



A STUDY ON UNIVERSITY NON-ENGLISH MAJOR STUDENTS' SPEAKING ANXIETY

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Abstract:

This study investigates the levels of foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA) among non-English major students at a public university of economics in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Utilizing the Foreign Language Anxiety Scale (FLAS) developed by Horwitz *et al.* (1986), 120 second-year students were surveyed to determine their anxiety levels when participating in English-speaking classes. The results indicate that 89% of students experience significant anxiety, with 69% reporting moderate anxiety levels, 18% high anxiety, and 13% low anxiety. Additionally, gender differences in anxiety levels were analyzed, revealing that male students generally exhibit higher anxiety than female students. The study emphasizes the importance of addressing speaking anxiety to enhance language proficiency and academic success. Recommendations for educators include fostering supportive learning environments, promoting positive attitudes, and employing engaging teaching methods. Future research should focus on longitudinal studies and explore the underlying causes of FLSA to develop comprehensive intervention strategies.

Keywords: foreign language speaking anxiety, non-English major students, gender differences, foreign language anxiety scale

1. Introduction

English has emerged as a global lingua franca, creating an unprecedented demand for proficient communication skills in the language. However, learners of English as a foreign language face numerous challenges that can be categorized into learner factors, teacher factors, and language factors (Brown, 2007). Among these, psychological aspects related to the learners themselves, such as anxiety, significantly hinder skill development (Yamat & Bidabadi, 2012; Ali & Fei, 2016; Razak *et al.*, 2017). Many learners often grapple with a pervasive sense of stress and nervousness, particularly when speaking English. This phenomenon, commonly referred to as "language anxiety" or "second/foreign

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language anxiety" when it pertains to learning a second or foreign language, negatively affects the learning process and has been a focal point of research in psychology and education (Horwitz, 2001).

Understanding language anxiety involves addressing some key questions: what it is, why it impacts language learning, and how it differs from anxiety in first language acquisition. Language anxiety can arise from various situational factors, such as the pressure to speak in public (MacIntyre, 1995; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989; Tittle, 1997), or it can be a unique form of anxiety intricately tied to the language learning experience itself (Horwitz *et al.*, 1986). This specific anxiety can be challenging to both learners and educators in modern language classrooms, where the demand for communication can expose students' weaknesses and exacerbate their anxiety.

Anxiety in language learning encompasses both cognitive aspects, such as worry and negative expectations, and physiological responses, like tension and nervousness (Morris *et al.*, 1981; Spielberger, 1983). It can arise from various sources, including personal beliefs, classroom dynamics, and testing pressures (Young, 1991). Addressing these sources of anxiety is crucial for improving language learning outcomes.

Initially, studies on second language acquisition focused on cognitive variables like aptitude and intelligence, but later research emphasized emotional factors, recognizing their crucial role in language learning (Brown, 2007). Anxiety, specifically, has been recognized as one of the most significant affective barriers to language learning achievement (Aida, 1994; Hewitt & Stefenson, 2011; MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012; Riasati, 2011; Horwitz *et al.*, 1986; Cheng, 2002; Argaman & Abu-Rabia, 2002). Research on foreign language learning anxiety has grown substantially, revealing its complex relationship with language learning outcomes. While some researchers argue that anxiety may hinder performance (Arnold & Brown, 1999; Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993), others suggest it might enhance it (Chastain, 1975) or find no significant relationship between anxiety and proficiency (Young, 1990).

In the context of increasing numbers of students learning English as a foreign language, it is essential to explore the factors that hinder their progress, particularly anxiety. Creating low-anxiety learning environments has been shown to facilitate better language acquisition (Brown, 2007). Research indicates that high anxiety levels correlate with lower academic performance, while reducing anxiety can improve grades (Comunian, 1993; Mwamwenda, 1994).

To address the multifaceted nature of language anxiety, scholars have developed instruments such as the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), aimed at assessing anxiety levels among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners (Horwitz *et al.*, 1986). Despite the increasing recognition of anxiety's detrimental effects on language learning, research on this topic remains relatively limited, particularly within specific learner populations.

This study aims to contribute to the growing body of research on language anxiety by focusing on non-English major students at a public university of economics in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. By examining the prevalence and impact of speaking anxiety on these students, this research seeks to shed light on the challenges they face in acquiring

English language proficiency. Furthermore, it explores potential strategies and interventions to mitigate speaking anxiety and enhance language learning outcomes. Through this endeavor, the author attempts to provide valuable insights for educators and language learners, ultimately fostering a more supportive and conducive learning environment for English language acquisition.

