education contexts, Manley [24] used a modified Horwitz et al. [16]. FLCAS to collect quantitative data among first-year students in a university. The findings showed that anxiety about class performance, uncomfortableness when speaking, pressure for tests and preparation, comparisons to peers and negative attitudes towards English class were the primary causes leading to English speaking anxiety. Later, also in the Korean context, Tian [25] did a study to examine 22 sophomores at a national university and shared some similar results when identifying that negative attitudes towards speaking tasks, preparation time and negative feedback from peers were the main elements resulting in students' English-speaking anxiety. Furthermore, Debreli and Demirkan [26] conducted a study in a Turkish university and indicated that pronunciation difficulties, being asked immediate questions by teachers, and failure to understand teachers' questions were the main reasons behind students' anxiety of speaking English. Later, Rajitha and Alamelu [27] found that lack of grammatical knowledge, pronunciation factors, stage fear, stage fear, lack of confidence, shyness and peer evaluation were the factors contributing to English-speaking anxiety among the target participants.

3.1.2. In Southeast Asian Contexts

In the Southeast Asian contexts, several studies have been carried out in search of the factors leading to learners' anxiety in speaking English. Batiha et al. [28] concluded that test anxiety, fear of failing the course, instructor-learner interaction, vocabulary, negative evaluation and high expectations were the core factors causing Indonesian students' English-speaking anxiety. In addition, Wilang and Singhasiri [28] used the Anxiety Scale in Spoken English as a Lingua Franca to determine the factors causing Thai undergraduates' English-speaking anxiety and noted that fast speed and understanding the meaning behind utterances were thought to be anxiety-causing situations. In the Philippines, Milan [29] cited that students experienced English-speaking anxiety as they were afraid of grammatical errors, lack of opportunities to speak the target language, internal innovation and misconceptions about spoken English fluency. Furthermore, her study revealed that the shortage of personal training in the language, instructional materials unrelated to students' interest or major and concerns about being corrected while speaking are the major reasons underlying the participants' anxiety for the speaking performances. In the same context, Jugo [30] discovered that negative self-perception, error correction, fear of making mistakes or being negatively evaluated are notable reasons leading to Filipino students' anxiety in the process of English-speaking lessons.

3.1.3. Solutions

Positive solutions for overcoming English-speaking anxiety have been identified in several studies for the purpose of improving the quality of teaching and learning practice. In the Japanese educational context, Iizuka [31] investigated EFL college students' solutions to deal with anxiety in English language speaking and noted that the students practiced positive measures, including having better preparations, making greater attempts in most speaking performances and seeking peer assistance when failing to understand teachers' questions. In addition, Chou [32] investigated Taiwan undergraduates from four universities and concluded that the target participants used rehearsal and paraphrasing strategies to overcome the anxiety of English-speaking anxiety in their performances and practices. Later, in 2021, Pabro-Maquidato [33] identified Filipino university students utilized a range of solutions to overcome anxiety in English speaking sessions, such as using useful learning tools, putting thoughts into writing, having more speaking practice and consulting teachers for feedback.

Besides positive solutions used by college and university students, negative ways, including giving up, ignoring or distancing themselves from difficult situations, were identified. In a Turkish university, an investigation was carried out by Genç et al. [35], and the results were recorded. The target participants used resignation strategies such as giving up, stopping paying attention and accepting the difficult situation. Seeking support from peers was identified in this quantitative study as a strategy to cope with English-speaking anxiety, but they used it with the least frequency.

3.1.4. Related Studies in Vietnam

Recognizing the importance of English-speaking skills in the Vietnamese educational context, several studies have been conducted for the sake of giving insights into factors contributing to English-speaking anxiety among Vietnamese university students and strategies to overcome this issue in the teaching and learning process. The need for exploring the anxiety-causing factors among those target students is undeniable as the English language has become so dominant in the teaching curriculum in many universities in Vietnam; furthermore, undergraduates consider English as a means of widening the scope of their understanding in this globalized world and ensuring themselves a wide range of job prospects. Therefore, Tran [34] carried out a study examining the level of English-speaking anxiety among first-year students at Hanoi National University of Education. With the use of the Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety Scale, the researcher found that the participants engaged in the study showed their low English language proficiency, unwillingness and uncertainty during speaking lessons. Additionally, the results indicated that students in this university encountered a high level of anxiety during English lessons.

