



FUNCTIONS OF SPEAKING IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE & SPEAKING ANXIETY

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Abstract:

Plato once said “*a wise man speaks because he has something to say, a fool speaks because he has to say something!*” Often the ability to speak (or not) is used to gauge a person’s language proficiency. Speaking is one of the four language skills which includes listening, reading and writing. However, of all the four skills, the first skill that is portrayed is a person’s speaking skills. A person’s speaking skills (or lack of it) is often used by future employers to evaluate the oral communication abilities of their employees. This is because speaking has many different functions and failure to understand the varying functions may lead to anxiety among the speakers. This pilot study is done to investigate the usage of the English language in undergraduates’ interaction and transaction in their everyday lives, their speaking performances and their speaking anxiety. Data is analysed using SPSS and presented in the form of mean scores. Findings for interaction and transaction showed that English is used during formal transaction. In addition to that, the discussion on academic matters is a necessity to speak English. Next, findings for performance revealed that no matter how good or poor their achievement in this second language, speakers have to make it happen – this is one of the challenges that the speakers have to face. Lastly, the speaking anxiety may impact their (speakers) interaction with other people. Results of this study bear interesting implications towards the acquisition and learning of speaking in English among learners.

Keywords: speaking skills, interaction, transaction, performance, anxiety

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background of Study

Speaking is one of the four basic language skills in learning second or foreign languages besides listening, reading and writing. Learners are found to claim that it is the most important (Garbati & Mady, 2015) and the hardest skill in acquiring the language. Speaking requires innate knowledge of grammar, and it requires the learner to use this knowledge in every day's conversation. Apart knowing the grammar excellently, learners also need to get the pronunciation right; the learner's speaking skill in producing coherent and fluent enunciation (Dugartsyrenova & Sardegna, 2017) shows the level of complexity that the learner has achieved in learning the language. It can be inferred that once the learner knows how to speak eloquently, he or she can be classified as an effective language learner.

There are almost always issues with second language acquisition around the globe - that includes the country like Malaysia. Malaysian graduates have serious problem in speaking English and this is one of the top five issues confronting Malaysian employers. According to an article from The Star Online (2017) Malaysia Employers Federation (MEF) executive director Datuk Shamsuddin Bardan said speaking in English language still the main problem among job seekers, especially the fresh graduates, SPM and diploma holders. Quite a number of job seekers cannot come up with proper sentences during the interaction in interviews. He recalled his experience while interviewing an interviewee who answered his questions in Bahasa Malaysia in spite of being questioned in English language. Nor Zahidi Alias, the chief economist at Malaysian Rating Corp Bhd also stated that the number of unemployed graduates in Malaysia has increased over the years and one of the main reasons is poor English language proficiency (The Edge Malaysia, 2017).

In the Salary Surveys 2016 by MEF, it was discovered that over 90% of respondents showed the requirement for improvement on their English capability in order to be employable (The Star Online, 2017). This study is relevant in comprehending the usage of the English language in undergraduates' interaction and transaction in their everyday lives, their speaking performances and their speaking anxiety. This research attempts to answer the following questions:

- 1) In what ways are interaction and transaction used in speaking skills among university students?
- 2) How does speaking performance influence speaking skills among university students?
- 3) How does speaking anxiety influence speaking skills among students?

2. Literature review

2.1 Talk as interaction and transaction – the challenges amongst the L2 users

Talking - or in a more professional setting is usually known as speaking, communicating and interacting - functions very importantly and relevantly in everyday walks of life especially when English language is involved as their second or foreign language. It becomes more important when it is applied for international transaction (Brown, 2018; Balderston, 2018) such as to establish diplomatic relationships (Baker & Jarunthawatchai, 2017), to maintain political power structures (Conty, 2018) and so forth. For L2 users, the art of talk as transaction offers very dramatic needs and also the challenges – especially when they are to deal with cultural and the linguistics differences (Alzouwain & Lincoln, 2018) - as they are to give and to receive information throughout their daily lives in that second or foreign language. As for these L2 users or learners, they have to face obstacles (that is to grab the grammar and syntax skills of that language) in order to be language competence so that speaking strategies can be easily acquired. This effort to employ speaking and listening strategies will successfully assist them in their daily transaction (Shirkhani, et al., 2020). With the speaking strategies applied, L2 users or learners will be able to explain, describe, justify, clarify, agree, disagree, and so forth. All these skills are necessary to ensure one's comfort when managing themselves in public or dealing with their university assignments.