This study intends to address the following questions:

- 1) What is the level of speaking anxiety that non-English major students experience?
- 2) Does their speaking anxiety differ according to gender?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Anxiety

Anxiety is a well-studied psychological construct that plays a significant role in many areas of the human experience, including education and language learning. The literature is replete with definitions and discussions on anxiety. The Cambridge Dictionary of Psychology explains anxiety as a fearful state of mind with an unclear or nonspecific focus, typically accompanied by physical arousal (Matsumoto, 2009). According to Hilgard *et al.* (1971), anxiety was described as a state of apprehension or a vague fear that is not directly linked to a specific object (as cited in Scovel, 1978). Spielberg (1983) defined anxiety as a subjective experience involving feelings of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry that are connected to nervous system arousal (as cited in Král'ová & Sorádová, 2015). Brown (2007) emphasized the personal nature of anxiety in learners, describing it as the degree to which learners worry about themselves. This internalized worry is particularly relevant in educational contexts, where students may feel more tense and nervous about their performance in language classes compared to other subjects.

2.2 Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA)

Foreign language anxiety (FLA) is a specific form of anxiety that arises in the context of learning and using a foreign language. This type of anxiety has been extensively studied and is recognized as a significant factor that affects learners' ability to acquire and use a new language effectively. Young (1990) described FLA as a complicated multidimensional phenomenon, while Horwitz *et al.* (1986) defined it as a distinct construct of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors specifically related to classroom language learning. This anxiety arises from the unique nature of the language learning process. Young (1999) further elaborated that FLA involves apprehension and undesirable emotional reactions when learning or using a second language.

Horwitz *et al.* (1986) detailed three components of FLA: communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. Communication apprehension involves a fear of or anxiety about communicating with others due to limited linguistic knowledge. Fear of negative evaluation arises from apprehension about others' evaluations and the expectation of negative judgments. Test anxiety is a performance anxiety related to fear of failure in evaluative situations. Ely (1986) noted

that learners experiencing these types of anxieties often view language learning as a test rather than an opportunity for skill improvement.

The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), developed by Horwitz *et al.* (1986), is a widely used tool to measure FLA. The FLCAS is a self-report measure consisting of 33 items that assess various components of anxiety, including negative performance expectancies, social comparisons, psychophysiological symptoms, and avoidance behaviors. This scale has been instrumental in quantifying the degree of anxiety experienced by language learners and understanding its impact on their performance.

Anxiety in language learning can be analyzed through two approaches: the transfer approach, where FLA is viewed as a manifestation of other forms of anxiety, and the unique approach, where FLA is seen as specifically related to language learning and distinct from other types of anxiety (Horwitz & Young, 1991). Additionally, FLA can be considered both a stable trait and a temporary state induced by specific situational factors (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). Two models explain FLA's impact on learning: the interference retrieval model, which suggests anxiety inhibits recall of learned material, and the interference model, which attributes learning issues to poor study habits or lack of knowledge (Tobias, 1986).

Multiple studies have pinpointed the major causes of FLA. Von Worde (2003) and Zheng (2008) pointed to non-comprehension, speaking activities, error correction, personal and interpersonal factors, learner beliefs about language learning, teacher beliefs about language anxiety, teacher-learner interactions, classroom procedures, and language testing as primary sources of anxiety. These factors contribute to students' reluctance to share ideas and speak publicly, directly affecting their oral performance.

Research consistently shows a negative correlation between FLA and language achievement, with anxiety being a significant challenge for learners to overcome (Gardner *et al.*, 1992; Aida, 1994; Mak, 2011; Liu, 2006; Alrabai, 2014; Scovel, 1978; Krashen, 1982; Horwitz *et al.*, 1986). This relationship indicates that high levels of FLA can lead to poor language proficiency, despite extensive effort and classroom time (Dalkılıç, 2001; Batumlu & Erden, 2007; Tuncer & Dogan, 2015). For example, students who experience high levels of anxiety are less likely to participate in speaking activities, which are crucial for language development. This further reinforces the importance of addressing anxiety in language education.

Therefore, reducing FLA is essential for improving language learning outcomes. Creating a low-anxiety classroom environment, understanding the factors that contribute to anxiety, and addressing these factors can help students feel more comfortable and perform better in language classes. Techniques such as positive reinforcement, providing a supportive learning atmosphere, and focusing on communicative competence rather than perfection can alleviate anxiety and enhance language learning experiences (Kitano, 2001).