The reasons were later analyzed, and they were attributed to their lack of confidence in communication and concerns of failure. Besides, the participants experienced the feeling of anxiety in speaking activities or tests, teachers' speaking speed and feelings of inferiority to their classmates. A year later, Le and Tran [35] conducted a descriptive study among Thai Nguyen University students to determine the level of speaking anxiety and concluded that the participants had a moderate level of English-speaking anxiety. Moreover, the reasons underlying their anxiety were fear of being laughed at, fear of making mistakes and lack of confidence. Other reasons, including fear of negative evaluation and anxiety of being the focus of attention, were also identified.

4. Methodology

4.1. Design

A descriptive study using a mixed-methods approach was conducted to investigate university students' English-speaking anxiety and find out solutions to overcome this issue. A mixed-methods approach, according to Fraenkel, et al. [36] includes quantitative and qualitative data gathering and analysis. Quantitative data, in particular, is used to generalize the findings of the study to the entire population, and qualitative data is utilized to obtain a detailed understanding of the initial quantitative data (e.g., [36, 37]). To analyze quantitative data, the computer software Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25 was employed. The *Descriptive Statistics Test*, *One Sample t-Test*, *Paired-Samples t-Test* and *Independent Samples t-Test* were run to examine the level of English-speaking anxiety among first-year students.

4.2. Participants

4.2.1. Participants For the Questionnaires

The participants in this study were 200 first-year students from a private university in the Mekong Delta. There were 100 female students and 100 male students getting involved in the study. They are taking an English course at the time the study was conducted. The participant selection is based on convenience sampling [36].

4.2.2. Participants For the Interviews

20 first-year students (10 males and 10 females) were invited to participate in the interviews. The purpose of the interviews was to gain their perspectives of the reasons behind their English-speaking anxiety and their solutions to overcome this issue in their language learning.

5. Instruments

5.1. Questionnaires

In this study, questionnaires were used to collect data on the level of anxiety when speaking English among the participants. The questionnaire consisted of 32 questions revolving around three main causes of learners' anxiety when speaking English: communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. These causes were identified from the research of Horwitz et al. [16]. The adapted questionnaire was referenced from the questionnaire in the study of Saeed and Rana [40], containing 30 questions using a five-point Likert scale and 2 open-ended questions in the end.

5.2. Interviews

In addition, semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were conducted as a qualitative data collection tool with the aim of gaining a deeper understanding of the reasons behind the anxiety-inducing factors of the target participants and identifying their solutions to improve their speaking abilities. All transcripts of the interviews were read carefully and coded using thematic analysis [38]. Subsequently, the participants' responses were grouped into themes based on their similarities and differences.

6. Findings

6.1. Findings from the Questionnaires

6.1.1. Overall Anxiety Faced by First-Year Students in Speaking Classes

A *Descriptive Statistics Test* was conducted to examine the overall mean score of student anxiety when attending speaking classes. The results of the test are presented in Table 1.

Table 1.
Students' overall anxiety

	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Total	200	1.00	5.00	3.41	0.70
Valid N (listwise)	200				

Table 1 shows the overall mean score of anxiety faced by first-year students when attending speaking classes, which was at an average level ($M=3.41$, $SD=.70$) (noted by Oxford [39] the five-point scale (average-level: means of 2.6 to 3.4)).

Table 2.

Students' speaking anxiety by clusters.

	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
Communication Apprehension	200	1.00	5.00	3.37	0.77
Test Anxiety	200	1.00	5.00	3.63	0.79
Fear of Negative Feedback	200	1.00	5.00	3.22	0.79
Mean overall	200	1.00	5.00	3.41	0.70
Valid N (listwise)	200				

Table 2 shows that the mean score for students' test anxiety was at a high level ($M=3.63$, $SD=.79$), followed by that of communication apprehension ($M=3.37$, $SD=.77$), and fear of negative feedback was at an average level ($M=3.22$, $SD=.79$).

6.1.2. Anxiety Faced by First-Year Students in Speaking Classes in Terms of Gender

Table 3.

Independent-Samples t-Test for students' anxiety (in terms of gender).