Talking – socially, formally or professionally – does allow users to experience a smooth journey in conveying and contributing ideas or it could also be the most unpleasant journey for them. It takes the level of one's confidence, one's language competency, one's communication ability and also one's pragmatic ability (Alqurashi, 2019) in order to determine how far they manage to speak up in public especially when second or foreign languages are applied. If talk as interaction and transaction, many would agree that what does matter is the messages to convey; which linguistic accuracy is not always important and the focus is more on the meaning to be understood. However, it does not seem intact for the L2 users when using or speaking the second language with horrendous grammar and syntax. This issue has been discussed long ago and until the recent year, the issue is still becoming one major fear to these L2 users. There are numbers of challenges related to this fear; namely - limited learning space, issues with English language instructors, students could not care less of the language, and also the overuse of their own mother tongue during English class.

Learning space or learning environment can be one's priority to achieve great result of language acquisition, especially to assimilate speaking flair. The learning space or learning environment here refers to how much or how far can the L2 users or learners grab the learning of English language skills and also the communication strategies. Can the learners really obtain what they study in class just by referring to books? Are they having the right speaking partner to achieve the learning goal? Are they practising speaking the second language using correct grammar and syntax only with the presence of their teachers? With several doubts to think about, something needs to be pondered by the government or the language experts on this matter. The solution which is

suggested by many is that to have native or native-like language instructors or peers to assist these L2 users or learners. Abrar (2018) encountered in his research that one of the learners' preferences to learn spoken English is by listening to native speakers. In this case, it could also possibly mean that language instructors – no matter if he or she a native or native-like speaker - has to play their role and has to be genuinely responsible to really impart the knowledge and skill (in terms of instilling correct grammar usage and accurate syntax skills) to these learners; not only as language instructors but also as “*educator, model, and cultural ambassador that offers a more global outlook*” (Brown, 2018).

The above argument brings us to witness another worrying situation that is to determine the qualification of the language instructors, who have been appointed to teach and to coach the L2 learners. This is as a consequence of English instructors to certainly cultivate highly linguistics competence to the learners (Lopez, 2018), have knowledge of the subject matter and also to have pedagogical expertise in the language acquisition (Balderston, 2018). Balderston also found out that English language instructors with high level of language efficacy will keep on searching for more knowledge to increase their skills – which potentially can promote learners learning. However, regrettably to know that some schools in Malaysia, a number of English teachers are from a totally different field of English study (Berita Harian, 2019). They are appointed to teach English subject as the school lacks of English language graduates. This issue is seen very serious as the schools are reluctant to report and submit the problem to the ministry. It is a serious problem because by appointing non-English graduates to teach English language skills to the learners is observed as not professional. Here, the school has not done justice to the learners. As a result, the learners' performances and achievements in English language especially in speaking or oral communication are deteriorating due to not having appropriate training from certified trainers. Ghani & Azhar (2017) in their research affirmed that L2 learners will succeed to grasp oral communication skill when they are taught by well-trained language instructors with pedagogical skills and also when they are provided with appropriate teaching methods.

The next challenges to point out here are from the students' impression and perspective. L2 users or learners are found to be comfortable to use their mother tongue - or sometimes preferably to practise code switching and mixing (Sánchez-García, 2018; Bisai, & Singh, 2020) – when participating in social transaction or classroom interaction; mainly for knowledge and information transfer or exchange and also for social and affective communication (Sánchez-García, 2018). This occurs as they find comfort (Bisai, & Singh, 2020) to deliver messages - in this way - precisely and with confidence. In addition, L2 learners sometimes are not guided not only to foresee the impact and relevancy of English language (Smith, 2018) for international transactions and needs but also they are not coached by the language instructors to explore the intercultural communication (Bisai & Singh, 2020) which enable them to grasp the second language easily. This ignorance conduct will result in their communication hindrance; which later leads to difficulties in their social and public interaction.

With all the challenges faced by these L2 users or learners to acquire speaking competency, serious actions have to be pondered to decrease the dilemma of not being able to shine in the future.

