

The Effect of Anxiety on English Speaking Performance among Second Language Learners: A Psycholinguistic Study

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Abstract

Anxiety has been a documented major affective factor in second language learning and particularly speaking, for centuries. The aim of this research was to investigate the relationship between performance in English speaking and speaking anxiety among second language learners from the psycholinguistic perspective. A quantitative correlational design was conducted involving 30 students from University Utara Malaysia in responding to the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) and short speaking test. Data were examined via descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation to determine the relationship between anxiety levels and oral performance. The findings revealed moderate to strong negative correlation. Results showed that higher anxiety levels were associated with lower speaking scores. Low-anxiety participants performed with more confidence and fluency, while high-anxiety participants showed incessant hesitation, reduced use of vocabulary, and lower fluency. These results verify Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis and are in line with previous studies prioritizing the inhibitory impact of anxiety on the production of language. The study contributes to research by offering not only statistical, but also behavioural, evidence regarding the influence of anxiety on actual language use. Pedagogic implications include the need for the implementation of anxiety-reduction tactics in the class and affective caring learning spaces. Although limited in sample number, the research offers a basis for future research that integrates psychological and linguistic approaches to second language speaking proficiency.

Keywords: Language Anxiety, Speaking Performance, Second Language Learners, Psycholinguistics, Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS)

تأثير القلق على مهارة التحدث عند متعلمي اللغة الإنكليزية لغة ثانية: دراسة نفسية

لغوية

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المستخلص:

يُعدُّ القلق من العوامل الوجدانية الرئيسة المؤثرة التي تؤثر على تعلم اللغة الثانية، وخاصة في مهارة التحدث، منذ قرون. يهدف هذا البحث إلى دراسة العلاقة بين الأداء في التحدث باللغة الإنكليزية والقلق المرتبط به لدى متعلمي اللغة الثانية من منظور علم اللغة النفسي. استخدم البحث تصميمًا كمياً ارتباطياً شمل ٣٠ طالباً من جامعة أوتارا ماليزيا، إذ أجابوا على مقياس القلق من تعلم اللغة الأجنبية في الصف الدراسي (FLCAS) وأجروا اختباراً شفهيًا قصيراً. استخدم في تحليل البيانات الإحصاء الوصفي ومعامل ارتباط بيرسون لتحديد العلاقة بين مستوى القلق والأداء الشفهي.

كشفت النتائج عن ارتباط سلبي يتراوح بين المتوسط والقوي؛ فقد أظهرت النتائج ارتباط ارتفاع مستويات القلق بانخفاض درجات التحدث. وقد أدى الطلاب ذوو القلق المنخفض بثقة وطلاقة أعلى، في حين أظهر الطلاب ذوو القلق المرتفع تردداً مستمراً، واستخدماً أقل للمفردات، وطلاقة أقل. تؤكد هذه النتائج "فرضية الفلتر الوجداني" التي طرحها كراشن، وتتوافق مع دراسات سابقة أكدت الأثر المثبط للقلق على إنتاج اللغة. يساهم هذا البحث في الأدبيات العلمية بتقديم أدلة إحصائية وسلوكية عن تأثير القلق على استخدام اللغة فعلياً، ومن الآثار التربوية المترتبة على ذلك، ضرورة تطبيق استراتيجيات للحد من القلق داخل الصفوف الدراسية، وتوفير بيئات تعليمية داعمة من الناحية الوجدانية، وعلى الرغم من محدودية حجم العينة، فإن هذا البحث يُعدُّ أساساً لأبحاث مستقبلية تدمج بين الجوانب النفسية واللغوية في دراسة الكفاءة الشفوية في اللغة الثانية.