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig.	Mean Difference	SD	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Mean E	Equal variances assumed	2.89	0.09	-0.62	198	0.536	-0.06	0.100	-0.26	0.13
	Equal variances not assumed			-0.61	184	0.539	-0.06	0.101	-0.26	0.13

Table 4.

Independent-Samples t-Test for students' anxiety (in terms of majors of study).

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig.	Mean Difference	SD	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Mean E	Equal variances assumed	2.26	0.61	-0.38	198	0.704	-0.38	0.101	-0.23	0.16
	Equal variances not assumed			-0.37	177	0.706	-0.38	0.102	-0.24	0.16

An *Independent-Samples t-test* was also run to determine whether there was a difference between male and female students in terms of speaking anxiety and the results are shown in Table 3. After analyzing the data through the function "Compare Means" in the SPSS software, it was identified that the mean score of male students in respect of English-speaking anxiety was 3.38 and that of female students was 3.44. Then, with analyzing the overall mean score for both male and female students through Independent-Samples t-Test, the result demonstrates that there was no difference between the two target participants regarding their speaking anxiety ($t=.62$; $df=198$; $p=.09>.05$). It is indicated from the result that male and female students faced the same level of anxiety when attending English-speaking classes.

6.1.3. Anxiety Faced by First-Year Students in Speaking Classes in Terms of Majors of Study

An *Independent-Samples t-Test* was also run to determine whether there was a difference between non-English-majored students and English-majored students in terms of speaking anxiety and the results are shown in Table 4. From the analysis in the SPSS software, it was noted that the mean score of non-English-majored students in respect of English-speaking anxiety was 3.39 and that of female students was 3.43. Then, with analyzing the overall mean score for both non-English-majored students and English-majored students through the Independent-Samples t-Test, the result demonstrates that there was no difference between the two target participants regarding their speaking anxiety ($t=-.38$; $df=198$; $p=.61>.05$). It is indicated from the result that non-English-majored students and English-majored students faced the same level of anxiety when attending English-speaking classes, although the mean score for English-majored students was observed to be higher than that of non-English-majored students.

7. Findings from the Interviews

7.1. Insights Into Students' Communication Apprehension

7.1.1. For English- Majored Students

Analysis for the interview data reveals that most of the English-majored students (8 out of 10) participating in the interview encountered anxiety when attending speaking classes. In particular, eight of them advocated that when being asked unexpected questions and had a little time for preparation, they seemed to be anxious, and their mind went blank. However, they still tried to overcome that anxiety and present their ideas. The following extracts illustrate their views.

"First, I may feel a bit nervous and scared because at that time I am not ready to answer the question, but I will still try to answer the questions because I have the responsibility to contribute to the speaking lessons." (Student 1, interview extract)

"If the question is too unexpected, I will be a bit anxious. I will not be able to prepare the answer in time and I'm not mentally ready to respond to the lecturer. After that, I will still be calm to find the answers." (Students 9, interview extract)

However, 2 out of 10 English-majored students stated that they found themselves anxiety-free when communicating in English-speaking classes. They found it normal and be mentally ready to answer questions from lecturers and with confidence. The following extracts illustrate their views.

"As soon as I hear the questions from teachers, I would be ready to prepare the answers and eager to answer them, so I think that is quite normal." (Student 7, interview extract)

"When the lecturer asks me unexpectedly, I know that my English level can be good enough to deal with their questions. But if I make mistakes, lecturers can help supplement my knowledge. Therefore, there is nothing to worry about."

7.1.2. For Non-English-Majored Students

After analyzing interview data, it is seen that 10 out of 10 non-English-majored students participating admitted that they encountered English-speaking anxiety in speaking classes, especially when being asked unexpected questions from lecturers then had not much time to prepare a fulfilled answer. 3 out of 10 students said that they were not able to answer teachers' questions, then gave up or avoided presenting their ideas. The following extracts illustrate their viewpoints.

"I can understand the questions, but when the teacher asks me to give answers, I cannot have a complete answer." (Student 11, interview extract)

"I feel so much worried and cannot answer teachers' questions well because I am afraid that my ability is not good or I mispronounce some words". (Student 16, interview extract)

Nevertheless, the rest of the non-English-majored students (7 students) showed their anxiety at first, but they tried to answer them with their proficiency. Some of them even asked for help from their friends to overcome their anxiety and answer teachers' questions in speaking classes. The following extracts illustrate their opinions.

