

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN SPEAKING ANXIETY AMONG ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN A MALAYSIAN TERTIARY CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

This research set out to establish gender differences in speaking anxiety among Malaysian tertiary ESL (English as a Second Language) learners. Another objective is to determine the level of speaking anxiety among tertiary students in the ESL classroom. The ESL speaking anxiety constructs in this research include psychological anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, social-environmental factor, English classroom language anxiety, and perception factor. Responses from 237 (149 females) undergraduate students at a Malaysian university were collected using a structured questionnaire modified from the FLCAS (Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale) which was developed by Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986). The participants of this survey were asked to rate each of the statements in the 32-item questionnaire using a five-point Likert-type scale in which 1 refers to strongly disagree, 2 disagree, 3 neutral, 4 agree, and 5 strongly agree. Results from the research show that Malaysian tertiary ESL students experienced a moderate level of speaking anxiety. The research findings also corroborate the hypothesis that female tertiary ESL students display a higher level of speaking anxiety than their male peers. The results also prove that female students are more worried about negative evaluation and experience more psychological anxiety in the ESL classroom. Additionally, the research findings also affirm that there is no significant difference between female and male students on ESL speaking anxiety in relation to three affective factors, i.e. English classroom speaking anxiety, social-environmental factor, and perception factor. To some extent, the findings could be of some use to instructors/ lecturers teaching the ESL proficiency courses at the universities, both locally and abroad. This study could potentially help L2 teachers in embracing a less anxiety-inducing atmosphere in the classroom. The research findings could be used as a guide in the preparation of effective instructional materials, and in adopting appropriate strategies to allow students cope with speaking anxiety in the ESL classroom. The results from this investigation should have profound pedagogical implications to the ESL practitioner at the university. This research also contributes to the literature not only on speaking anxiety in ESL classrooms among Malaysian tertiary ESL learners, but has also added new anxiety provoking factors.

Key words: Speaking anxiety, language anxiety, second language, gender, ESL learners.

Introduction

Communication is an essential element in human interaction. Communication is of course connected to oral and listening aspects of a language (Rajanthran, Prakash and Husin, 2013). Effective communication enhances many aspects of human life. Throughout history, different people in the world have developed different languages as their specific means of communication. There is no doubt that English is one of the dominant world languages and has acquired an important role in the world. It is spoken as a native language in countries such as Australia, Canada, England, New Zealand and the United States of America, which Kachru (1985, as cited in Roy-Campbell, 2014) refers to as the inner circle. English is also used as an imported language that has been used in other countries, including former British colonies in Asia, where it is referred to as the outer circle (Kachru, as cited in Roy-Campbell, 2014). Since English is used in the outer circle, alongside multiple indigenous languages, its role differs from that of countries in the inner circle, as each country has its norms of communication (Crystal, 1997 as cited in Roy-Campbell, 2014). In outer circle countries such as Malaysia, students learn English while living in a community where English is not their native or first language; the national and official language of Malaysia is Malay language. However, the Malaysian government has accorded English as a second language status as stated in Article 152 (Jalaluddin, Mat Awal & Abu Bakar, 2008, p. 106). As an officially recognized important second language in Malaysia, English is widely used in social, economic, science, technology, educational development, diplomatic services, well as local and international businesses.

In this age of globalization, learning a foreign language (FL) or a second language (L2) has become a necessary tool to broaden the horizons and gain a better understanding of foreign people and their cultures. El Bahr (2007) noted that L2 is any language a child learns after the L1 or mother tongue. He added that L2 has become an umbrella term for second and foreign languages. Diao and Paramasivam (2013) noted that early research on second language acquisition (SLA) emphasized cognitive variables like intelligence, language aptitude, learning styles, and so forth. Citing Chakrabarti and Sengupta (2012), Diao and Paramasivam added, affective and emotional variables became important in the area of SLA after the research conducted by Gardner and Lambert in 1972. In short, learning a foreign language (FL) embodies cognitive as well as affective features on the part of the learners. Anxiety is one of the most frequently observed problems in relation to the affective domains in the language learning process (Çağatay, 2015). Various studies have long pointed to the fact that anxiety plays an important affective role in SLA. Kojima (2007) delineated the following factors that impact the level of anxiety among EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students: the cultural gap between their culture and the target culture; the differences between the L1 and L2 systems; the levels of self-confidence, the perceived competence and willingness to communicate; the absence or presence of a relaxed atmosphere in the ESL classroom setting; the attitude of the instructors and the students' expectations. All these factors come under the ambit of cultural, linguistic, psychological, and pedagogical domains. Horwitz et al (1986) allude to the inter-play of emotions, self-perception, beliefs, and behaviours linked to language learning which can give rise to FL anxiety.

