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# SPEAKING ANXIETY AMONG MALAY ESL LEARNERS AT A PRIVATE UNIVERSITY: A GENDER-BASED STUDY

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**ABSTRACT**

Speaking is found to be the most anxiety-inducing facet of language learning and is one of the many variables that could hamper successful language learning. Several studies have suggested gender to be a factor for speaking anxiety, with some findings indicating speaking anxiety was more prevalent in female participants and others that detected no statistical difference between female and male participants. This present study aims to identify students' anxiety levels based on the personality and environment variables and to compare the level of speaking anxiety between male and female students. This quantitative research involves 60 male and 69 female students from a private university in Perak who were second-year students taking an English Proficiency class that was carried out for 14 weeks. A 5-likert scale questionnaire adopted from Horwitz's Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) was administered to the students at the end of the semester. Based on the study conducted, it was found that the participants experienced a moderate level of speaking anxiety in the second language classroom, with the males recording a slightly higher speaking anxiety level than females, and while personality did not show a significant impact on students' anxiety levels, environmental variables did.

***Keywords:*** *second language learning, ESL, motivation, personality, comparative*

## INTRODUCTION

Second language anxiety is one of the variables that could hamper successful language learning. The feelings of worry, nervousness, and stress that second language learners experience have become a stumbling block that can affect nearly every aspect of learning. Due to this, it has become the subject of abundant studies over the years (Piniel & Zolyomi, 2022). This is evident through notable studies conducted by Horwitz (1986), Amwdgk and Waddu (2021), Balakrishnan (2020), and Botes et al. (2020), which prove that many variables can contribute to anxiety, such as motivation, demographic, proficiency, individual differences, and genders. While the relationship between anxiety and other variables is somewhat definite and straightforward throughout studies that are conducted thus far, gender, on the other hand, is believed to be rather inconsistent and inconclusive (Piniel & Zolyomi, 2022). The inconsistency is somehow understood as males and females are different in so many ways. The way our brains are wired to our bodily functions down to our actions and emotions are completely different, which significantly influences important aspects in learning such as motivation, personality, environment, and extroversion that can vary across genders, which in return leads to varying level of anxiety (Isa et al., 2023).

Other than gender, race is also considered to be among the factors behind the varying levels of English as a

Second Language (ESL) learners' speaking anxiety. Race is a demographic factor that cannot be controlled, but it can somehow influence learners' extrinsic motivation. According to MacIntyre, Zare, and Williams (2023), this could be due to the broader aspect of racism and discrimination that can affect the way learners perceive themselves. However, the study is restricted to the American community, which cannot be generalised to our local Malaysian context. Despite the supposed correlation, it is not easy to measure race as the factor that contributes to speaking anxiety. This is because it is closely related to the proficiency of the learners, regardless of their race or ethnicity (Hassan & Ramarow, 2021).

A notable number of studies explore speaking anxiety across genders, but most of the recent ones focus on foreign language contexts (Isa, 2023; Piniel & Zolyomi, 2022; Marx, 2019; Makesavanh & Low, 2022). Maturanec (2015), Mesri (2012), Occhipinti (2009), Öztürk and Gürbüz (2013), Pappamihiel (2001), and Shahnaz and Bhatti (2014) have investigated gender roles in a second language context, but their studies are no longer recent. Amwdgk and Waddu (2021) studies are an exception, but their focus is on language anxiety as a whole and not specifically on speaking. Studies on anxiety and gender should be explored coherently and kept ongoing in order to provide a better understanding and consistent explanations for a concept that remains inconclusive. As such, this study aims to fill the gap by contributing to the body of research that specifically focuses on the speaking anxiety of second language learners across genders. This present study aims to identify students' anxiety levels based on the two chosen variables and to compare the level of speaking anxiety between male and female students. The following subtopics will address research questions and objectives, followed by a literature review, methodology, and discussion of the data collected.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following are research questions that will be addressed in this study.

1. What are the speaking anxiety levels of male and female students?
2. Are there differences in speaking anxiety levels between male and female students based on personality and environmental factors?

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this study are listed as followings:

1. To identify the speaking anxiety level of male and female learners.
2. To compare the speaking anxiety levels of male and female students based on personality and environmental factors.