2.3 Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety

Foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA) is widely recognized as one of the most significant and debilitating forms of anxiety faced by language learners. Research has consistently shown that speaking is the most anxiety-provoking skill among students studying a foreign language. Tanveer (2007) found that classroom speaking activities particularly cause significant stress for students. Young (1992) confirmed that speaking courses generate more anxiety compared to courses focused on reading, writing, and listening. Chaokongjakra (2012) also noted that speaking anxiety considerably affects the acquisition of productive language skills, including speaking and writing. Phillips (1992) conducted a study using the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), oral exams, and interviews to assess anxiety levels and their impact on oral performance among 44 participants. The study revealed that despite good performance on written tests, students with higher levels of anxiety tended to speak less, use shorter utterances, and employ fewer dependent clauses in their communication. This indicates a negative relationship between foreign language anxiety (FLA) and oral performance, as anxiety constrains the learners' ability to express themselves fully.

Similarly, Steinberg and Horwitz (1986) explored the effects of FLA on oral output by dividing 20 Spanish-speaking English as a Second Language (ESL) students into high- and low-proficiency groups and further into anxiety and non-anxiety conditions. The anxiety condition involved a stern environment with video cameras, whereas the non-anxiety condition was more relaxed and without cameras. The results showed that students in the anxiety condition spoke less and provided less detailed interpretations of pictures from Murray's Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) compared to their counterparts in the non-anxiety condition. This further emphasizes the negative impact of FLA on students' speaking performance.

The psychological perception of learners also plays a crucial role in the level of anxiety experienced during speaking activities. Young (1999) argued that negative self-perceptions and fear of failure are significant contributors to speaking anxiety. Learners who doubt their abilities and skills tend to experience higher levels of anxiety, particularly when speaking in front of others. This cognitive anxiety can lead to reduced behavioral performance, as anxious students may struggle to provide expected responses due to their preoccupation with negative thoughts and fear of judgment.

Competitiveness is another factor influencing speaking anxiety. According to Bailey (1983), students often compare their speaking abilities with those of their peers, leading to feelings of inadequacy and poor performance. This competitive anxiety undermines their confidence and exacerbates their speaking anxiety.

Communication apprehension, a type of anxiety associated with fear of speaking, affects both cognitive processes and psychological perceptions. Arnaiz Castro and Guillén García (2012) described communication apprehension as the discomfort experienced when expressing oneself in front of others. Research has mentioned communication apprehension as a common cause of speaking anxiety, which can significantly hinder information processing and language acquisition. Price (1991) and MacIntyre (1995) stated that oral presentations are particularly anxiety-inducing, leading

students to focus more on avoiding mistakes than on conveying their message. This focus on accuracy over fluency results in inefficient language production and increased anxiety. Negative self-assessment, fear of making mistakes, and apprehension about peers' evaluations further contribute to speaking anxiety, causing students to be quiet and reserved in speaking classes (Tsiplakides & Keramida, 2009). McCroskey *et al.* (1989) observed that students experiencing communication apprehension tend to avoid situations requiring oral communication. This avoidance can be more pronounced in foreign language contexts, as noted by Mustapha *et al.* (2010), who suggested that communication apprehension in one's native language may negatively impact the ability to speak a foreign language, leading to increased anxiety and poorer performance. Consequently, foreign language teachers must be aware of their students' anxiety and adopt methods to mitigate it, ensuring a supportive learning environment.

Several other factors contribute to speaking anxiety, including low proficiency in language components like grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary, which lead to low self-esteem and higher anxiety levels (Liu, 2006). Teacher-student rapport and teacher support also play crucial roles. Unfriendly or unsympathetic teachers can create a formal, stressful classroom environment that exacerbates anxiety. Additionally, teacher-centered approaches and a lack of knowledge about communicative teaching methods can increase students' speaking anxiety (Koçak, 2010).

Furthermore, traditional teaching methods and teacher-centered classes can greatly exacerbate speaking anxiety among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. The use of audiolingual and grammar-translation methods, along with direct corrective feedback in class, creates a stressful environment that inhibits student participation. To reduce speaking anxiety, teachers should foster a supportive learning community and tolerate mistakes, encouraging students to engage more actively in speaking activities (Davies & Pearse, 2000; Hedge, 2000).

In conclusion, speaking in a foreign language is the most stressful aspect of language learning, leading to communication apprehension and negative outcomes for both speakers and listeners. It is essential for foreign and second language teachers to recognize and address their students' speaking anxiety to facilitate a more effective and supportive learning environment. Understanding the sources and effects of FLSA can help educators develop strategies to reduce anxiety and improve students' oral proficiency.