Extensive studies on anxiety have revealed that language anxiety is directly linked to L2 learning difficulty (MacIntyre, 1995). Citing past studies (e.g. Wu, 2010; Zheng, 2008), Elaldi (2016) noted that anxiety has been a matter of considerable interest in the language education setting for educators since it is a major obstacle to FL learning that L2 learners need to overcome. Although the extant literature has extensively studied speaking anxiety, there are still areas to be explored. Moreover, there is a dearth of research on the impact of anxiety on ESL learners in Malaysia and this has provided the impetus for us to investigate the extent of this affective variable among Malaysian tertiary learners. Citing McCroskey (1977), Amini Naghadeh, Amini Naghadeh and Amini Naghadeh (2013) claimed that almost 20% of university students face the problem of public speaking anxiety. According to Krannich (2004 as cited in Amini Naghadeh, Amini Naghadeh and Amini Naghadeh, 2013), the fear of delivering a speech or a presentation ranks as the number one fear among most people, including students as well as adults from many diverse backgrounds. Chiu et al. (2016) stated that speaking in the target language has been seen as the most threatening aspect of FL learning; numerous studies have been conducted on the subject of English speaking anxiety in the FL classroom. Chuang (as cited in Chiu et al., 2016) asserted that speaking has been such a difficult part that can provoke great anxiety for SLA. Thus, the present research aimed to focus on the affective factors that lead to ESL speaking anxiety and the level of anxiety faced by the learners.

Additionally, gender appears to be another issue in language anxiety. A great number of studies (e.g. Abu Rabia, 2004; Awan, Azher & Anwar 2010; Chiang, 2012; Capan & Simsek, 2012; Elkhafai, 2005; Elliot & Chong, 2004; Ezzi, 2012; Gopang, Bughio & Pathan, 2015; Huang, 2005; Lu & Liu, 2015; Maturanec, 2015; Mesri, 2012; Occhipinti, 2009; Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2013; Pappamihel, 2001, 2002; Shahnaz & Bhatti, 2014; Sijali & Khanal, 2016; Wang, 2010; Wilson, 2006; Wu, 2011; Yamat & Bidabadi, 2012; Yashima et al., 2009) have examined gender differences in SLA. According to Fariadian, Azizifar, and Gowhary (2014), anxiety is an important construct in L2 learning, and in particular L2 learners' speaking skill. Different learners, both male and females, have different levels of anxiety, and it may delay their L2 speaking. This paper attempts to investigate the overall level of speaking anxiety among ESL students in a tertiary context with a special focus on gender differences.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. Section 2 presents a discussion on speaking anxiety in ESL classrooms. Section 3 outlines the research methodology while section 4 reports the research findings and discussion. Section 5 concludes the paper.

Speaking anxiety in ESL classrooms

Definition of anxiety and language anxiety

Huang (2012) stated that anxiety may have different definitions due to different purposes of different research. Spielberger (1983 as cited in Sijali & Khanal, 2016) defined anxiety as "the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the automatic nervous system". Citing a previous study (i.e. Scovel, 1978), Huang, (2012, p. 1520), defined anxiety from the psychological point of view as "a state of apprehension, a vague fear that is only indirectly associated with an object". Hewitt and Stefenson (2011 as cited in Ebrahim Khodadady & Gholam Hassan Khajavy, 2013) believed that learning a FL can be a stressful activity for some learners. FL/ L2 researchers and linguists have long been trying to associate anxiety with language learning. According to Awan, Azher and Anwar, a feeling of nervousness associated with language learning is termed as language anxiety (LA). MacIntyre (1998 as cited in Awan, Azher & Anwar, 2010) conceived of LA as "the worry and negative emotional reaction aroused when learning or using a second language" (p. 34). Huang added, it is widely recognized and accepted by language researchers that anxiety has a close link to FL learning. Therefore it is frequently and extensively researched in FL studies. Chen (2015) noted that a large number of research findings regarding anxieties from the perspective of psychology and linguistics have contributed to FL teaching pedagogy.

FL anxiety is widely used to describe the feeling of tension, which is specifically associated with FL learning contexts, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Rajanthran, Prakash & Husin, 2013). According to the study by Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986), anxiety towards L2 is focused, in particular, on speaking and listening. MacIntyre (1999 as cited in Chan, Abdullah & Yusof, 2012) noted that anxiety influences "both language learning and communication processes" (p. 157). Citing Keramida, Subasi (2010 as cited in Chan, Abdullah & Yusof, 2012) affirmed that speaking appears to be a main source of anxiety in the learning of language skills. Also, Marzec-Stawrarska (2015 as cited in Syafrudin, Nurkamto, Linggar, & Mujiyanto, 2016) said that speech or public speaking is an activity which provokes anxiety in FL/ L2 acquisition. Young (1992 as cited in Chan, Abdullah & Yusof, 2012) supported this notion too. Yan and Horwitz (2008, as cited in Chen, 2015) emphasised that L2 students get anxious about their self-expression in front of others.