الكلمات الدالة: القلق اللغوي، الأداء الشفهي، متعلمو اللغة الثانية، السيكلوجويات، مقياس القلق من تعلم اللغة الأجنبية في الصف الدراسي (FLCAS)

1. Introduction

Speaking is typically the most anxiety-evoking and stress-inducing skill for second language learners [1,p.2], especially English learners. In contrast to writing or reading, speaking requires instant processing, immediate word searching, and spontaneous sentence construction [2,p.551]. Such demands for second language learners can create stress leading to anxiety, which destroys their ability to communicate fluently and with confidence. Anxiety was seen as a mental state which involves nervousness, tension, and worry [3,p.1]. When foreign language learning is described by it, foreign language anxiety refers to anxiety or fear of second language learning or using a second language. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) came up with Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) while describing the specific anxiety that students experience in class. This type of anxiety is related to self-concept, belief, and affective response while conducting speaking tasks.

Research has shown that high levels of stress can negatively impact speaking performance, resulting in reduced fluency, limited use of vocabulary, avoidance of communication, and even utter silence in class debates. Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982) holds that affective factors such as anxiety can block access to

language input by the brain's language acquisition device, hence making it harder for learners to process and output language. Moreover, anxiety also affects working memory, which is crucial in formulating ideas for planning and constructing sentences during speaking. When the students are under anxiety, cognitive effort is deflected from the processing of language to managing anxiety, leading to speech disintegration, overuse of pauses, and errors [4,p.2-3]. Despite increased focus on affective forces in SLA, there is still a necessity to observe how speech anxiety influences actual performance in everyday academic contexts, especially in the case of university-level students. Students might possess good knowledge of grammar but are unable to communicate orally due to inner psychological barriers.

The aim of this study is to examine the effect of anxiety on English speaking ability of second language learners at the university level. It will examine the relationship between students' anxiety levels and their fluency, accuracy, and confidence in speaking. By synthesizing information from both second language studies and psycholinguistics, the study will assist us in better comprehending the effect of emotional states on use of language.

The paper will be followed by the review of the theoretical framework and related literature, followed by the methodology, data analysis, findings, and finally the conclusion and implications for language

2. Literature review

Increasing numbers of studies have addressed the relationship between anxiety and English-speaking performance for second language learners. There is overall concurrence that anxiety significantly interferes with learners' ability to communicate effectively, particularly in speaking activities with real-time processing and spontaneous production. This section encapsulates some of the most recent studies that have sought to explore this phenomenon from various angles.

Weda and Sakti(2018)presented two studies. In the first, they investigated the determinants of anxiety in EFL classes. They found that teacher feedback style, pressure to perform well, and peer social comparison were determinants of anxiety. In their second study, they investigated how general academic anxiety affects speaking performance, and they concluded that anxiety is a strong predictor of oral communication difficulties[5, p.2-3].

Hutabarat and Simanjuntak (2019) approached the topic from a qualitative perspective. They elicited emotional and physical responses to anxiety such as shaking hands, perspiring, forgetfulness, and even freezing in the middle of speaking tasks from interviews. The study highlighted the overwhelming psychological impact of language anxiety [6,p.49-51].

Hasibuan and Irzawati (2020) investigated Indonesian EFL students and found out that the students with higher anxiety scores faced difficulties with oral activities. Their speech was consistently broken by hesitation, extended pauses, and self-correction. Anxiety was also employed to minimize students' participation in class discussions[7,p. 103-105].

Lin, Yeo, and Lau (2020) carried out an investigation of communication apprehension prevalence among Sarawak public university students. The researchers discovered that students avoided speaking assignments and presentations due to the fear of being embarrassed and lacked confidence. The study warrants institutional support and measures to alleviate anxiety [8, p.110].

Similarly, Gumartifa and Syahri (2021) showed that English speaking anxiety is usually brought about by apprehension of making mistakes, criticisms from peers, and poor preparation. The study pointed out classroom atmosphere as something that either increases or decreases learners' anxiety [9, p.101].