"What I need is to have enough time to prepare for my answers. Then, I try my best to come up with the ideas and answer the questions from lecturers based on what I know." (Student 12, interview extract)

"For the questions I do not know how to answer, I feel anxious at first sight. Then, I try to answer them or find support from the friends sitting next to me." (Student 14, interview extract)

7.2. Insights Into Students' Test Anxiety

7.2.1. For English-Majored Students

The qualitative data from the questionnaires indicate that half of the English-majored students (5 out of 10) encountered speaking anxiety when taking an English-speaking test. This type of anxiety came from the fact that they had high expectations on their scores in taking the test. The following extracts illustrate their opinions.

"I just feel relieved when I finish my speaking test as I always expect that I will achieve high scores in the English-speaking test, which is the reason why I feel anxious before the test." (Student 1, interview extract)

"After many times dealing with the speaking test, I can get used to the feeling of anxiety before it. However, I still feel anxious and worried when having to take the test because I want to achieve flying colors in the tests and achieve my goals." (Student 5, interview extract)

Surprisingly, 5 out of 10 English-majored students showed no anxiety when attending an English-speaking test. Some of them even described their readiness and eagerness in taking the test. The following extracts illustrate their opinions.

"The lecturers gave us some topics for preparation before the speaking test, so I had time to well prepared for that. Therefore, I found no anxiety when taking an English-speaking test."

"I can easily overcome English-speaking anxiety as I grew up with a lot of chances to speaking English with foreigners, so I am not anxious when taking an English test." (Student 9, interview extract)

7.2.2. For Non-English-Majored Students

The semi-structured interviews with non-English-majored students reveals that almost all of them (9 out of 10 students) advocated that they suffered from speaking anxiety when taking an English test. The reasons came from their fear of making time constraints, being asked extra questions, lack of vocabulary for the answers or simply not understanding teachers' questions. The following extracts illustrate their ideas.

"I am afraid that the examiners in the speaking tests wait for my answers to be generated for so long, but then I cannot have a complete answer." (Student 11, interview extract)

"Although I have time to prepare for my answer, I still feel nervous before the test because of the fact that the examiners may ask extra questions or follow-up questions based on my speaking content and I'm afraid that I am not proficient enough to answer those questions." (Student 12, interview extract)

"I am not confident with my range of vocabulary, so when I have to take an English-speaking test and talk face-to-face with the examiners in the speaking test, I cannot find enough vocabulary to come up with the answers as I wish." (Student 15, interview extract)

Just 1 non-English-majored student showed no anxiety when dealing with an English test as he stated that he was confident with his ability and his problem-solving skills. Therefore, speaking anxiety is of his control and he found no anxious feelings.

"I have time to prepare for the speaking test; thus, I do not suffer from English-speaking anxiety at all." (Student 16, interview extract)

7.3. Insights Into Students' Fear of Negative Evaluation

7.3.1. For English-Majored Students

8 out of 10 English-majored students stated that they found no anxiety about their peers' negative evaluation or being laughed at when making mistakes. Even when they made mistakes in their speaking performances, they felt all right as they were just normal in the learning path. Moreover, they found teachers' feedback on their speaking performances to be valuable in their learning process. The following extracts illustrate their viewpoints.

"I am not afraid that my friends may laugh at me if I make mistakes when giving speaking performances or presentation in classes because they are just at the same age as me. For lecturers' feedback, it is useful in my study because it helps me recognize my mistakes and improve them later." (Student 3, interview extract)

"When I was at high school, I was a little shy. However, when coming to university, the learning environment is more dynamic, and I was motivated to be more active by my friends. Gradually, I become more confident in English-speaking classes as and the lecturers are supportive to students as well, which helps me feel more comfortable in speaking classes." (Student 5, interview extract)

Then, 2 out of 10 students expressed their anxiety when they sometimes encountered English-speaking anxiety in classes. The reasons were that they lacked knowledge in vocabulary and grammar, so they could not control their utterances in speaking performances or presentations. However, fear of negative feedback was not a very major problem as they said they could overcome it, and this did not affect their mood for the next time giving speaking performances. The following extracts illustrate their views.