Definition of speaking anxiety

According to (Horwitz et al., p.127 as cited in Hadziosmanovic, 2012), communication apprehension, oral communication anxiety, "stage fright" and speaking anxiety are different terms for the manifestation of "difficulty in speaking in dyads or groups or in public, or in listening to or learning a spoken message". Samuelsson (2011 as cited in Hadziosmanovic, 2012) define speaking anxiety as difficulty to speak in the group or before a group of people. Samuelsson (2011 as cited in Hadziosmanovic, 2012, p. 9) also claimed that speaking anxiety is a specific social phobia that 15 - 20 % of human population suffers from, and it could be a hindrance in studies and life in general.

Amini Naghadeh, Amini Naghadeh and Amini Naghadeh (2013) noted that "public speaking anxiety is very common among both university students and also the general population. It is a feeling of panic associated with physical sensations that are all too painfully familiar to those affected such as increased heart and breathing rates, increased adrenaline, over-rapid reactions, and a

tension in the shoulder and neck area.” (p. 71). Likewise, based on their much earlier study, Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) pointed out that students with anxiety have some common symptoms when they speak English, such as tenseness, trembling, sweating, cardiopalmus and sleeping disorder. Samuelsson (2011 as cited in Chiu et al., 2016) asserted that anxiety has certain impact on student’ conduct. They tend to evade any chance of speaking in front of others. When they have to speak to a crowd, anxious students will have physiological reactions such as talking too fast, stammering, and losing eye contacts with listeners. The negative psychological feeling as well as the display of physiological behavior which are linked to English speaking anxiety also finds support in Chiu et al.

According to Rajanathan, Prakash and Husin, anxiety when speaking in the L1 differs from the anxiety felt when speaking a FL. When speaking a FL, the speaker has to be aware of the lexical cues, remain within the syntactic structure and use a clear accent. Therefore, speaking is seen as one of the great obstacles of FL learning and achievement, where students need to process linguistic inputs and produce their thoughts at the same time (Harmer, 2004 as cited in Çağatay, 2015). Past studies in the field of FL anxiety have repeatedly proved that learners expressed more anxiety in speaking than any other language skills. Öztürk and Gürbüz (2014) claimed that students in FL classrooms generally report that speaking in the target language is the most anxiety producing experience. According to Young (1990 as cited in Öztürk and Gürbüz, 2014), speaking activities requiring in front of class and on spot performance produce the most anxiety from the students’ perspective; learners experience more anxiety over speaking than other language skills.

In the investigation of students’ perspectives on anxiety and speaking, Young (1990 as cited in Hadziosmanovic, 2012) found that speaking in the FL is not exclusively the source of students’ anxiety, but speaking in front of others is the real anxiety-evoking situation. Price (1991 as cited in Öztürk and Gürbüz, 2014) also found that speaking in front of their peers is a very anxiety provoking activity for the FL learners because the learners were concerned about making mistakes in pronunciation and being laughed at. Rajanathan, Prakash and Husin added that ESL students were more anxious in their speaking classes especially when speaking to native speakers or in front of a large audience (p. 2043). Chen (2015) reported that L2 students’ oral anxiety stems from speaking in front of other people because students feel that their proficiency level is not yet on par with that of target language native speakers. According to Liu and Jackson (2008 as cited in Chen, 2015), ESL students in China would exhibit speaking-in-class anxiety when they participate in inter-personal conversations. These research findings show that ESL/ EFL learners suffer from language anxiety when they communicate with others. Such findings suggest that L2 students experience fear of self-exposure; they are afraid of revealing themselves or being spotlighted in front of others. Awan, Azher and Anwar (2010) asserted that anxiety is one of the key issues in the acquisition of speaking by EFL/ ESL learners in instructed language teaching context.

Positive and negative effects of speaking anxiety

Past studies pertaining to the impact of L2/ FL anxiety on learners have produced conflicting results. Some researchers (Chastain, 1975; Scovel, 1978; Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993; Young, 1999 as cited in Zhang, 2001) revealed that the LA can be either beneficial/ facilitating factor which can stimulate learners, or inhibitory/ debilitating factor, which could hinder the learners’ performance. According to Çağatay (2015), beneficial anxiety triggers action and excitement and it paves the way for success; however, debilitating anxiety places a barrier in front of a successful performance (p. 649).

According to Chiu et al. (2016), some studies believed that moderate stress can be beneficial for learning, as well as English speaking anxiety. Past studies (e.g. Alpert and Haber, 1960; Chastain, 1975; Kleinmann, 1977, Scovel, 1978 as cited in Chiu et al., 2016; Mahmoodzadeh, 2012) reported that learners could perform better with appropriate tension and a little anxiety. Chiu et al. added that hard working students would study harder to bring better learning outcome after realising their own weak points. This is in line with Hou’s (2013 as cited in Chiu et al., 2016) suggestion that there is a positive relation between motives and learning results; the learners’ performance and their efforts on learning is interrelated.