3. Related Studies

Foreign language speaking anxiety has been a significant focus in linguistic research, highlighting its impact on learners' communication abilities across various modes. According to Cheng, Horwitz, and Schallert (1999), anxiety related to foreign language learning affects all communication forms, including speaking, writing, reading, and listening, with speaking being the most challenging (as cited in Aichhorn & Puck, 2017). This is further emphasized by Horwitz *et al.* (1986), who developed the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). Before the FLCAS was proposed, their study

involving 30 students at the University of Texas revealed that these students experienced extreme stress during foreign language classes. They reported symptoms such as "freezing" in class, standing outside the door trying to muster enough courage to enter, and going blank before tests. Additionally, psychological difficulties such as tenseness, trembling, and sweating were common. These findings laid the groundwork for the FLCAS, where a significant portion of the statements reflected the experiences of at least a third of the surveyed students, with seven statements being supported by over fifty percent of participants.

Further studies have expanded on these findings. Gaibani and Elmenfi (2016) examined the relationship between age and public speaking anxiety, noting that younger students (below 25) exhibited higher anxiety levels than older students (25–34). Their research also indicated that while some participants understood the language, they struggled to speak it, with poor speaking skills further exacerbating anxiety. This correlates with the findings of El-Sakka (2016), who observed that improving speaking proficiency can reduce anxiety. El-Sakka's study also highlighted that strategic use of speaking techniques could enhance performance and reduce anxiety.

Ahmed (2016) explored factors contributing to elevated speaking anxiety among students in Kurdish universities. Using a five-point Likert scale questionnaire, Ahmed found that most of the 30 participants experienced significant anxiety when speaking. The primary concerns included fear of failing English classes, negative feedback from peers, and being laughed at. Akkakoson (2016) conducted a similar study with 282 Thai university students learning English. The findings revealed moderate anxiety levels related to test anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and communication apprehension. However, these students also showed positive attitudes towards speaking English in their classrooms.

Ibrahim and Hamadamin (2020) examined foreign language speaking anxiety among 91 first-year Kurdish EFL students. Their quantitative analysis showed that participants experienced moderate levels of speaking anxiety in their English classes. The most anxiety-inducing factors were immediate questions and speaking in front of others. Key sources of anxiety included fear of making mistakes, lack of linguistic ability, insufficient preparation, and fear of negative evaluation.

Suleimenova (2013) scrutinized the presence and consequences of speaking anxiety in a foreign language classroom among 8 second-year high school EFL students in Kazakhstan, using the translated Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) by Horwitz *et al.* (1986). The study revealed that students experienced significant anxiety, which interfered with their ability to generate and articulate ideas, often at the pre-verbal stage. A variety of factors contributed to this anxiety, including fear of negative evaluation, loss of confidence, and the overwhelming number of language rules. Anxiety was found to impair foreign language production, affecting students' self-confidence, risk-taking ability, and overall proficiency. High anxiety led to less participation, with students avoiding risk-taking and producing fewer interpretive messages. The study emphasized the negative impact of a hostile classroom environment on anxiety,

emphasizing the need for supportive, non-threatening settings to mitigate anxiety and improve language learning outcomes.

Anh (2023) uncovered meaningful insights into speaking anxiety among 41 second-year English majors at Tra Vinh University, Vietnam, utilizing the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz *et al.* (1986). The study found that a vast majority (90%) of students experienced medium levels of speaking anxiety, with a few displaying high (2.4%) and low (7.3%) anxiety levels. Key factors contributing to this anxiety consisted of fear of making mistakes, lack of confidence, fear of negative evaluation, peer pressure, and linguistic challenges related to vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar. The research underlined that anxiety often led to reduced participation in speaking activities as students tended to avoid speaking to prevent embarrassment. Supportive teachers and positive classroom environments were identified as crucial in alleviating anxiety, along with group activities and peer support, which helped reduce individual pressure. These findings stress the need to create a supportive and encouraging classroom atmosphere to mitigate speaking anxiety among students.

Elmenfi and Gaibani (2016) also examined the role of social evaluation in speaking performance. Their study found that positive and supportive feedback from peers and teachers significantly contributed to reducing anxiety and enhancing motivation. This underscores the importance of creating a supportive learning environment to help students overcome speaking anxiety.

These studies collectively highlight the pervasive nature of foreign language speaking anxiety and its detrimental effects on students' learning experiences. While previous research has provided valuable insights into speaking anxiety among language learners, it primarily focuses on English majors or general EFL learners. However, this research paper aims to fill this gap by specifically examining the speaking anxiety of non-English major students. This study will provide a unique perspective on how speaking anxiety manifests in students who are not specializing in English, potentially uncovering different anxiety triggers and coping mechanisms compared to their English major counterparts. By focusing on this distinct group, the research seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of foreign language speaking anxiety and offer tailored strategies to support non-English majors in their language learning journey.