"For small talks with friends, I feel normal. However, when giving presentations or having to speak in front of the whole class, I feel shy and anxious as I am not confident with my vocabulary and grammar." (Student 6, interview extract)

"I am worried that my friends may laugh at me if I make mistakes when giving speaking performances. However, this will not affect me lot for the next time I do it." (Student 10, interview extract)

7.3.2. For Non-English-Majored Students

8 out of 10 students admitted that they had anxiety due to negative feedback from peers or disappointment from lecturers. To be more specific, some non-English major students revealed the fear of being laughed at by their friends if they made mistakes while speaking; whereas others felt embarrassed when making the same mistakes, although their lecturers had carefully conveyed that piece of knowledge. In other words, those students felt anxious and worried since they were afraid of being judged or underestimated by their peers or lecturers. Most of them advocated that those negative feelings would affect their speaking performances next time. The following extracts illustrate their points of view.

“For my friends, I do not feel so embarrassed. But for my teachers, I feel so shy if I make so many mistakes in my speaking performances because that is the knowledge the teachers taught me before. I do not remember and make mistakes, so I feel uncomfortable and guilty of my mistakes when facing my teachers.” (Student 11, interview extract)

“I just feel embarrassed if my friends laugh at or judge me when I make mistakes. But for our lecturers, I value their feedback for my improvement in the future. However, when receiving feedback, I may feel a little upset and become less confident for the next time presenting in speaking classes.” (Student 12, interview extract)

“If being stopped and corrected directly in speaking classes, I would feel so embarrassed. This refrained me from continuing to present my ideas because I lost my confidence at that time. And for the next time giving oral presentation, I would not feel as normal.” (Student 20, interview extract)

Notably, 2 out of 10 non-English-majored students showed no anxiety for negative evaluation from their lecturers or peers. They stated that making mistakes was unavoidable in the learning process and they could learn new knowledge or not making the same mistake one more time. The following extracts illustrate their viewpoints.

“Fear of negative evaluation does not cause me an anxiety because my English proficiency was not good. I accepted that, so I felt normal when making mistakes and tried to learn new things from them.” (Student 19, interview extract)

“I think that I can learn from the feedback that my lecturers or friends gave me. Those were valuable to me because I can recognize my weaknesses and have a chance to correct them to be better in speaking English in the future.” (Student 17, interview extract)

7.4. Insights Into Students' Solutions to Overcome English-Speaking Anxiety

7.4.1. For English-Majored Students

The participants used a wide range of solutions to overcome English-speaking anxiety. Most of the English-major students agreed that they tried to get involved in an English-speaking environment so that they could have more chances to speak English utterances. In particular, 4 out of 10 students advocated that they actively engaged in some of the environments that allowed them to speak more. They participated in some English-speaking clubs, set some of the social network platforms on their phones in the English language, or talked with natives from English-speaking countries so that they could immerse themselves in this target language and improve their speaking skills. In addition, playing games designed in English is another way students use to help them create an environment enabling them to speak as much English as possible. For those students, playing games not only brings them excitement and entertainment but also assists them in uttering English sentences more frequently since they must communicate with other players in a game match to be winners. This is a good condition for them to use English communicatively as they are motivated to win the game, which indirectly helps them overcome their English-speaking anxiety. The following extracts illustrate their points of view.

“For me, I have attended some English-speaking clubs in my city so that I can have more friends and talk English with them. Moreover, I make friends with some foreigners in the social network and then I try to talk with them to improve my English-speaking skills.” (Student 1 and Student 8, interview extract)

“For games, they bring us joy and relaxation after hard study. Moreover, one of the reasons I play games is that I want to improve my English-speaking skills. In the game, there are many players coming from different countries and the only language we share is English. Therefore, it is an opportunity for me to talk English to them and get over my English-speaking anxiety or even proficient in it.” (Student 3, Student 4 and Student 10, interview extract)

Improving English vocabulary and grammar is another strategy that 2 out of 10 students used to tackle their English-speaking anxiety. They said that they needed to broaden their vocabulary range as well as grammar to be less anxious in speaking classes. The following extracts illustrate their perspectives.