In contrast, there were educators and researchers who suggested that L2/ FL anxiety can have negative effects on learners’ speaking ability. Onwuegbuzie, et al. (1999 as cited in Mahmoodzadeh, 2012, p. 468) noted that the existence of FL anxiety can affect negatively the fluency of learners’ speech and learning in a general. Gardner & MacIntyre (1993 as cited in Chiu et al., 2016, p. 115) argued that, though anxiety could motivate some students to learn more actively, it might reduce motivation too, especially students with high anxiety who have difficulty to relieve tension and stress from their speaking anxiety; they feel nervous more easily. Citing Hou (2013), Chiu et al. revealed that language learners who afraid of making mistakes could become unwilling to speak English. MacIntyre (1995 as cited in Chiu et al., 2016; Hadziosmanovic, 2012) indicated that non-native speakers that experience language anxiety might affect his/ her confidence. Chiu et al. further pointed that students who feel anxious tend to lose their confidence and get frustrated when they encounter difficulties in English classes. Liu (2006 as cited in Chiu et al., 2016, p. 115) noted that students with higher level of anxiety will feel much tense when giving individual presentations than working in a group. Chiu et al. concluded that speaking anxiety could lead to inhibition of L2, especially English learning and affect students’ speaking ability, which may have negative impact on students’ SLA and performance.

In order to improve students’ communication skills, in-class presentations are usually adopted by teachers in EFL/ ESL contexts to improve L2 students’ target language skills. The essential role of presentations in the classroom associated with effective anxiety coping strategies may assist L2 students to reduce in-class speaking anxiety (King, 2002 as cited in Chen, 2015). Language teachers need to pay attention to learners’ anxiety in order that they would be able to achieve their goals in the target language (Tanveer, 2007 as cited in Rajanathan, Prakash and Husin, 2013).

Research objectives and research questions

This research is carried out in an ESL setting at a Malaysian university which aims to:

- 1) examine the overall level of speaking anxiety among tertiary ESL students, and
- 2) investigate the speaking anxiety experience of tertiary ESL students according to gender.

Based on the research objectives, the following research questions were formulated:

- 1) What is the level of speaking anxiety among Malaysian ESL students based on the ESLSAS instrument?
- 2) Is there a significant difference in terms of ESL speaking anxiety (ESLSA) among Malaysian tertiary students according to gender?

Research methodology

Research samples

The paper discusses two major domains in a one-year research that was funded by an internal research grant scheme of a Malaysian university. Due to time constraint, this research focuses only on students at the Malaysian University that funded the research. Hence, the population for this research was limited to tertiary students from this Malaysian University. Research samples were randomly selected from two faculties who were taking different programmes:

- Actuarial Science, Applied Mathematics with Computing, Financial Mathematics, Software Engineering (Science-based programmes), and
- Broadcasting, Corporate Communication, Early Childhood Studies, and Graphic Design & Multimedia (Arts-based programmes).

A total of 240 respondents participated in the research. However, 3 incomplete questionnaires were excluded from the analyses due to missing data. The consent to disseminate the survey questionnaires to the selected research samples was granted before the commencement of the survey. All the participants were enrolled in the English Language Proficiency courses during the time of the administration of the questionnaire. The main focus of this paper is the investigation of gender differences in English speaking anxiety experienced by ESL learners in the English Language Proficiency classes - of a total number of 237 participants, there were 88 males and 149 females who participated in this research.

Each participant was given 15-20 minutes to complete the questionnaire. The participants were asked to read the 32 items carefully and circle the appropriate choice which appealed to them best. Choosing the appropriate number would indicate the degree of agreement implied in each item. Once the data collection was completed, the items in the questionnaire were classified and tabulated.

Measures

The principle research method employed in this research was self-administrated questionnaire survey approach. The main instrument developed in this research was a survey questionnaire that contained two sections:

- **Section A:** This section contained 32 items aimed at determining the level of speaking anxiety (SA) among tertiary ESL (English as Second Language) learners using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree), which is henceforth referred to as ESLSAS (English as a Second Language Speaking Anxiety Scale); and
- **Section B:** Personal details to solicit demographic data of the ESL learners.