4. Methodology

4.1 Participants

This study involved 120 second-year university students, 51 males and 69 females, from three classes with different non-English majors. The participants were aged between 18 and 19. They were in their second academic year of a four-year bachelor's program at a public university of economics in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. According to the program curriculum, their English proficiency level was expected to be pre-intermediate. Each participant completed at least seven years of English education in public schools, from sixth to twelfth grade. This study marked their first experience responding to

questionnaires regarding anxiety in foreign language classrooms, specifically focusing on speaking classes.

4.2 Research instruments

The study utilized a single instrument for data collection: a questionnaire. This questionnaire was mainly based on the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale developed by Horwitz *et al.* (1986) and aimed to elicit genuine responses from students about their anxiety in speaking classes. The questionnaire comprised two main sections. The first section gathered demographic information about the participants, while the second section contained 33 items addressing foreign language speaking anxiety, which were rated on a five-point Likert scale from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (5). The 33 items were categorized into three groups: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. The items pertaining to communication apprehension included numbers 1, 4, 9, 14, 15, 18, 24, 27, 29, 30, and 32. Items 3, 5, 6, 8, 10, 11, 12, 16, 17, 20, 21, 22, 25, 26, and 28 were related to test anxiety. Lastly, items 2, 7, 13, 19, 23, 31, and 33 were designed to measure fear of negative evaluation.

4.3 Research procedures

The process of conducting the surveys and gathering the necessary data for this study was extensive and required careful planning. The development of the questionnaire and the identification of participants were meticulously organized to ensure a smooth execution of the study. The data collection process involved three primary stages. First, the survey questions were developed, drawing on related studies cited in the literature review, particularly the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale by Horwitz *et al.* (1986), along with the researchers' personal beliefs and experiences. To ensure the questionnaire's comprehensibility, it was translated into Vietnamese. Two of the researcher's colleagues proofread the Vietnamese version of the questionnaire. After incorporating their feedback, a pilot test was conducted with some students to verify the clarity of the questionnaire. Subsequently, the final version of the questionnaire was administered to the participants during their break time for convenience. Finally, the researcher collected and analyzed the responses using SPSS software version 22.0. The reliability of the questionnaire was tested using Cronbach's alpha, which yielded a value of 0.788, indicating that the questionnaire was reliable for use in this study.

Table 1. Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of items
0.788	33

5. Findings and Discussion

Research question 1: What is the level of speaking anxiety that non-English major students experience?

Table 2: Summary result

N	Mean	Min	Max	Std. D
120	100.66	73.00	131.00	11.71

Source: Author's calculations.

To address the first research question, the total score based on the answers to each question item given by each respondent is formulated. Therefore, the total of 33 items ranged from 33 to 165 (one point for each item equals 19 points in the minimum score of the total, whereas 5 points for each item becomes 165 points in the maximum score of the total). The finding indicates that the mean score of the foreign language classroom speaking anxiety of the students is 100.66, with a maximum score of 131 and a minimum score of 73 points. To assess the anxiety level of the students in the study sample, the author used Sellers' (2000) method of classifying depression levels, categorizing anxiety into high, medium, and low levels. The sample data, with a mean score of 100.66 and a standard deviation of 11.72, were used to define these categories. A student's anxiety is considered high if their mean score exceeds the sum of the sample mean and one standard deviation (112.38). The low anxiety level comprises scores below the difference between the sample mean and one standard deviation (88.94). Scores that lie between the thresholds of 112.38 and 88.94 fall into the medium range of anxiety. This classification provides a clear and statistically sound way to understand the distribution of anxiety levels among the students, facilitating better analysis and targeted interventions. The result reveals that the level of foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA) among the students averages 100.66 out of 165, which is classified as a moderate level of anxiety. The classification and distribution of the samples across these three anxiety levels are shown in Table 2.

Table 3: Distribution of the sample by level of speaking anxiety

Levels of foreign language speaking anxiety	Numbers of student	Mean	Percentage	Score per item	Min	Max
Low level	16	81.75	13%	2.21 – 2.67	73	88
High level	21	117.95	18%	3.42 – 3.69	113	131
Medium level	83	99.93	69%	2.69 – 3.36	89	111

Source: Author's calculations.