2.2 Language instructors and peers do influence the learning of a second language and communication skills – to ensure speaking performance - not only the learning itself

Research by Astuti (2013) who examined the factors that impacted the lack of English-speaking performance in Indonesia found that her respondents likewise admitted that they felt timid to communicate in English and there were also feeling of uncertainty and nervousness. This indicated how the understudies' speaking focus was influenced no matter of having the knowledge of the language. Al-Mahrooqi (2012) conducted a research and found that the understudies felt the instructors are the primary explanation behind their hazardous English capability. Their information demonstrated that the educators were not sufficiently strong to roll out improvements on understudies' attitudes or help in expanding understudies' inspiration. One of the discoveries that was very new contrasted with other researchers was the peer discouragement. Peers that mocked upon another peer's exhibition in communicating in English can influence one's learning progress. Understudies can be extrinsically motivated in learning English. Extrinsic factors, for example, include the instructors and learning the advantage of acquiring English.

In general, a large number of respondents agreed that a great English teacher is what keeps them looking forwards to come to school. A strong teacher-students relationship might influence students' perception of teachers as their inspirational source (Siti Sukainah and Melor, 2014). Another research by Soureshjani and Riahipour (2012) discovered that understudies' speaking skills were mostly afflicted by the educators. They pinpointed issues about the instructors' behaviour and the discrimination upon weak and strong understudies that influenced their learning inspiration. Educators also are mentioned selecting unsuitable teaching materials and this likewise made the understudies be unambitious to learn. Thusly, instructors and peers play a critical part in one's speaking process.

2.3 Second language learners' anxiety to speaking English – the cause and effect

Speaking in public has always been an issue amongst many people across the nation - specifically speaking the language which is not the first language of that speaker (Wilang, 2018). Commonly, speaking or oral communication has been notified as critical or unfavourable amongst people – children or adults – as this form of communication requires one's self-confidence and courage. Lacking of these qualities will deny one's potential in many fields. People, specifically L2 learners may have missed many opportunities in the study or life as the world now necessitates for English interaction for varied transactions. However, it is learnt that with the students' intrinsic motivation to learn English – knowing that English is greatly used worldwide for business and international transactions; for both written and oral communication – it is found that this group has the potential to excel in learning English language (Dincer, 2018). Anyhow,

one of the reasons related to the unwillingness to speak up especially when using English language could be the individual's speaking anxiety (Shirkhani, et al 2020); in which people are found to feel exceptionally comfortable when relying on a written script when they speak or present as they can avoid themselves from being nervous when speaking (Wilang, 2018).

In addition, in relation to the above claim, oral communication or public speaking is also perceived as not easy and it can be very stressful to some individuals as they lack of confidence to utter words in front of people. This issue is also seen as speaking anxiety – not being able to deliver or share their thoughts due to the uneasiness and their nervousness. This drawback will actually cause number of problems to these individuals as the world that we are living now, no matter where you are, requires you to speak – at work or home, professionally or socially. Here, speaking or communication strategies are found needed in assisting these L2 learners to speak confidently (Shirkhani, et al., 2020; Liu, 2018) as Tsai (2018) mentioned in the study that students' speaking anxiety is reducing as they employ more speaking strategies. The speaking strategies employed amongst the L2 learners or communicators do meet the principle of speaking transaction. Hence, language instructors also, in order to effectively implement the mentioned effort, are recommended to heighten their teaching methods and skills – as to enhance learning atmosphere (Aslan & Şahin, 2020) - in order to ensure learners' comfort in acquiring speaking strategies (Tsai, 2018; Liu, 2018). Consequently, it is a very constructive measure to be taken amongst these L2 learners to improve their English language proficiency as it is proven that by becoming more proficient helps to reduce their speaking anxiety (El-Sakka, 2016; Abrar 2018). However, L2 learners or communicators will end up revert to their mother tongue or choose to keep silent if they are unable to express all their thoughts in English due to lack of motivation from the language instructors and lack of English language competency (Smith, 2018). Again, both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations are believed to be the factor one's could speak up confidently in which their anxiety level too is decreasing (Jang & Wood, 2019; Abrar, 2018).