“I am supposed to improve my vocabulary and grammatical structures from the basic to advanced level to overcome my anxiety when I have to give English speaking performances.” (Student 2, interview extract)

“To understand others' speaking, I must equip myself with a range of vocabulary. Then, I will be able to communicate with them or just simply respond to them.” (Student 5, interview extract.)

Enhancing students' proficiency is one of the notable solutions that English-majored sophomores made to lessen the anxiety in their speaking performances. To be more specific, 2 out of 10 students stated that they tried to imitate the intonation from English natives so that they could have good pronunciation as well as natural intonation just like them, which can be considered a promising strategy to promote their proficiency in English speaking and address their anxiety. Some of the listening sources are speaking videos, talks, or speeches on some social network platforms. The following extracts demonstrate their points of view.

“I found videos or English presentations like TED Talks so useful as they convey a lot of knowledge as well as help me improve my pronunciation. Besides, I can imitate the native presenters' intonation so that I can have a

precise way of pronouncing a word or the intonation in a whole sentence.” (Student 7 and Student 9, interview extract)

7.4.2. For Non-English-Majored Students

10 non-English-majored students found some effective strategies for addressing their speaking anxiety. 3 out of 10 students improved their English anxiety through entertainment activities such as playing online games with English instructions (Student 12) and watching films with English subtitles (Students 13 and 17). Other first-year students found support from lecturers or their foreign friends for clarification or correction of their mistakes in speaking (Students 14, 15, and 18). Although their ideas are not as diverse as those of English-majored students, 2 out of 10 non-English-majored students advocated interesting and innovative solutions to overcome the research issue. To illustrate, these two students recognized the need for self-improvement as they were supposed to address their own weaknesses in English speaking, then focus on self-study or find an English-speaking environment to support their speaking skills. The following extracts illustrate their viewpoints.

“Recognizing and improving my own weaknesses are crucial if I want to solve my English-speaking anxiety. I am so shy to do that with the help of lecturers.” (Student 16, interview extract)

“I myself have to find an English-speaking environment in the I live so that I can have more chances to speak out the target language. I stress the importance of self-study for improvement, but with the support and correction from teachers as well.” (Student 20, interview extract).

8. Discussion

8.1. From Questionnaires

The quantitative findings of this study provide a statistical overview of the English-speaking anxiety experienced by first-year university students in a private university in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam and offer insights into the levels of its specific components as well as potential differences based on gender and academic majors.

The analysis of the anxiety overall mean score indicates that the first-year students in this study experienced an average level of anxiety when attending English-speaking classes, suggesting that while anxiety is present, it is not overwhelmingly high for the student population as a whole. However, this overall average potentially masks variations within the specific domains of speaking anxiety.

A more detailed examination of the anxiety components reveals a more nuanced picture. Notably, test anxiety emerged as the most prominent domain, indicating a high level of anxiety. This finding underscores the significant pressure and apprehension students associate with formal speaking evaluations. Following test anxiety, communication apprehension was found to be at an average level, indicating a moderate degree of nervousness and discomfort related to oral communication in the classroom. Lastly, fear of negative evaluation revealed an average level, suggesting that while students are concerned about others' judgments, this concern is not as significant as their anxiety related to testing situations. The higher level of test anxiety compared to communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation suggests that the evaluative aspect of speaking tasks is a particularly significant source of anxiety for these learners.

Furthermore, the study investigated potential differences in overall speaking anxiety between male and female students. The results indicated that there was no statistically significant difference in the anxiety mean scores between the two groups. This suggests that, on average, both male and female first-year students in this study experience similar levels of anxiety when participating in English-speaking classes.

Finally, an analysis was conducted to explore potential differences in overall speaking anxiety between English-majored and non-English-majored students. The findings revealed no statistically significant difference in the anxiety mean scores between the two groups. This implies that, despite a slightly higher observed mean score for English-majored students, both groups experience comparable levels of anxiety in English-speaking classes. This is a noteworthy finding, as one might intuitively expect non-English majors to experience higher anxiety due to less focused language study. However, the data suggests that factors beyond academic major contribute to speaking anxiety in this context.