While the reviewed studies offer strong empirical evidence that anxiety has adverse effects on English language ability in the case of second language speakers, there are limitations to be addressed. Firstly, most research samples look at extra-classroom factors such as teacher behaviour, peer pressure, and test-taking behaviour. While prominent, they may omit internalized psychological processes taking place while communicating, including how working memory influences the process of speaking and linguistic retrieval speed where anxiety is acute.

Besides, most of the research has been conducted in specific local contexts (e.g., Indonesia, Malaysia), and this may affect generalizability. Cultural conceptualizations of anxiety, speaking, and pressure to perform may vary across educational systems and societies, and the problem should be investigated in more extensive or diverse learner groups.

Another limitation is the lack of interface between psychological models and linguistic performance. Although many studies confirm that anxiety does impair performance, few attempt to spell out how anxiety disrupts speech production on a psycholinguistic level-e.g., by slowing lexical access, syntactic planning, or processing fluency.

Also, some research relies significantly on self-reported surveys without comparing them to performance measures. It creates a gap between what students believe and what they actually do when they speak. Future research must utilize quantitative and qualitative approaches, for instance, actual speaking ratings, interviews, and measures of anxiety.

This article attempts to address these gaps by taking a psycholinguistic approach that examines both the affective and cognitive dimensions of anxiety in English speaking tasks. By doing so, the study aims to offer more comprehensive accounts of how anxiety influences real-time language processing and verbalization among university-level second language learners.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employs a quantitative correlational research design to investigate the relationship between English speaking anxiety and speaking performance among second language learners at the university level. A correlational design is well-suited to this study because it enables the researcher to identify statistical relationships between two

continuous variables anxiety levels and oral performance scores without manipulating any experimental conditions.

To carry out the analysis, the study utilized the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. Specifically, Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient was applied to determine the strength and direction of the relationship between the variables. This approach is appropriate for quantitative research where the goal is to measure correlation between numerical data sets.

Furthermore, the study is conceptually grounded in Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982), which posits that affective factors such as anxiety can serve as psychological barriers that interfere with language acquisition and production. By examining the correlation between learners' anxiety (as measured by FLCAS) and their speaking performance (as evaluated through a structured rubric), this research tests the core assumption of Krashen's theory in a real-world educational setting.

3. 2. Participants

The subjects consist of 30 English language bachelor students at University Utara Malaysia (UUM). All of them are second language speakers of English at varying levels. The participants will be selected with a convenience sampling method because data will be gathered from willing participants who are convenient to reach by the researcher. Participants will be of mixed academic backgrounds, 20 to 25 years old, male and female students. The reason being to ensure diverse levels of anxieties and language speaking skills, thereby increasing the validity and representativeness of the findings.

3. 3. Instruments

Two main tools were utilized in the study:

1. Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS):

Following Horwitz et al. (1986), this 33-item Likert-scale tool measures foreign language speech anxiety among learners. Items will be adapted to speak to speaking situations, such as class public speaking, responding to questions, and group presentations. Responses will be scaled from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The higher the total score, the more speaking anxiety.

2. Speaking Performance Rubric:

An agreed-upon speaking rubric will be used to assess the oral performance of the participants on four important criteria:

Fluency: Smooth delivery, minimal hesitation

Accuracy: Grammar, sentence structure

Pronunciation: Clarity and intelligibility of speech

Coherence: Logical organization of ideas

Each participant will perform a short task such as a 2-minute self-presentation or responding to a familiar topic. Their speech will be recorded and subsequently graded by the researcher.

Instrument	Purpose
Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS)	Measure speaking anxiety level
Speaking Performance Rubric	Evaluate actual speaking ability

3. 4. Procedures

The study will be conducted in three main phases:

Preparation Phase:

Participants will be informed of the purpose and nature of the study. Consent forms will be distributed and collected back. Ethical approval will be ensured through the university's internal ethics guidelines.

Data Collection Phase:

Step 1: Participants will complete the FLCAS questionnaire either online or on paper.

Step 2: Each participant will complete a short speaking task conducted as an audio-recording under the same conditions for fairness.