## LANGUAGE LEARNING ANXIETY AND SPEAKING ANXIETY

The relationship between language learning and affective variables and other personality factors such as self-esteem, risk-taking, extroversion, motivation, and anxiety has been studied numerous times. As language learning has been seen to be affected by psychological factors, studies on the positive and negative effects of the affective filters have also been conducted in the past. Balemir (2009) found that amongst the affective filters, anxiety is an important facet of the affective filter. Furthermore, among the four basic skills in language learning, reading, writing, speaking, and listening, anxiety in speaking is the most profound for second and foreign languages (Saltan, 2003). On top of that, there is a common perception that anxiety is the main block for succeeding in a foreign language, especially when it comes to speaking in a foreign language (Minghe & Yuan, 2013).

A study by Alsaiari et al. (2022) found that anxiety in speaking can be due to gender, previous negative speech experiences, and a family history of social anxiety. Other factors include students' personality, self-confidence, prior knowledge and exposure to the language, classroom settings, teachers' behaviour, and other demographics of the learners, such as age and gender (Lucas, Mira Flores, & Go 2011; MacIntyre et al., 2002; Machida, 2002; Matsuda & Gobel, 2003; Williams & Andrade, 2008). Matsuda and Gobel (2003), for example, interestingly found that students with overseas living experiences fared better in speaking and had less anxiety than their counterparts who didn't, while Lucas, Flores, and Go (2011) revealed that teachers' personalities played an important role in students' anxiety to participate in speaking activities. This suggests that anxiety has complicated relationships with different personality variables.

In the Malaysian setting, factors that contribute to speaking anxiety include fear of negative evaluation and lack of confidence, types of education received, communication apprehension and test anxiety, as well as levels of language proficiency and motivation, both extrinsic and intrinsic (Rahmat, 2021; Zulkiflee, Marimuthu & Tahir, 2023; Raja & Mohamad, 2023; Ramarow & Hassan, 2021). Although these studies considered students' demographics, including race, none noted any significant differences between races in speaking anxiety, while gender showed contradicting findings.

In terms of gender, previous studies have found inconclusive relations between gender and speaking anxiety. While some findings suggest that female students have higher speaking anxiety than male students (Alsaiari et al., 2022; Machida, 2001; Hz, 2022; Siew & Wee, 2017), some found that speaking anxiety among female students reduced over time, whereas it stayed constant for male students (MacIntyre et al., 2002). However, it is important to differentiate between speaking anxiety due to fear of public speaking or anxiety caused by the spoken language. Shamsudin, Ng, Abdullah, and Chan (2021) revealed that students have heightened anxiety when speaking in English, attributing this to their inability to enjoy the language, emphasizing the significance of audience size in student presentations and underscoring the need for enhanced coping strategies to address language confidence issues, calling for instructors to equip students with essential language skills for overcoming public speaking fears. Interestingly, Tianjian (2010) found that there are no strong correlations between speaking anxiety and gender. Fauziah, Wati, and Solihati (2022) also suggested that there is no statistically significant difference between male and female students in speaking anxiety, but implies that females exhibited higher anxiety levels in general than males.

Speaking anxiety can be measured with the Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety (PRPSA) scale (Alsaiari et al., 2022) as well as The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) (Horwitz, 1986). Those with speaking anxiety can also be seen in their reactions to speaking activities. In general, the reactions from learners struggling with anxiety, which include but are not limited to shaking, stuttering, and general apprehension and avoidance of speaking tasks, are often regarded as a negative factor and a hindrance for language learning by language professionals (Debreli & Dermiken, 2015). It can aggravate matters by affecting students' self-esteem, as Gallego, McHugh, Penttonen, and Lappalainen noticed that individuals with social anxiety tend to underestimate their speech performance when compared to assessments made by observers. As language learning strongly depends on maximum exposure to practice in the target language, it is important for factors for anxiety to be explored.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Sample

This is quantitative research that involves 60 male and 69 female students from a private university in Perak. The participants were second-year university students from various programs taking the English Proficiency class that was carried out for 14 weeks. The students were all Malay, with ages ranging from 19 – 20 years old. The proficiency levels of the students were below average, with CEFR levels between upper A2 and upper B1, while the Ministry of Education aspires for university students to be between levels B2 and C1 (MOE, 2019).