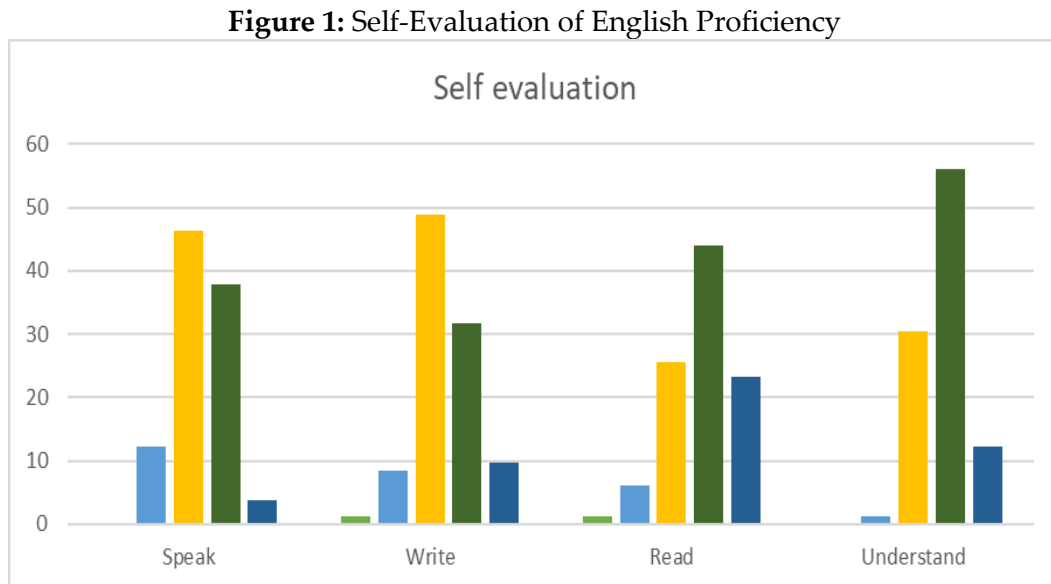
3. Methodology

This quantitative pilot study in a form of survey was administered to 82 students from Faculty of Art and Design and Faculty of Education in Mara University of Technology in Selangor campus. There were 18 male and 64 female students from first, second and third year in their studies. The instrument used in this study is questionnaire. The questionnaire (with 5-point Likert scale) consists of 3 sections; first section explains demographic information on the participants, second section attempts to describe the functions of speaking in English Language and the final section aims to illustrate the participants' speaking anxiety.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Self-evaluation of English proficiency

For the first section, participants were asked 4 self-evaluation questions on how good they think their command in the English Language. The response for each statement is measured by using a five-point Likert scale: 5 for “fluently”, 4 for “moderately”, 3 for “with difficulty”, 2 for “only a few words” and 1 for “not at all”. Figure 1 below illustrates the findings for the respondents’ self-perception of their English proficiency.



Note: 1st column for 1 for “not at all”; 2nd column for 2 for “only a few words”; 3rd column for 3 for “with difficulty”; 4th column for 4 for “moderately”; 5th column for 5 for “fluently”.

The result illustrates more than 80 per cent of the participants believe they speak, write and understand English with difficulties and moderately, whereas only 69.5 per cent think they read English with difficulties and moderately.

For the second section of the questionnaire, participants were asked 7 questions relating to the usage of the English Language for interaction and transaction and 6 questions associating with their performance in performing certain daily tasks in the English Language. The response for each statement is also measured by using a five-point Likert scale: 1 for “strongly disagree”, 2 for “disagree”, 3 for “undecided”, 4 for “agree” and 5 for “strongly agree”. The quantitative data have been collected and analysed by SPSS.