The findings of the current study elucidate the nuanced spectrum of Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety (FLSA) experienced by the student participants. A noteworthy 13% of the sample reported a low FLSA level, indicative of a favorable disposition toward speaking a foreign language (Wang, 2021). This low FLSA prevalence suggests a sense of confidence and ease in language communication contexts, fostering a facilitative environment for language acquisition devoid of substantial apprehension. Conversely, a predominant 69% of participants disclosed a moderate FLSA level. Within academic discourse, moderate anxiety levels are often regarded as conducive to language learning, stimulating motivation and diligence without impeding performance (Horwitz, 2001).

Contrastingly, high levels of anxiety may impede linguistic acquisition, underscoring the importance of maintaining a balanced anxiety threshold. This sentiment aligns with the assertions of Boonrat *et al.* (2012), who similarly observed a prevalent moderate FLSA level across various academic strata.

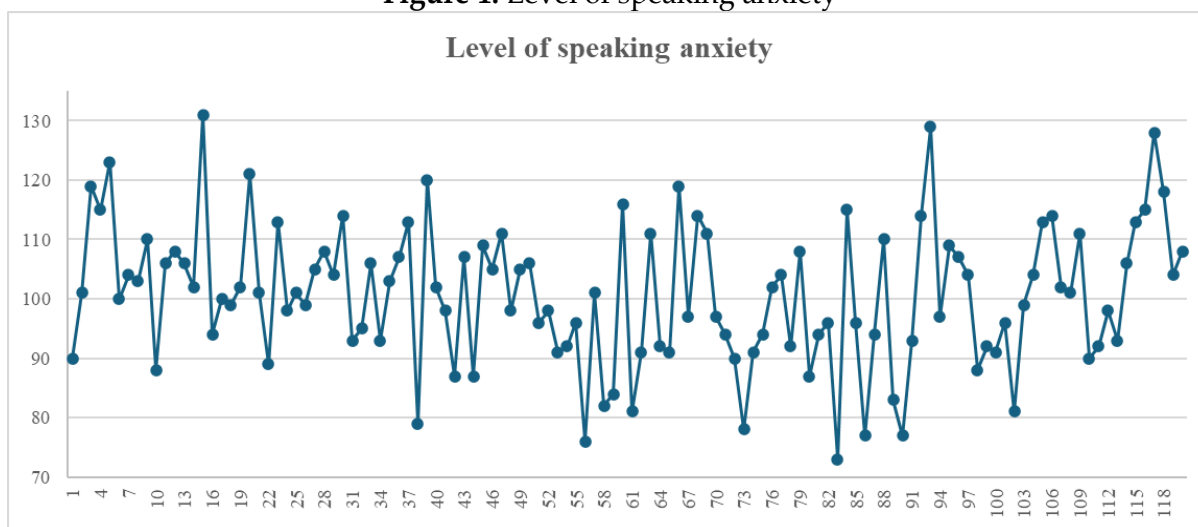
Furthermore, proactive management and mitigation of anxiety emerge as imperatives in optimizing language learning efficacy. As claimed by Awan *et al.* (2010), a negative correlation exists between foreign language anxiety and linguistic proficiency, with heightened anxiety impeding cognitive receptivity and linguistic assimilation. Hence, concerted efforts to cultivate a supportive and nurturing learning milieu are imperative to assuage student anxieties and optimize language acquisition outcomes. Intriguingly, a notable subset of learners, constituting 18% of the cohort, reported elevated anxiety levels. This disproportionately high prevalence of anxiety underlines the imperative for targeted intervention strategies aimed at assuaging anxiety burdens and fortifying linguistic self-efficacy among Kurdish learners. Such interventions may encompass pedagogical adjustments, socio-cultural sensitivity, and tailored psychological support mechanisms to alleviate anxiety and foster a conducive learning milieu.

The study's results indicate that 87% of the students experience high to moderate levels of anxiety, which is considered a high percentage. Nevertheless, the overall level of anxiety is moderate, even though the students generally acquire their knowledge through traditional teaching methods. In summary, although moderate levels of FLSA are common among students and can potentially lead to positive learning outcomes, the substantial occurrence of heightened anxiety necessitates nuanced attention and tailored intervention strategies to optimize language acquisition trajectories and enhance linguistic self-efficacy among students. Learning to speak English can cause significant anxiety for students due to various factors, as evidenced by scientific studies. Fear of making mistakes (Horwitz *et al.*, 1986), lack of confidence (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994), and pressure from the learning environment (Young, 1991) are major contributors. In addition, fear of being negatively evaluated (Price, 1991), lack of practice opportunities (Krashen, 1982; MacIntyre, 1995), cultural differences (Brown, 2000), and pressure from expectations (Kitano, 2001) also play crucial roles. These combined factors create a challenging learning environment that can heighten anxiety when students learn to speak English. Creating a supportive learning environment and encouraging practice can help mitigate this anxiety.