In testing the adapted instrument, the researchers conducted face and content validity tests by distributing the questionnaire to the other lecturers to be reviewed. The given comments and suggestions were used to improve the adapted instrument. As for the reliability of the original instrument, a pilot study was conducted on 300 participants, and the scale of correlation for the FLCAS showed an alpha coefficient of .93. Despite the existing Cronbach score, another reliability test was conducted on 35 participants to make sure the current adapted questionnaire is suitable and consistent with the selected target participants with a score above .70 which suggested by Nunnaly (1978) as an appropriate reliability coefficient score.

### Research Design

After completing the English Proficiency course for 14 weeks, a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire, which consists of 14 items, is administered to the students at the end of the semester. The questionnaire is adopted from The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). The original FLCAS consisted of 33 items that revolved around three different variables which are comprehension apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. However, this study only maintains 14 items with a focus on two variables, which are personality and environment. Some

items are taken out, and the variables are improved to better suit the needs and context of this study.

## RESEARCH PROCEDURE

Two research questions are addressed in this study. Two types of analyses are used to answer the research questions. Descriptive analysis is used to analyse data meant for the first research question, while an independent t-test analysis is used to answer the second research question. Descriptive analysis is used as the first research question is rather straightforward (to identify speaking anxiety level), which can be understood by looking at mean and standard deviation. A different type of analysis, which is an independent t-test, is needed for the second research question as it involves comparisons. Detailed explanations and discussions on the data analysis are provided in the next section.

### Findings and Discussions

This research study was conducted on 129 participants. 69 of them, which makes up 53.5%, are female, and another 60, which makes up 46.5%, are male. The participants were also asked to rate their English Proficiency level, ranging from very poor (1) to very good (5), where 53.5% agreed that their proficiency is at a moderate level, while 31.0% rated as poor, 9.3% claimed to be good. The rest of the participants evaluated their proficiency as very poor (4.7%) and very good (1.6%), as represented in the table below.

**Table 1** Demographic background

| Item(s) | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Gender | | |
| Male | 60 | 46.5 |
| Female | 69 | 53.5 |
| **Level of Proficiency** | | |
| 1. Very Poor | 6 | 4.7 |
| 2. Poor | 40 | 31.0 |
| 3. Moderate | 69 | 53.5 |
| 4. Good | 12 | 9.3 |
| 5. Very Good | 2 | 1.6 |
| Total | 129 | 100.0 |

The first research question focused on the level of speaking anxiety experienced by the participants of both genders based on 14 items tested in the questionnaire. The descriptive statistics exhibited the mean and standard deviation scores of each item based on the gender (male and female) categories. The mean scores were recorded and then being interpreted based on Berowa's (2018) table of mean interpretation, as displayed in Table 2 below in deciding the level of anxiety experienced by both genders.

**Table 2** Speaking anxiety mean interpretation score

| Indicator | Score |
|---|---|
| Very high | 4.20 - 5.0 |
| High | 3.40 - 4.19 |
| Moderate | 2.60 - 3.39 |
| Low | 1.80 - 2.59 |
| Very low | 1.0 - 1.79 |

Table 3 illustrates the mean score and the interpretation of the speaking anxiety level experienced by the participants and the comparison between the male and female genders. Item 4 (I often feel excited to attend English class.) recorded the highest mean score for both genders (M=3.78, SD=.952), indicating a high level of speaking anxiety, whereas item 10 (I do not feel anxious when I have to speak without preparation in English class.) scored the lowest which (M=2.47, SD=1.076) signified the low level of anxiety.

Additionally, male participants scored the highest mean (M=3.85, SD=.971) for item 4 (I often feel excited to attend English class.) and scored (M=2.67, SD=.951) for item 10 (I do not feel anxious when I have to speak without preparation in English class). Similar to the male's results, item 4 and item 10 were recorded as the highest (M=3.72, SD= .938) and lowest (M=2.29, SD= 1.152) among female participants, respectively. However, despite the similarity of both genders, male participants recorded higher scores for all 14 items tested in this research study in comparison to females, as demonstrated in Table 3.

The mean score for each of the genders showed a similar pattern of results where the level of speaking anxiety for males (M=3.10) and females (M=2.80) was reported to be at a moderate level. Despite the similarity, male participants were found to be slightly more anxious than female participants when speaking in English, which is similar to the findings of Saeed et al. (2022) in the study. Moreover, the overall mean score of speaking anxiety for this research study was also recorded at a moderate

level (M=2.95), as suggested by Berowa's (2018) mean of interpretation.