The ESLSAS as a systematic 32-item survey questionnaire is a modification of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) which was developed by Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986). According to Çağatay (2015), Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope were the first scholars to deal with anxiety in language learning, explore speaking anxiety in relation to foreign language anxiety which is defined as “a distinct complex of self perceptions, feelings and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process” (p. 127). The FLCAS is the best known and most widely used FL/ L2 anxiety assessment scale that was originally aimed at measuring FL learners’ level of anxiety. The FLCAS is a self-assessment of language learner’s feelings of anxiety as a specific reaction to FL learning in the FL classroom (Wang, 2010 as cited in Elaldı, 2016). The instrument is intended to measure FL learners’ anxiety level while learning a language in the classroom. This is a valid and reliable scale that has been consistently used in past studies to measure language anxiety (e.g. Al Asmari, 2015; Alrabai, 2014; Awan, Azher & Anwar, 2010; Balemir, 2009; Ebrahim Khodadady & Gholam Hassan Khajavy, 2013; Elaldı, 2016; Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986; Moghaddam, 2014; Şener, 2015; Tóth, 2011). According to Elaldı (2016, p. 220), Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope classified FL anxiety into three interrelated components while learning a target language, which encompass:

- 1) **Communication apprehension:** Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope define communication apprehension as “a type of shyness characterized by fear of or anxiety about communicating with people” (p. 127). Citing Horwitz, Horwitz & Cape, Elaldı (2016) noted that in communication apprehension, foreign language learners have difficulty not only in speaking but also comprehending messages from others.
- 2) **Fear of negative social evaluation:** According to Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, fear of negative evaluation means “apprehension about others’ evaluation, avoidance of evaluative situations, and the expectation that others would evaluate oneself negatively” (p. 128). Citing MacIntyre and Gardner, Elaldı claimed that fear of negative evaluation is closely related to communication apprehension. Kitano (2001 as cited in Elaldı, 2016) postulated that “students whose personalities tend to fear negative evaluation seem to be strong candidates for experiencing anxiety in foreign language classrooms”.

- 3) **Test anxiety:** Horwitz, Horwitz & Cape stated that test anxiety includes the tests and examinations during language learning and refers to “a type of performance anxiety stemming from a fear of failure” (p. 128). Huang (2005 as cited in Elaldi, 2016) reported that, the causes of provoking test anxiety might be derived from the educational system.

In this research, the authors have established the following five factors that are associated with communication apprehension which may have effects on the oral communicative competence instead of three:

- 1) **Psychological anxiety** (e.g. self-esteem in speaking in English) – Items 1-2, 11-13, 16-18, 20 and 26;
- 2) **Fear of negative evaluation** (e.g. worrying about negative evaluations from their instructors or peers) – Items 10 and 14-15;
- 3) **English classroom speaking anxiety** (e.g. become anxious when participating in activities that require them to speak in English) – Items 3-9 and 19-23;
- 4) **Social-environmental factor** (e.g. an unpleasant emotion experienced as a lack of opportunities to practice English in daily lives) – Items 27-32; and
- 5) **Perception factor** (e.g. perception of the ability to communicate in English which will affect graduate employability in recruitment) – Items 24-25.

Since the focus of the research was to measure students’ anxiety towards English speaking in the ESL classrooms, some items that were irrelevant to the focal point of the research were eliminated; minor changes had been made to certain items in FLCAS, and some new items were also added to suit the present research. Further, the term “foreign language” used in the FLCAS was replaced by “English” in the ESLSAS. For instance, the FLCAS item 1 “I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my foreign language class.” was modified to “I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in English.” In addition, several negatively worded items which need reverse scoring had also been modified to positively worded items to ease the data coding process. For example, in the FLCAS item 2 “I don’t worry about making mistakes in language classes” was modified to “I am worried about making mistakes when speaking in English.” The ESLSAS was developed to probe deeper into the participants’ perceptions of ESL speaking anxiety (ESLSA). The respondents were asked to give a rating to each of the items built into the above-mentioned five factors. The ESLSAS uses a 5-point Likert scale with 32 items, ranging from Strongly Agree (5) to strongly Strongly Disagree (1) to measure the level of ESLSA. The answer ‘Strongly Agree’ indicates high level of SA, whereas ‘Strongly Disagree’ indicates low level of SA that ESL learners feel. Total anxiety scores for the ESLSAS range from 32 to 160 points. A total score more than 128 demonstrates a high level of ESLSA; the total score which ranges from 96 to 128 indicates a moderate level of ESLSA, and participants who had a total score of less than 96 points shows a low level of ESLSA.

Prior to the empirical study, a preliminary study was carried out among 30 students to pilot-test the survey questionnaire for its internal consistency. These respondents were excluded from the empirical study to avoid contamination (van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2002). Citing the past studies (e.g. Emory & Cooper, 1991; Kaplan, 1987), Shiratuddin (2002) noted that a reliable instrument should produce consistent results at different times under different conditions. A reliability test was carried out using Cronbach’s alpha, which measures the internal consistency of the survey questionnaire. According to Curtis and Drennan (2013), Cronbach’s alpha values greater than 0.70 are considered acceptable, while values greater than 0.80 indicate good internal consistency. The ESLSAS demonstrated a reasonably good inter-item correlation within each formed factor in which the Cronbach’s alpha values coefficient of the five factors ranged from 0.783 to 0.896, as shown in Table 1. Since the Cronbach’s alpha values for all the five factors exceeded the minimum acceptance level of 0.70 as recommended by Hair et al. (2006), it can be inferred that the ESLSAS was well constructed and reliable.