In summary, the quantitative data indicate that first-year students, on average, experience an average level of anxiety in English-speaking classes, with test anxiety being the most prominent component. Interestingly, no significant differences in overall speaking anxiety were found between male and female students, nor between English-majored and non-English-majored students. These findings provide a foundational understanding of the prevalence and nature of speaking anxiety within the studied population, highlighting the specific challenges posed by testing situations and suggesting that anxiety is a shared experience across gender and academic focus at this stage of their university studies. These quantitative results can be further enriched and contextualized by the qualitative insights gathered from the interviews.

8.2. From Semi-Structured Interviews

The qualitative data gained from the semi-structured interviews offers valuable and nuanced insights into the English-speaking anxiety experienced by both English-majored and non-English-majored students. Analyzing these experiences through the lens of communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation reveals both shared vulnerabilities and distinct differences between the two groups.

Regarding communication apprehension, the findings consistently indicate that unexpected questioning in speaking classes serves as a significant trigger for anxiety in most students, regardless of their major. The feeling of being unprepared

and under pressure to formulate immediate responses often leads to nervousness and mental blocks. However, a key divergence lies in the subsequent response. While most English-majored students, despite their initial anxiety, actively strive to overcome it and participate, a notable portion of non-English-majored students tends to feel overwhelmed, leading to avoidance or an inability to articulate their thoughts. This suggests that English-majored students may possess a greater degree of resilience or a stronger sense of responsibility towards classroom participation, even when faced with anxiety-provoking situations.

In the domain of test anxiety, the anticipation of formal speaking assessments results in anxiety in a substantial number of students from both majors. For English-majored first year students, this anxiety is often intertwined with high personal expectations for their speaking performances. Conversely, non-English-majored first-year students express anxieties rooted in perceived linguistic limitations such as fear of time constraints, unexpected follow-up questions, insufficient vocabulary and comprehension challenges. The fact that half of the English majors reported no test anxiety, potentially due to familiarity or adequate preparation, contrasts sharply with most anxious non-English majors, underscoring the different levels of confidence and preparedness when facing evaluative speaking tasks.

The findings on fear of negative evaluation reveal a more profound distinction between the two groups. Most English-majored students demonstrate a relatively low level of anxiety concerning peer judgment or making mistakes, viewing errors as a natural part of language acquisition and appreciating constructive feedback from instructors. In contrast, a significant proportion of non-English-majored students express considerable anxiety related to negative evaluation from both peers and lecturers. The fear of being ridiculed, underestimated or feeling embarrassed by their mistakes, particularly when they involve previously taught material, appears to be a significant concern. This suggests that non-English majors may be more sensitive to social evaluation in the language learning context, potentially hindering their willingness to take risks and participate actively.

Finally, the exploration of students' solutions to overcome English-speaking anxiety reveals a greater diversity and proactivity among English-majored students. Their strategies encompass creating immersive English-speaking environments, leveraging entertainment for language practice, consciously focusing on vocabulary and grammar development and actively working on pronunciation. While non-English-majored students also identify coping mechanisms, their approaches appear less varied and often involve seeking external support or utilizing more passive forms of engagement. The recognition of self-improvement and the need for English-speaking environments by some non-English majors indicates an awareness of proactive strategies, though perhaps with less confidence in their independent implementation.

In conclusion, the interview data provide a rich understanding of the multifaceted nature of English-speaking anxiety among first-year university students in the University of Research. While both English-majored and non-English-majored students experience anxiety across the domains of communication apprehension and test anxiety, the intensity and underlying concerns often differ. Notably, non-English majors exhibit a greater vulnerability to anxiety, particularly concerning unprepared communication and fear of negative evaluation. The diverse solutions employed by English majors offer valuable insights for pedagogical interventions aimed at fostering a more supportive and less anxiety-inducing learning environment for all students. These findings underscore the importance of tailored approaches that address the specific anxieties and needs of different learner populations in foreign language classrooms in Vietnamese universities.