The finding of this current research study is similar to past studies conducted on speaking anxiety, which indicated a moderate level of speaking anxiety experienced by the research participants conducted in an ESL Malaysian setting (Long et al., 2019; Lin et al., 2020; Dellah et al., 2020). In comparison between male and female participants, another study conducted by Zulkiflee and Nimehchisalem (2022), Siahpoosh et al. (2022), and Rehman et al. (2022) disclosed different results where the female participants tend to experience slightly higher speaking anxiety dissimilar to this current research's finding.

**Table 3** Level of speaking anxiety between gender

| Item(s) | Mean/Interpretation | | | SD | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | M | F | O | M | F | O |
| 1. I feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my English language class. | 2.82 (Moderate) | 2.58 (Moderate) | 2.69 (Moderate) | 0.770 | 1.035 | 0.925 |
| 2. I feel confident when I use English with my teacher and classmates. | 2.85 (Moderate) | 2.57 (Low) | 2.70 (Moderate) | .820 | 1.050 | .957 |
| 3. I do not feel embarrassed to volunteer answering in English during language class. | 3.22 (Moderate) | 3.00 (Moderate) | 3.10 (Moderate) | .904 | 1.029 | .975 |
| 4. I often feel excited to attend English class | 3.85 (High) | 3.72 (High) | 3.78 (High) | .971 | .938 | .952 |
| 5. I do not get nervous or confused when I am speaking in English class. | 2.95 (Moderate) | 2.54 (Low) | 2.73 (Moderate) | .852 | .933 | .916 |
| 6. I feel very confident to speak in English. | 2.77 (Moderate) | 2.65 (Moderate) | 2.71 (Moderate) | .909 | 1.027 | .971 |
| 7. When I am attending an English class, I feel very sure and relaxed. | 3.33 (Moderate) | 3.10 (Moderate) | 3.21 (Moderate) | .837 | 1.165 | 1.028 |
| 8. I am not afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak bad English. | 3.25 (Moderate) | 3.12 (Moderate) | 3.18 (Moderate) | 1.052 | 1.119 | 1.086 |
| 9. In English class, I do not get nervous when I forget things I know. | 2.98 (Moderate) | 2.88 (Moderate) | 2.93 (Moderate) | .892 | 1.119 | 1.017 |
| 10. I do not feel anxious when I have to speak without preparation in English class. | 2.67 (Moderate) | 2.29 (Low) | 2.47 (Low) | .951 | 1.152 | 1.076 |
| 11. I do not get nervous if other students speak English better than me. | 3.37 (Moderate) | 2.88 (Moderate) | 3.11 (Moderate) | 1.221 | 1.105 | 1.181 |
| 12. I do not get nervous when I do not understand every word of the language teacher says. | 2.87 (Moderate) | 2.39 (Low) | 2.61 (Moderate) | .999 | 1.153 | 1.106 |

**Table 3** *(Cont.)*

| Item(s) | M | F | O | M | F | O |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 13. I do not get nervous when the language teacher asks questions which I have not prepared for advance. | 2.90 (Moderate) | 2.42 (Low) | 2.64 (Moderate) | 1.037 | 1.143 | 1.117 |
| 14. I am not scared to use English to communicate in class, though I'm not proficient enough. | 3.62 (High) | 3.16 (Moderate) | 3.37 (Moderate) | .993 | 1.196 | 1.125 |
| Total | 3.10 (Moderate) | 2.80 (Moderate) | 2.95 (Moderate) | | | |

***Indicator: M=Male, F=Female, O=Overall***

To address the second research question, which is to compare the speaking anxiety level of male and female students based on the two factors (personality and environment), an independent t-test was conducted to gauge the data needed and to validate the null hypothesis (H0) proposed in this current research study. The 14 items adapted from Horwitz et al. (1986) are then divided into two categories, with each factor represented by 7 items (Personality-item 1 to 7; Environment-item 8 to14).

H0: There is no significant difference in speaking anxiety levels between male and female students based on personality and environmental factors.