Table 1: Cronbach’s Alpha (α) coefficient for each affective factor in the survey questionnaire

Affective Factor of ESL Speaking Anxiety	Cronbach’s Alpha (α) Coefficient
Psychological Anxiety	0.783
Fear of Negative Evaluation	0.805
English Classroom Speaking anxiety	0.869
Social-Environmental Factor	0.815
Perception Factor	0.896

Data analysis

Data analysis started with the coding of data and was completed by interpreting the results obtained using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Science). The data collected was analysed through descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics were used to find out the respondents’ demographic data. These research findings were presented through the use of figures such as bar and pie charts. Moreover, descriptive statistics were also used to find out the level of SA among tertiary ESL learners, and causes (i.e. psychological anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, social-environmental factor, English classroom language anxiety, and perception factor) that may contribute to overall SA. Descriptive statistical data were used to present the results of respondents’ levels of agreement with the items that measure the SA. Means, standard deviation (S.D.), frequency and percentage of cases were generated to find out the number of respondents agreeing or disagreeing with each statement built into the questionnaire.

In relation to the examination on whether or not gender has significant effects on SA, the data collected from the survey questionnaire were statistically analysed through inferential statistics. The independent-samples *t*-test was used to compare the means of the two groups, to determine whether there is a significant difference in SA between the mean scores of male and female respondents.

Research findings and discussion

To address the first research question, the descriptive data, as shown in Table 2, reveals that 147 respondents (62%) experienced a moderate level of anxiety towards speaking in English as a second language and 80 (33.8%) of them experienced a low level of speaking anxiety. There were only 10 respondents (4.2%) who experienced a high level of speaking anxiety. The research findings from the current attempt show parallelism with several studies which revealed that the ESL/ EFL learners experienced a moderate level of anxiety when speaking in English (or learning English) as an L2 in Malaysian (e.g. Abdullah & Abdul Rahman, 2010; Chan, Abdullah & Yusof, 2012), Pakistan (e.g. Gopang, Umrani, Bughio & Lohar, 2015), Turkish (e.g. Balemir, 2009; Çağatay, 2015) and Saudi Arabia (e.g. Al Asmari, 2015; Javid, 2014) contexts. Çağatay stressed that the moderate level of anxiety might seem acceptable at first glance; however, this affective problem could discourage students from expressing their thoughts in English, affect their willingness to communicate and hinder the development of communicative competence in the long run.

Table 2: Frequency and percentage of ESL students’ total score of ESLSA and level of ESLSA

Total score of ESLSA	Level of ESLSA	Frequency	Percentage
More than 128	High	10	4.2
96 – 128	Moderate	147	62
Less than 96	Low	80	33.8

Turning to the second research question where the gender variable was taken into account, it aimed to investigate whether there is a significant difference in the level of ESL speaking anxiety level between male and female tertiary learners. The analysis was done through inferential statistics. The independent-samples *t*-test was used to test the following null hypothesis (H_01), i.e., to examine if there is a significant difference between gender in terms of speaking anxiety in tertiary ESL classrooms:

H₀₁: There is no significant difference in ESL speaking anxiety between male and female tertiary students.

As can be discerned from the descriptive statistics (Table 3) and *t*-test results (Table 4), although both genders have a moderate level of ESLSA, the anxiety level of female students ($M = 102.07, SD = 17.26$) in English speaking was found to be higher than that of male students ($M = 95.63, SD = 17.43$). In addition, the significant test – as seen in Table 4 - shows that the female students at a Malaysian university were found to be statistically significantly more anxious in ESLSA than the male students ($t = 2.769, p = 0.006$) with the mean rank (Table 3) of 102.07 for female and 95.63 male students. The data provides enough evidence to reject the H_01 ($p < 0.01$). Therefore, there was strong evidence to support the hypothesis which corroborate that there was a significant different between female and male tertiary ESL students with regard to speaking anxiety.

The findings in the current research prove that female students were significantly more anxious than the male students while speaking in English in a Malaysian tertiary ESL context. The research findings from the current attempt resonate with several empirical studies carried out to determine if there was a significant difference in gender in various contexts (e.g. Abu Rabia, 2004; Bozavlı & Gülmez, 2012 as cited in Çağatay, 2015; Dalkılıç, 2001 cited in Çağatay, 2015; Elkhafaifi, 2005; Elliot & Chong, 2004; Ezzi, 2012; Frantz, Marlow & Wathen, 2005, as cited in Piechurska-Kuciel, 2012; Huang, 2005; Maturanec, 2015; Mesri, 2012; Öztürk and Gürbüz, 2013; Pappamihel, 2001, 2002; Shahnaz & Bhatti, 2014; Sijali & Khanal, 2016; Wilson, 2006), which revealed that FL/ L2 anxiety of females tend to be higher than that of males in language learning. The results in the present research which reported a higher ESL speaking anxiety level among females could be attributed to females’ greater sensitivity to anxiety (Simon & Nath, 2004 as cited in Piechurska-Kuciel, 2012) and the fact that males were more likely to exhibit reluctance to admit feelings of anxiety (Williams, 1996 as cited in Capan & Simsek, 2012).