4.2 In what ways are interaction and transaction used in speaking skills among university students?

Figure 2: Interaction and Transaction in Speaking

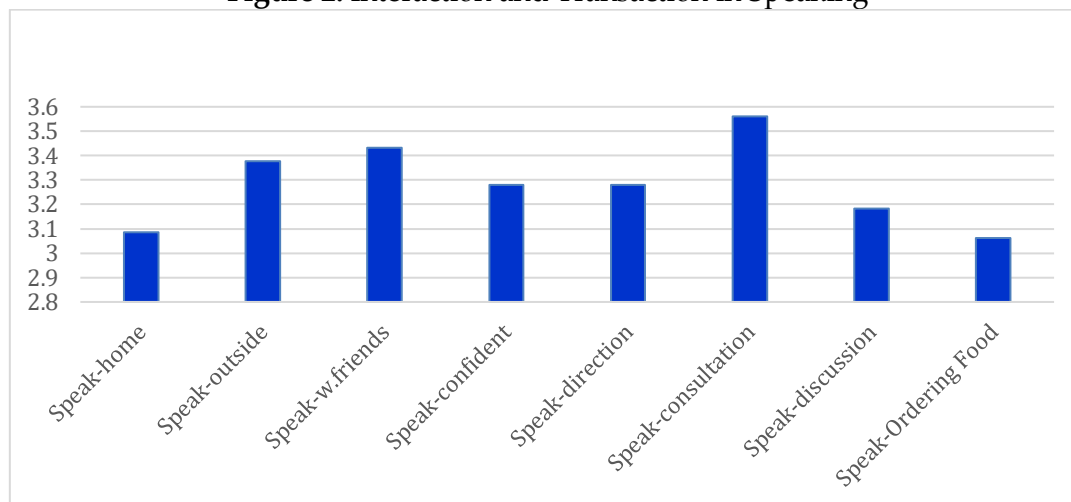


Figure 2 presents the mean score for “Usage of the English Language in Interaction and Transaction”. The highest mean score with 3.56 is the participants use English language when they have consultation session with their lecturers. The second highest mean score with 3.43 indicates they use English language when talking with their friends. The third highest mean score with 3.37 demonstrates they speak in English language outside their houses. Next, the mean score of 3.28 represents they use English language when they ask for directions and when they are confident in speaking the language. The sixth mean score with 3.18 reflects they use English when discussing problems in classroom. The seventh mean score with 3.08 indicates they use English language at home and the last mean score of 3.06 implies they use English language when they order food.

From the result, it is observed that the participants are more into applying English language during their formal transaction. The discussion on academic matters seems a necessity to these participants to speak English language. It could possibly be the reason that the learning institution itself demands for English language – where English language is used as the medium of instruction. This exercise can help to increase students’ self-efficacy (Mei-Ying & Valcke, 2020) as they are exposed to spontaneous interaction. This next reason to include English in their routine could possibly explain the needs of using the language during their learning – that is to adapt to the lecturers’ or the Professors’ language preferences. It is learnt that numbers of university instructors or trainers are the visiting Professors from different continents, or perhaps English language has become a preferred language to these university instructors. Thus, the students have no choice but to apply English language. It is a good move as Nam (2018) found out that Koreans learning abroad benefited in improving English language – at the proficiency level and the oral competency – due to having the experience interacting with the instructors whose English is their first language. Macaro, et al (2018) also mentioned that students – given the opportunity (Garbati & Mady, 2015) to interact with English

speaking people - can improve their speaking skill when English becomes the medium of instruction. In addition, on the other insight, English is the preferred language to be used during this meeting because most contents discussed are in need of English terminology and description. Therefore, it becomes everyone's preferences to make use of this second language as to cater for easy and comfort flow of the discussion between the two parties or individuals. It is a smooth flow and can be more efficient discussion when English language is used.

The result also revealed that the participants found comfortable communicating in English for other reasons too such as to socialize, and when they have the confidence – communicating with people who will not challenge or criticize them and who understand their obstacles using perfect structure; for instance speaking to the non-native English language instructors (Jang & Wood, 2019). This brings us to see how familiar English language has become amongst the participants. The scenario also helps us to realize the fact that talking as an interaction and transaction where linguistics accuracy is not important – as long as the messages are well conveyed and understood. With this notion, it can be said that English language has the potential and is able to assist L2 users to speak up provided that grammar and syntax rules are not the priority. However, it does not sound right if these two important skills are ignored. Adebileje & Akinola (2020) in their research suggested that both grammar and communication skills are equal importance in which language users - beforehand - need to be equipped with grammar rules in order to be communicative competence. This finding answers RQ1 which investigates how interaction and transaction – in the second language - are being used amongst the university students and also the consequences.