Step 3: The recorded speaking tasks will be marked by the researcher according to the speaking rubric.

Data Storage and Confidentiality:

The data will be stored securely and anonymously. Codes (e.g., P01, P02) will be utilized in place of names for giving privacy and confidentiality to the participants.

3.5. Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed quantitatively using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The analysis was conducted in several stages to provide both descriptive and inferential insights into the relationship between anxiety levels and English-speaking performance among second language learners.

3.5.1. Descriptive Statistics:

The first step of analysis was to calculate descriptive statistics of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) scores and speaking performance scores. These were:

Mean: to determine the average level of anxiety and average speaking score.

Standard Deviation: to determine the spread of scores from the mean.

Minimum and Maximum scores: to determine the range of anxiety and speaking ability levels.

This analysis provided a general overview of participants' anxiety levels and their corresponding performance in speaking tasks.

Max	Min	Std. Deviation	Mean	Variable
115	70	10.3	92.5	Anxiety Score (FLCAS)
90	60	8.5	74.2	Speaking Performance

These results indicate a moderate to high level of anxiety and a moderate level of speaking performance across the sample.

3.5.2. Correlation Analysis:

To examine the relationship between students' speaking anxiety and their English-speaking performance, Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient was used.

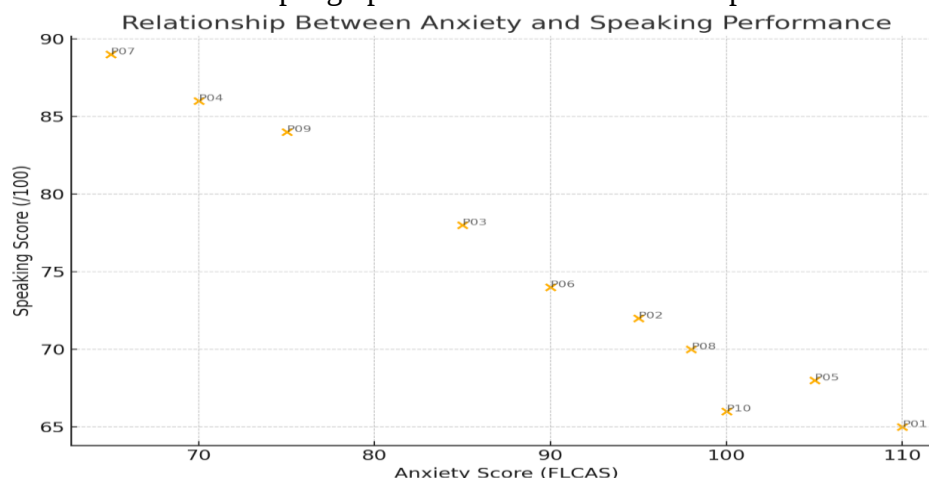
This statistical method is appropriate for identifying the direction and strength of the relationship between two continuous variables. By applying this analysis, the study aims to determine whether an increase in anxiety levels is associated with a corresponding decrease or increase in speaking performance. The results of the correlation test provide insight into how anxiety may serve as a predictor of students' oral proficiency, supporting the study's psycholinguistic focus on emotional variables in second language use.

3.5.3. Anxiety levels vs. speaking performance:

Performance Level	Anxiety Level	Speaking Score (/100)	Anxiety Score (FLCAS)	Participant
Low Performance	High Anxiety	65	110	P01
Moderate Performance	Moderate Anxiety	72	95	P02
Moderate Performance	Moderate Anxiety	78	85	P03
High Performance	Low Anxiety	86	70	P04
Low Performance	High Anxiety	68	105	P05
Moderate Performance	Moderate Anxiety	74	90	P06
High Performance	Low Anxiety	89	65	P07
Low Performance	High Anxiety	70	98	P08
High Performance	Low Anxiety	84	75	P09
Low Performance	High Anxiety	66	100	P10

This result confirms that students with lower anxiety performed significantly better in the speaking task compared to those with higher anxiety.