According to Bello (1995 as cited in Piechurska-Kuciel, 2012), females may be slightly more apprehensive about public speaking than males. The reason may be that the stereotypical feminine role usually promotes female inferiority, meaning that a female is likely to suffer from elevated levels of apprehension when she needs to communicate her ideas or feelings to a group (Strohkirch & Parks, 1986 as cited in Piechurska-Kuciel, 2012). Perhaps, because of the feminine feature, women are more willing to admit that they face anxiety (Arnaiz & Guillén, 2012). Dörmyei (2005 as cited in Çağatay, 2015) claimed that the hesitation to speak or the demonstration of higher anxiety level in FL speaking among the females might derive from the cultural background of the society, in which they could not express themselves confidently in a social context compared to males.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics for ESL speaking anxiety and gender

	Gender	N	Mean	SD
ESL Speaking Anxiety	Male	88	95.63	17.43
	Female	149	102.07	17.26

Table 4: t-test results for ESL speaking anxiety and gender

ESL Speaking Anxiety	Levene's Test for Equality of Variance		t-test for Equality of Means		
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Equal variances assumed	0.024	0.877	2.769	235	0.006**
Equal variances not assumed			2.762	181.159	0.006

** p<0.01

Note: According to Griffith (2010), the value of equal variance assumed is applicable if the significance of the Levene's test is high (greater than 0.05). Since the p-value for Levene's test is large (p = 0.877), which is greater than 0.05, we can assume that the equal variances assumed is not violated. Thus, one should select p-value (0.006) for "equal variances assumed".

On the other hand, some gender-related anxiety studies discovered that males were more prone to language anxiety than their female counterparts (Awan, Azher & Anwar 2010; Capan & Simsek, 2012; Lu & Liu, 2015) or there is no significant difference in level of language anxiety by gender (Aida, 1994 as cited in Wan, 2012 & Yashima et al., 2009; Gopang, Bughio & Pathan, 2015; Kitano, 2001 as cited in Wan, 2012; Cheng, 2002 as cited in Wan 2012; Matsuda and Gobel, 2004 as cited in Wan 2012 & Wang, 2010; Onwuegbuzie, Bailey, & Daley, 1999 as cited in Wan, 2015; Piechurska-Kuciel, 2012; Rodríguez & Abreu, 2003 as cited in Wan, 2015; Wu, 2011; Yamat and Bidabadi, 2012). The inconsistent results with regard to the association between language anxiety and gender could be caused by socio-cultural differences (Chiang, 2012; Lowe & Ang 2012 as cited in Capan & Simsek, 2012), different measures employed in the studies (Elliot & Chong, 2004; Occhipinti, 2009) and unknown variables (Wang, 2010).

Further, the independent-samples t-test was also used to examine if there is a significant difference between genders in terms of the the five affective factors of ESLSA being studied in the research. The results are summarised in Table 5.

Table 5: Factor that contribute to ESL speaking anxiety in terms of gender

Affective Factor of ESL Speaking Anxiety	Mean		SD		Sig. (p)
	Male	Female	Male	Female	
Psychological Anxiety	2.96	3.12	0.60	0.59	0.043*
Fear of Negative Evaluation	2.48	2.86	0.66	0.77	0.000**
English Classroom Speaking Anxiety	3.16	3.32	0.67	0.65	0.061
Social-Environmental Factor	3.37	3.20	0.81	0.70	0.093
Perception Factor	4.22	4.24	0.71	0.77	0.798

** p<0.01

* p<0.05

Results in Table 5 depict that female students are more worried about negative evaluations from their instructors or peers compared to male students. As highlighted by MacIntyre and Gardner (1991 as cited in Yahya, 2013), communication apprehension may exist both outside and inside of the classroom; inside the classroom there are other types of anxiety, i.e. the worries about being evaluated and the worries of looking foolish in front of peers. In the literature, some of the reasons why students tend to be silent listeners rather than active speakers in oral English classes are psychological pressure of making mistakes in the presence of their classmates, and performing poorly during their oral performance due to poor English proficiency (Chan, Yusof & Abdullah, 2012; Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986; Tunaboynu, 1993 as cited in Yahya, 2013). It is worth noting that in the European context, Gkonou (2013) found that fear of receiving negative feedback from their teacher and peers—a type of socio-psychological constraint—was also a strong contributory factor of anxiety among EFL learners.