8.3. Implications

Drawing from the quantitative and qualitative insights into students' experiences with English-speaking anxiety, several recommendations can be proposed to foster a more supportive and effective learning environment. For instructors and curriculum designers, it is crucial to implement strategies that directly address the identified causes of anxiety. This includes minimizing communication apprehension by providing students with adequate preparation time for oral tasks, cultivating a low-pressure classroom atmosphere where mistakes are viewed as integral to the learning process, and offering gradual opportunities for oral participation. Furthermore, addressing test anxiety in speaking assessments requires clear evaluation criteria, opportunities for practice and familiarization with the test format, and a focus on communicative competence over perfect accuracy. Finally, creating a positive classroom environment that actively discourages negative evaluation, models supportive feedback, and encourages peer collaboration is essential to reduce students' fear of judgment and promote a more comfortable learning space. For students themselves, proactive engagement in English-speaking opportunities, leveraging English-language entertainment for informal learning, setting realistic goals for improvement, and developing personal coping strategies for anxiety are recommended. Furthermore, seeking support from peers and instructors and considering mistakes as valuable learning experiences can also significantly contribute to reducing anxiety and building confidence in English speaking. School leaders and administrators also play a crucial role in fostering a supportive environment for language learning. To address English-speaking anxiety at a broader institutional level, it is recommended to prioritize teacher training and professional development focused on anxiety-reducing pedagogical approaches and effective feedback strategies. Establishing clear guidelines for speaking assessment that emphasize communication over error-focused evaluation can also alleviate student pressure. Besides, creating opportunities for extracurricular English language activities, such as speaking clubs and peer tutoring programs, can provide students with low-stakes environments to practice and build confidence. Allocating resources for smaller class sizes in speaking-focused courses could allow for more individualized attention and reduced performance anxiety. Finally, promoting a school-wide culture that values language learning as a process involving experimentation and mistakes, rather than a performance judged on perfection, can significantly impact students' affective experiences and overall language acquisition.

9. Conclusions

In conclusion, this study provided a comprehensive understanding of English-speaking anxiety among first-year university students in a Mekong Delta private university in Vietnam. Quantitative findings revealed an average overall anxiety level, with test anxiety being the most prominent component, and no significant differences based on gender or major. Qualitative data enriched these findings by highlighting the distinct anxieties and coping mechanisms of English-majored and non-English-majored students, particularly regarding communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation. The implications suggest targeted pedagogical and administrative interventions to reduce anxiety and foster a more supportive learning environment. Future research should address the study's limitations by employing larger qualitative samples, exploring longitudinal trends and the interplay of different anxiety types, and investigating the effectiveness of specific interventions in diverse contexts.

While the qualitative data offer rich insights into the causes of English-speaking anxiety among the participating students, several limitations must be acknowledged. Firstly, the semi-structured interviews were conducted with a small sample of only 20 students, evenly divided between English-majored and non-English-majored participants. This limited sample size inherently restricts the generalizability of the qualitative findings to the broader student population and other educational contexts. Secondly, the study involved a considerably larger quantitative sample for the questionnaire (200 participants), creating a significant disparity between the depth of the qualitative data and the breadth of the quantitative data. This imbalance prevents a direct triangulation or statistical linking of the detailed interview findings to the larger trends potentially identified through the questionnaires. Thirdly, the reliance on self-reported data, both in interviews and questionnaires, introduces the potential for various biases, including social desirability and recall inaccuracies, which could influence the reported levels and experiences of anxiety. Furthermore, the study was conducted within a specific educational and cultural context in a private university in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam, and the findings may be unique to this environment, limiting their direct applicability to other diverse learning settings. Finally, the study's focused examination of speaking anxiety means that other potentially significant sources of anxiety within the foreign language classroom, such as those related to listening, reading, or writing, were not explored, potentially offering an incomplete picture of the overall affective challenges faced by learners.

Based on the findings and limitations of this study, several avenues for future research are suggested. Firstly, given the limited sample size of the qualitative interviews, future studies could employ larger and more diverse interview samples to enhance the generalizability of the in-depth insights into students' anxiety experiences and coping mechanisms. Longitudinal studies could also track the development of speaking anxiety and the effectiveness of interventions over time. Furthermore, exploring the interplay between different types of foreign language anxiety (e.g., listening, writing) and speaking anxiety could provide a more holistic understanding of learners' affective challenges. Investigating the impact of specific pedagogical interventions designed to target the identified domains of anxiety, such as communication apprehension and test anxiety, would be valuable. Finally, cross-cultural comparisons of English-speaking anxiety among first-year university students could offer insights into the role of cultural and educational contexts in shaping this topic of research.

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