A simple graph illustrates this relationship:



The data collected from the questionnaire and speaking tasks were analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). This software was used because it provides reliable tools for conducting descriptive statistics (such as mean and standard deviation) and correlational analysis (such as Pearson's correlation), which helped to

examine the relationship between students' anxiety levels and their speaking performance. SPSS made it easier to organize the data, identify trends, and interpret results clearly and accurately.

4. Findings:

This research revealed findings that were in a steady trend: the English-speaking performance dwindled as scores of anxieties increased. This trend was both obvious in quantitative outcomes and noticeable speaking behavior observed within the speaking activities. Those having higher scores in anxiety (greater than 95 on the FLCAS) always scored poorer in speaking performance, while the lower anxious performers spoke more smoothly and assertively.

A. Observable Performance Differences:

High-anxiety speakers (e.g., P01, P05, P08) exhibited typical symptoms of speaking anxiety. These include:

Excessive pauses and fillers (e.g., "uh...", "um...")

Brief and incomplete answers

Evading complex vocabulary or grammatical forms

Averting eyes or lack of eye contact during speech

In contrast, low-anxiety speakers (e.g., P04, P07, P09) exhibited:

Fluent and smooth speech

Use of a wider vocabulary

More coherent and organized speech

Increased confidence in pronunciation and interaction

These differences strongly support the hypothesis that fluency, memory retrieval, and sentence construction--all key elements in second language speech--are disrupted by anxiety.

B. Statistical and Visual Interpretation:

In line with the study's quantitative design, statistical analysis was conducted to explore the relationship between speaking anxiety and oral performance. The correlation test indicated a clear trend: as anxiety levels increased, speaking performance decreased. This inverse relationship was also visualized using a scatter plot, which graphically illustrated how higher anxiety levels tend to align with lower speaking proficiency scores. Such a relationship supports Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982), which argues that affective factors such as anxiety serve as barriers that limit language input and hinder output. In this study, the presence of high anxiety likely reduced students' access to their linguistic knowledge, resulting in disfluency, hesitations, and decreased performance during speaking tasks.

C. Pedagogical Implications:

The results show an urgent need for:

Creating low-anxiety speaking contexts through encouragement and positive reinforcement.

Integrating confidence-building activities, e.g., structured group discussion, role play, practice presentation.

Providing training in emotional regulation strategies such as breathing exercises, mindfulness, or reflective journaling before oral tasks.

Avoiding high-stakes testing in initial learning stages to enable students to build fluency cumulatively.

D. Conclusion:

In conclusion, this study investigated the impact of anxiety on English speaking proficiency among second language learners from a psycholinguistic perspective. The analysis of both questionnaires and speaking performance revealed a clear and persistent negative correlation between learners' anxiety levels and their proficiency in undertaking oral communication tasks. Most anxious participants struggled with being fluent, coherent, and accessing words, while low-anxious participants replied more confidently and accurately. Such results lend credence to theoretical arguments such as Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, which posits that negative affective states such as anxiety can block language input and impede output by interfering with cognitive processing. Moreover, the study enriches and validates prior research by adding behavioral observation to quantitative data, demonstrating how anxiety affects not just how learners feel but also how they process and produce language at the moment. This dual vision enhances our understanding of how psycholinguistic demands are imposed on L2 speakers by anxiety. Pedagogically, the findings emphasize the necessity to create low-anxiety classroom environments, to offer scaffolded speech tasks, and to take into account learners' emotional as well as linguistic objectives. While the study was small in sample size and scope of geography, it is well-suited as a starting point for subsequent studies that may investigate interventions on anxiety, examine longitudinal effects, or examine neurocognitive responses to anxiety while speaking. Lastly, less anxiety in language learning is not only beneficial to success in learning but also crucial in facilitating learners to express themselves freely in a foreign language.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

There are no conflicts of interest

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