As presented in Table 4, the mean score for personality factor of male participants (M=21.78, SD=4.70) found to be slightly higher than the female participants (M=20.15, SD=5.96) and the pattern seemed to be repeated for the environment factor in which the female scored (M=19.14, SD=6.62) lower level of speaking anxiety in comparison to the male score (M=21.65, SD=4.82). These findings showed that the male participants tend to experience higher speaking anxiety in contrast to female participants in English language class instigated by their personality and the environment.

Despite the findings presented in the descriptive statistics, an independent samples t-test has been employed to strengthen the above data and prove the proposed null hypothesis in searching for the significant differences between male and female participants' scores for both factors. Table 5 exhibited the results which show that there are no statistical differences between the level of speaking anxiety of males and females on the personality factor (t=1.69, p=.092> .05, d=.30), which concluded the acceptance of the proposed null hypothesis that there is no difference between the participants' means with a small effect of Cohen's d of .30 as suggested by Cohen's (1999) calculation guidelines. This proved that the personality aspect does not cause the difference in the level of speaking anxiety between male and female participants, even though the male students' scores recorded slightly higher mean values than the female students. Other studies conducted by Hwa and Peck (2017), Piniel and Zólyomi (2022), and Fauziyah et al. (2022) discovered similar findings where the gender-related differences are not statistically significant.

Different results have been recorded for the environment factor (t=2.47, p=.015 <.05, d=.43), which led to the rejection of the null hypothesis, indicating there is a significant difference between male and female participants on the level of speaking anxiety. Cohen's d value was recorded at .43, which is also considered a small effect size. As for this factor, it can be concluded that male participants tend to display a higher level of speaking anxiety, which is aligned with the past study conducted by Oflaz (2019).

**Table 4** Descriptive statistics of contributing factors

| Factor(s) | Gender(s) | N | Mean | SD |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Personality | Male | 60 | 21.7833 | 4.70518 |
| | Female | 69 | 20.1594 | 5.96712 |
| Environment | Male | 60 | 21.6500 | 4.82516 |
| | Female | 69 | 19.1449 | 6.62942 |

**Table 5** t-test results of males and females on personality and environment

| | Levene's Test for Equality of Variances | | | t-test for Equality of Means | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | F | Sig. | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) | Mean Difference | Std. Error Difference | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | |
| | | | | | | | | | Lower | Upper |
| Personality | Equal variances assumed | 3.134 | 0.079 | 1.69 | 127 | 0.09 | 1.62391 | 0.95631 | -.2685 | 3.5163 |
| | Equal variances not assumed | | | 1.73 | 125.85 | 0.09 | 1.62391 | 0.94075 | -.23783 | 3.4856 |
| Environment | Equal variances not assumed | 4.611 | .034 | 2.421 | 127 | 0.017 | 2.50507 | 1.03454 | 0.45791 | 4.5522 |
| | Equal variances not assumed | | | 2.474 | 123.33 | 0.015 | 2.50507 | 1.01241 | .50111 | 4.50903 |

The overall level of speaking anxiety shown by all Malay participants is at a moderate level, with a mean score of 2.95. Since the only race participating in this study is Malay, thus no comparison can be made to prove whether there is any significant difference between Malay and other races in terms of their level of speaking anxiety. However, a study conducted by Ramarow and Hassan (2021) probed into the differences in speaking anxiety levels among three different races (Malay, Chinese, and Indian). The study found that there is a significant difference in English speaking anxiety based on race, with Malay students recording the highest mean of speaking anxiety in comparison to Chinese and Indian students.

## LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

This study has a few potential limitations. The sample size is small in comparison to the entire population of Malay ESL learners. However, it represents the population of students in the chosen institution. Future studies on this subject matter can widen the scope by including participants of different races to study the possible effects of multiracial settings on participants' speaking anxiety.

This study also involves students with a limited range of proficiency (CEFR upper A2- upper B1). Future studies can be more inclusive by including participants with a wider range of language proficiency levels.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the study conducted, it can be concluded that the participants experienced a moderate level of speaking anxiety in the second language classroom, with the males recording a slightly higher speaking anxiety level than the females. Other than that, the findings of this study show that personality is not a variable that causes the difference between male and female speaking anxiety levels. However, it is a different case with the other variable tested, which is environment, as there is a difference between males and females, proving that environment is indeed a possible cause that leads to the difference in their speaking anxiety levels.

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