4.3 How does speaking performance influence speaking skills among university students?

Figure 3: Speaking Performance

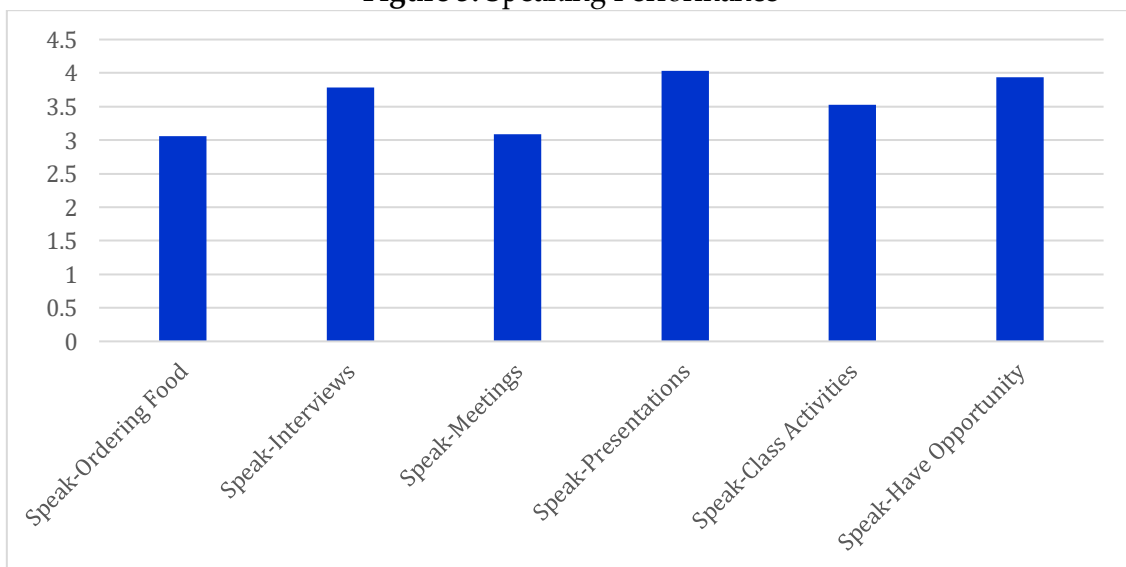


Figure 3 illustrates the mean score for “Performance”. The participants’ performances in several everyday tasks by using English Language. The highest mean score with 4.0 is the participants use English language when they have presentations. The second highest mean score with 3.8 indicates they use English language when they have the opportunity to do so. The third highest mean score with 3.6 demonstrates they speak in English language for interviews. Next, the mean score of 3.0 represents they use English language when they have class activities. The fifth and sixth mean score with 3.18 reflects they use English during meetings and when ordering food.

From the result, it shows how English language has become important in the formal setting especially to some learning institutions where English is the medium of instruction. The participants used the language for their presentations and also when they have the opportunity to communicate using this second language. It discloses the idea that no matter how good or poor their achievement in this second language, they still have to make it happen – this is one of the challenges that they have to face. Iqbal et al (2019) mentioned in their study that learners should be equipped and guided with oral presentation skills from school level which later can ensure high confidence during the real presentation. As a result, whether or not they like it, these participants have to find ways to learn and use English for their study routine. The result demonstrated that their performance in the presentation is found at the best ranking of all tasks as they realise that they are being assessed. Therefore, the effort to contribute to this task is higher. Furthermore, as they move on to another phase of life, English language is found relevance to be applied such as during the interview. It does not matter for whatever purposes of the interviews are but the use of English language is believed to elevate one’s ability and value. Numbers of opportunities await them compared to those with no or less English language skills. Again, the performance in using English is better as they wish to succeed in the interview. Surprisingly, it is found that the participants are not in favour to apply English on a simple activity or regular occasion such as during meetings and when to order food. It can tell that English language is not yet being widely practised by many that the language has not yet reached people of different social, cultural and academic background in the society. This is another challenge that at certain social levels in the society forbade the participants to make use of English language. Communication breakdown is identified when two parties or more are not well versed of the language spoken (Loewen & Sato, 2018) that contributes to frustration. Thus, this language gap needs to be remedied so that everyone will be equally treated. This finding answers RQ2 which explores university students’ level of speaking ability that influence their speaking performance.