As regards psychological anxiety, examples of items that evaluate students' level of self-esteem in speaking in English include "I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in English", "I always feel that the other students speak English better than I do", and "I would be nervous speaking in English with native speakers". In a nutshell, the psychological anxiety was caused by a combination of self-doubt and communication anxiety, and is experienced more by females than males.

However, the findings in Table 5 show no significant difference between female and male learners' ESLSA associated with three affective factors, i.e. English classroom speaking anxiety, social-environmental factor, and perception factor. English classroom speaking anxiety ($M = 3.26, SD = 0.66$) has caused the ESL learners to feel anxious in speaking in English. Both gender become anxious when participating in activities that require them to speak in English. Also, results from Table 5 indicate that both male and female students were in agreement on the importance of communication skill as one of the main criteria for employability. This means that students are more concerned about their ability to communicate in English because good oral communication skill is a key employability skill (i.e. perception factor).

Conclusion

This research has proven that the ESL undergraduates experience moderate speaking anxiety in the Malaysian context. The findings of this research seem to be parallel to that of the findings of a study by Chan, Abdullah and Yusof (2012) which found that almost two-thirds of their students had a medium level of anxiety towards speaking in English (65%), about a quarter faced a low level of speaking anxiety (24%), and 14% of them experienced a high level of anxiety towards speaking in English. Findings from this research also lend support to the study by Horwitz, Tallon, and Luo (2010 cited in Gkonou, 2011, p. 268) which argued that “approximately one-third of students studying a foreign language experience at least a moderate level of foreign language anxiety”. The findings also show parallelism with several studies which revealed that the ESL/ EFL learners experienced moderate levels of anxiety when speaking in English (or learning English) as an L2 in different outer circle countries such as Malaysia, Pakistan, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia as have been discussed in the “research findings and discussion” section. Çağatay stressed that the moderate level of anxiety might seem acceptable at first glance; however, this affective problem could discourage students from expressing their thoughts in English, affect their willingness to communicate and hinder the development of communicative competence in the long run. In the light of the results of this research, ESL instructors need to employ different strategies which appeal to each student to reduce their ESL speaking anxiety levels. ESL speaking anxiety needs to be taken as a serious issue of undergraduates at university level in Malaysia. Students should be provided with as much opportunity as possible to practice speaking in the classroom. They also need to provide opportunities for students to communicate with native speakers as well as other non-native speakers of English. In a nutshell, ESLSA needs to be dealt with great care to be able to contribute to students’ competence at all levels.

Furthermore, the hypothesis related to the gender difference on ESL speaking anxiety was also affirmed, proving that female students experienced significantly higher levels of anxiety than males. The findings from this research are consistent with a great number of empirical studies in literature carried out in different contexts such as Turkish (e.g. Öztürk and Gürbüz, 2013), Spanish (e.g. Wilson, 2006), and Taiwanese (Huang, 2005). Other studies are listed in the “research findings and discussion” section. Moreover, the findings also corroborated that both female and male undergraduates had no significant difference on ESLSA associated with three affective factors, i.e. English classroom speaking anxiety, social-environmental factor, and perception factor. Nonetheless, the results have also proved that female students are more worried about negative evaluations and experienced more psychological anxiety in ESL classrooms. This may help learners to enjoy anxiety-free learning.

In conclusion, with the research findings obtained, the following research objectives have been achieved:

- 1) examine the overall level of speaking anxiety among tertiary ESL students, and
- 2) investigate the speaking anxiety experience of tertiary ESL students according to gender difference.

The results from this research should have profound pedagogical implications to the ESL practitioner at the university. This research could potentially help L2 teachers in embracing a less anxiety-inducing atmosphere in the classroom. ESL practitioners at the Malaysian university that participated in the research, specifically, and other universities, in general, can procure several benefits from the present investigation. It is important for ESL teachers to recognize if our learners actually face anxiety in learning the English Language. As pointed out by Horwitz, et al (1986), ESL practitioners should not attribute poor student performance solely to the “lack of ability, weak background, or lack of motivation”. After determining the key anxiety factors, steps could be taken to help learners cope with and manage anxiety, ~~exclusively~~ especially in the ESL speaking classrooms in Malaysia and other countries.

However, this is a small-scale research where the findings could not be generalized to a larger population; the results in this research may not be sufficient to provide in-depth insights into students’ ESLSA levels at Malaysian tertiary context. For future studies, the scope of the sample could be expanded to include students in other Malaysian higher institutions, and ESL practitioners in higher educational institutions would thus be able to make use of the results to better handle anxiety among tertiary learners. To this end, both qualitative and quantitative studies with large samples to study EFL/ ESL anxiety, especially SA of students at different universities, may be conducted concurrently in future FL/ L2 research. In addition, as the majority of the subjects in this study come from a single ethnicity, future research might incorporate the extra dimension of culture to ascertain the different types of anxiety amongst Malay and Indian learners of ESL.

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