The overall anxiety level among the students is moderate, with 18% exhibiting high anxiety and 13% displaying low anxiety. This moderate level of anxiety may be attributed to the fact that students have studied English for seven years, from sixth to twelfth grade. Additionally, some students attended private schools where they learned English from first through twelfth grade, while others completed an English language diploma before university. This extended exposure to English likely helps reduce anxiety. Despite the moderate general anxiety level, 89% of students still experience anxiety, highlighting that it remains a prevalent aspect of learning a foreign language. Andrade and Williams (2009) found that 75% of Japanese students, out of 243 participants,

experienced anxiety in learning English using the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz *et al.* (1986). This suggests a higher anxiety rate among Yemeni students compared to Japanese students, possibly due to fewer available classroom facilities and the later start of learning English. Yemeni students begin English courses in seventh grade, unlike Japanese students who start in first grade, making prior experience a factor in reducing anxiety (Dewaele *et al.*, 2008). Wang (2004) investigated anxiety among English students in Mainland China employing the FLCAS on first- and second-year undergraduates, revealing a relatively high anxiety level. This elevated anxiety could be attributed to the fact that Wang's participants were in the early stages of their studies. In contrast, Yemeni participants were randomly selected from all university levels, resulting in varied proficiency levels and a moderate overall anxiety average. Similarly, Truitt's (1995) study on Korean English learners using the FLCAS showed high anxiety levels, comparable to Wang's findings. Nahavandi and Mukundan (2013) also found high anxiety levels among 548 Iranian students across different proficiency levels, utilizing the FLCAS. The high anxiety in these studies is attributed to the differences between the English language system and the students' native languages. However, this anxiety is somewhat mitigated by the fact that the university students participating in this study possess a foundational knowledge of English acquired during their pre-university education.

Figure 1: Level of speaking anxiety



Source: Author's calculations.

Figure 1 describes the total score of 33 scales for each student. The results demonstrate several observations regarding the frequency of occurrence of each score and the distribution of the scores. It is evident that certain anxiety scores are more commonly observed than others. For example, scores such as 106, 102, 101, 94, and 91 appear multiple times in the dataset, indicating a higher frequency of occurrence for these particular scores, which means the corresponding students showed a medium level of anxiety. On the other hand, there are scores such as 131, 129, 128, 123, and 76 that only occur once, suggesting lower frequencies for these scores. Moreover, the distribution of

anxiety scores exhibits notable variability. While some scores cluster around particular values (e.g., around 101, 94, and 91), suggesting a concentration of students experiencing similar levels of anxiety, other scores are more dispersed (e.g., 131, 129, and 76), displaying a wider range of anxiety levels among the students. Despite this variance, the scores do not deviate significantly from 100, meaning that these students shared the characteristics of a low level of anxiety and a relatively indifferent attitude towards their speaking classes. This may also imply insufficient motivation in these classes. Only one student, scoring 131, showed signs of high-intensity anxiety and necessitated intervention. It seems that there might be a central tendency in the score distribution, with scores clustering around the midpoint of the range (around 100–110). This denotes that a considerable portion of the students may experience a moderate level of anxiety. This result aligned with that of Akkakoson (2016), suggesting a tendency towards moderate levels of anxiety, albeit with some students experiencing lower or higher levels. These findings recommend that fostering a supportive and less competitive class can help reduce the stress associated with studying and practicing a language.

Research question 2: Does their speaking anxiety differ according to gender?

Table 4: Distribution of the sample by gender

Gender	Numbers of student	Mean	Percentage	Score per item	Min	Max
Male	51	101.73	43%	2.33 – 3.96	77	131
Female	69	99.86	58%	2.21 – 3.91	73	129

Source: Author's calculations.

Table 4 represents the research results on the distribution of anxiety scores by gender. The data reveal a pattern wherein male participants consistently exhibit higher anxiety scores compared to their female counterparts. Males typically report higher anxiety scores in English language learning, a trend often attributed to societal norms emphasizing competence and success (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). Liu and Huang's (2011) study corroborates these findings, indicating that students exhibited a relatively elevated level of anxiety in English language acquisition, with male students displaying higher anxiety scores compared to females. This result finds support in several other studies, including those conducted by Aydin *et al.* (2006), Er and Ozdogan (2011), Karabiyik and Mirici (2018), Kitano (2001), and Nyikos (1990). Scholarly literature posits various explanations for this gender-based discrepancy in anxiety levels. Research suggests that males may exhibit lower confidence levels in language proficiency and internalize emotions differently from females, resulting in heightened anxiety levels (MacIntyre, 2017; Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). Additionally, societal expectations, career pressures, and adherence to traditional gender roles may further contribute to this anxiety disparity among males (Horwitz *et al.*, 1986). Nonetheless, it is crucial to acknowledge the significant role that individual differences play in shaping anxiety responses within language learning contexts.