4.4 How does speaking anxiety influence speaking skills among students?

Figure 4: Anxiety

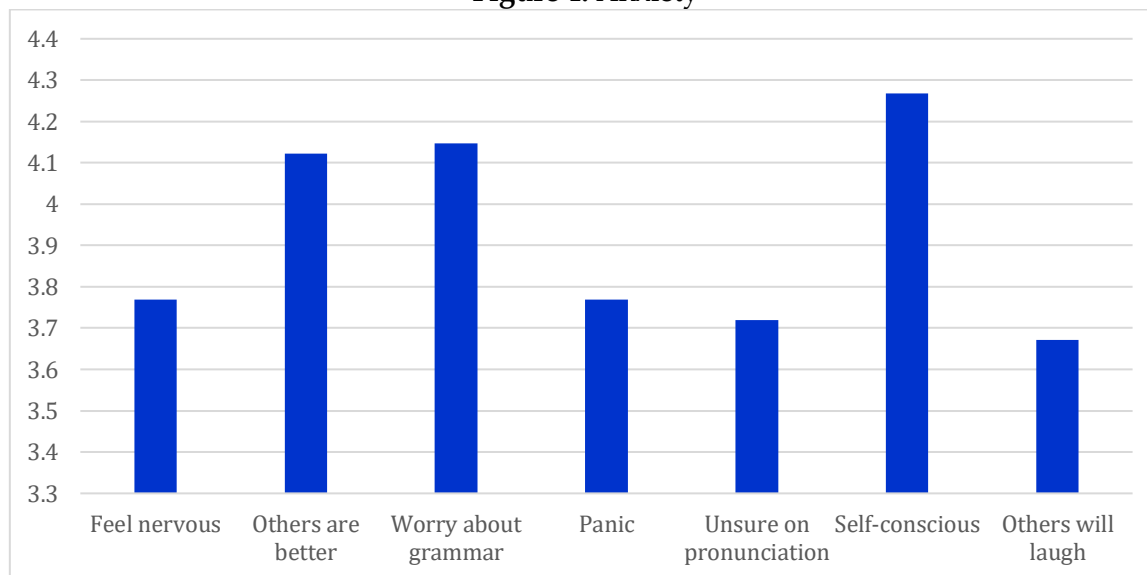


Figure 4 demonstrates the mean score for “Anxiety”. The participants’ anxiety in speaking English Language. The highest mean score with 4.26 is the participants feel self-conscious when they are interacting in the English Language. The second highest mean score with 4.14 indicates they are worried whether they use proper grammar. The third highest mean score with 4.12 demonstrates that they believe others or their friends are better English language speaker. Next, two items, which are the participants are always panic and also feeling nervous when interacting in English language share the same mean score of 3.76. The sixth mean score with 3.71 reflects they are still unsure with their pronunciation even though they are university students and have learned English language for at least 11 years. The last mean score of 3.67 implies they are afraid others will laugh at them when they are interacting in English. This is most probably because they are university students; they are well aware on the importance of using English language, so they are not really afraid of others laughing at their English usage. These findings also support the study by Sangrawee Donkaewbua (2016). Sangrawee stated that communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation are some of the anxieties that the students have. The first communication apprehension is characterised by fear of anxiety in communicating with people, such as difficulty to speak up in public. This type of anxiety in learning language actually represents the learner’s personal knowledge that they will have difficulty understanding others and making themselves understood. This means feeling of fear that will impact their interaction with other people. This finding answers RQ3 which analyses how speaking anxiety influence speaking skills among students.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, there are several ideas that can be concluded from the findings. Firstly, the students realise the importance of English language but English language is still not widely used even though English language is an official second language in Malaysia. Parents are best to create English speaking environment at home and make English a fun language to use in the daily interaction. According to Seda Ekiz & Zahitjan Kulmetov (2016), learners were more motivated and willing to learn English Language when their parents supported and encouraged them. The students need to use English language in their daily interactions to ensure their accomplishment for being a fluent speaker. Secondly, English teachers or instructors should make English language interesting and enjoyable to be practised daily. Since nowadays, most students' own smartphones, therefore teachers can incorporate the usage of smartphones in learning. Mindog (2016) from Nagoya Women's University in Japan conducted a study that provided some evidences that apps can support intermediate English language learners by giving them easy access to English content which caters to their interests. Thirdly, English teachers play very important role to motivate their students in learning English language. Effective and encouraging English teachers will lessen student's anxiety in learning English. Nghia (2015) stated that English teacher needs to be dedicated, friendly, helpful and understanding. However, one of the major reasons of the deterioration of English language proficiency among Malaysian youth is because the lack of qualified English teachers. It has been stated by Deputy Education Minister Datuk P. Kamalanathan that about 15,000 English teachers in Malaysia were not qualified to teach English language. These teachers were trained to teach other subjects, such as Mathematics or History, but because the schools needed English teacher, they were assigned to teach English even though they have no exposure to teach English subject (The Sun Daily 2016). This clearly affects the students' learning process and increases their negative perception towards English language.

Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest towards the publication of this article.

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