6. Conclusion

The primary objective of this study is to assess the level of foreign language speaking anxiety among non-English major students at a public university of economics in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. The study cohort comprises 120 second-year students who completed the Foreign Language Anxiety Scale (FLAS), originally devised by Horwitz *et al.* (1986). The results show that the majority of students (89%) experience anxiety when participating in English-speaking classes, a noteworthy proportion within the context of a foreign language learning environment, such as that of their university. Furthermore, the investigation unveiled the significant impact of gender on students' anxiety levels regarding language acquisition. Specifically, statistical analyses illustrate that male students display a higher level of anxiety than females, stemming from many different objective and subjective reasons.

Overall, addressing speaking anxiety in foreign language learners, particularly non-English majors, is imperative for enhancing their language proficiency and academic success. This study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of speaking anxiety and provides valuable insights for educators to develop effective interventions tailored to the needs of non-English major students. It underscores the importance of creating an environment that reduces language-related anxiety. To achieve this, educators should promote positive attitudes toward learning English through engaging and stimulating teaching methods. Instructors should also clearly communicate course objectives and ensure instructional activities have clear purposes, giving students a sense of direction and motivation in their language studies. Furthermore, educators need to foster a classroom atmosphere that is tolerant of linguistic errors, creating a safe and encouraging space for effective language learning. Adapting teaching materials to match students' proficiency levels can boost their confidence and belief in their ability to succeed in English courses. By providing a supportive and empowering learning environment, educators can enhance students' motivation and confidence, reduce anxiety, and facilitate more effective language acquisition.

Although this study is limited by its reliance on questionnaire data, future longitudinal studies could provide valuable insights into the evolving nature of anxiety in language learning. Additionally, further research should explore the underlying causes of foreign language anxiety to develop comprehensive strategies and interventions aimed at reducing anxiety and improving language learning outcomes. The academic community must continue to investigate the complex nature of foreign language anxiety and create effective methods to lessen its impact on language acquisition. Through these efforts, educators can nurture students' motivation, bolster their confidence, and ultimately improve their language proficiency and academic success.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

About the Author

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Questionnaire (English version)

Section 1: Personal information

- Name:
- Male/Female:
- Major:
- Year(s) of studying English:

Section 2: Foreign language classroom anxiety scale

Please put a tick (✓) in an empty box for questions 1-33.

Your answers are confidential.

Statements	1 Strongly Agree	2 Agree	3 Neither agree nor disagree	4 Disagree	5 Strongly Disagree
1. I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my foreign language class.					
2. I don't worry about making mistakes in the foreign language class.					
3. I tremble when I know that I'm going to be called on in the foreign language class.					
4. It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in the foreign language class.					
5. It wouldn't bother me at all to take more foreign language classes.					
6. During language classes, I find myself thinking about things that have nothing to do with the course.					
7. I keep thinking that other students are better at languages than I am.					
8. I am usually at ease during tests in my language class.					
9. I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in language class.					
10. I worry about the consequences of failing my foreign language class.					
11. I don't understand why some people get so upset over foreign language classes.					
12. In language class, I can get so nervous I forget things I know.					
13. It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my language class.					
14. I would not be nervous speaking the foreign language with native speakers.					

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15. I get upset when I don't understand what the teacher is correcting.					
16. Even if I am well prepared for language class, I feel anxious about it.					
17. I often feel like not going to my language class.					
18. I feel confident when I speak in foreign language class.					
19. I am afraid that my language teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make.					
20. I can feel my heart pounding when I'm going to be called on in language class.					
21. The more I study for a language test, the more confused I get.					
22. I don't feel pressure to prepare very well for language class.					
23. I always feel that the other students speak the foreign language better than I do.					
24. I feel very self-conscious about speaking the foreign language in front of other students.					
25. Language class moves so quickly I worry about getting left behind.					
26. I feel more tense and nervous in my language class than in my other classes.					
27. I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my language class.					
28. When I'm on my way to language class, I feel confident and relaxed.					
29. I get nervous when I don't understand every word the language teacher says.					
30. I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules I have to learn to speak a foreign language.					
31. I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak the foreign language.					
32. I would probably feel comfortable around native speakers of the foreign language.					
33. I get nervous when the language teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance.					

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