

## Investigating Factors Causing Anxiety in Speaking English of Thai University Students: The Case of Students in English Program at HCU

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### Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the factors contributing to students' anxiety in speaking English and the types of communicative situations that the students experienced anxiety. Thirty third-year undergraduate students studying in English Program, Huachiew Chalermprakiet University participated in the study. Student Questionnaire with closed-ended questions were used to collect the quantitative data. The findings revealed that the participants perceived limited vocabulary knowledge of students as the main factor of their anxiety in speaking English. Other important sources of anxiety were speaking English with peers and other interlocutors, losing confidence when making mistake and worry about bad English accents. The findings also reveal that the participants experienced varied degree of anxiety when getting involved in different communicative situations. The most anxious situation was when they are expected to respond and could not escape from communication. Making English presentations in classrooms and speaking English with no preparation were also the situations they felt anxious at a high level. In students' perceptions, when speaking with native speakers of English and losing confidence because of making mistakes in speaking were the situations the students were anxious at a moderate level. Pedagogical implications and conclusion are discussed in this paper.

**Keywords :** students' anxiety, anxiety in speaking English, factors, student perceptions, undergraduate students,

### 1. Introduction

English has been the world's most widely used language and remained a crucial component in global communication, business, and education. It is not surprising that students around the world study English as a second or foreign language to enhance their employment opportunities and academic and professional achievements. In Thai educational context, many required and optional English courses and programs are offered to Thai students at all educational levels ranging from kindergarten to higher education. English language teachers whether native English speakers or ESL / EFL teachers have been recruited. In English classroom, many teachers have attempted to encourage students to communicate in English. However, despite many years of English study, many students have struggled with speaking English. They perceived anxiety as one major issue that plays a significant role in English language learning and students' English speaking skills. In the study of Kitano (2001), it was found that many Thai students have fear and anxiety when using English in their daily lives, and this further inhibits their ability to communicate effectively. In the context of Huachiew Chalermprakiet University, the third-year students studying in English Program have faced anxiety in speaking in English. Arising from various factors such as lack of vocabulary knowledge, lack of confidence, fear of making mistakes, unrealistic expectations, negative

experiences, students' anxiety has become an obstacle which impedes the process of learning and students' development of speaking skills.

Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) well-known scholars in second language anxiety, define foreign language anxiety (FLA) as “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process” (p. 31). They proposed that FLA is a situational specific anxiety arisen from the uniqueness of formal learning of a foreign language learning. According to Horwitz et al. (1986), FLA consists of three components, namely communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. Communication apprehension refers to “a type of shyness characterized by fear of communicating with people” (p. 127), manifested in difficulty in speaking in groups, stage fright or difficulty in understanding spoken texts. Another component is test anxiety, which is “a type of performance anxiety arising from a fear of failure” (p. 127-128). Learners' unrealistic demands or expectations on themselves and oral tests are potential sources of test anxiety. Fear of negative evaluation is defined as a person's apprehension about being negatively evaluated by others, avoidance of negative evaluative situations (Horwitz et al, 1986). In their study, Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) was used to measure students' reactions to FLA variables. Based on the findings, Horwitz et al (1986) suggest that many students faced foreign language anxiety in several aspects of foreign language learning and that foreign language anxiety is a common phenomenon for students to experience in foreign language classrooms.

The existing literature on second and foreign language teaching and learning has affirmed the significant roles of anxiety it plays in impeding foreign language learning and achievement and causing students' lack of verbal responses in classrooms. Horwitz, & Young (1991) explain that foreign language anxiety occur when students have to perform tasks in a language that is not their own. “Because complex and nonspontaneous mental operations are required in order to communicate at all, any performance in the second or foreign language is likely to challenge an individual's self-concept as a competent communicator and lead to reticence, self-consciousness, fear or even panic” (Horwitz et al., 1986, p. 31). Many researchers report that English speaking anxiety is often problematic among English language learners. Anxiety in speaking English can impede the process of student learning, affect academic achievement and decrease student motivation in speaking English. For instance, Zhang (2019) found that Chinese university students often face anxiety and lack confidence in speaking English. These can negatively affect their academic and professional success. Similarly, Hu, & Hsu (2020) discovered that Taiwanese high school students frequently experience anxiety and embarrassment when speaking English in front of their peers. This can lead to lack of class participation and communication apprehension.

In the past two decades, a number of studies investigated factors affecting speaking skills of students at different educational levels in Thailand and other EFL countries (i.e. Akkakoson, 2016; Kammungkun, Jhanasanti, Varasay, & Wowong, 2020; Kammungkun, & Wowong, 2019; Lerttawisub, 2014; Sultana, & Jamin, 2021). These previous studies are varied in their research focus, context of study, groups of participants, methods of data collection and research instruments. Lerttawisub (2014) investigated the causes of English-speaking anxiety of high school students in the EFL classrooms and the degrees of anxiety. The researcher used the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale and the Test Anxiety Scale adapted from those used in Horwitz et al's (1986) study to measure the causes and the degree of anxiety. The participants were 86 Thai junior high school students in Kanchanaburi province. The finding showed that the degree of anxiety was at a moderate level. The sources of anxiety were the participants'

perceptions. Therefore, the students' English-speaking anxiety needs to be solved, and one possible way is by creating a positive classroom atmosphere.

Akkakoson (2016) investigated the levels of speaking-in-class anxiety among students in the English Conversation courses. This study also investigated the student's attitudes towards speaking in English Conversation classrooms and the sources of in-class anxiety. Using the quantitative and qualitative methods, the researcher collected the data through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire respondents were 282 undergraduate students. Based on the findings, overall, the students experienced English-speaking anxiety at a moderate level. It was concluded that Thai university students in the study are moderately anxious about oral communication in English. Fear of negative evaluation and test-anxiety were the main factors causing English-speaking anxiety among the participants (Akkakoson, 2016).

With a different focus and scope of the study, Sultana and Jamin (2021) conducted research to determine the situations that cause fear to act as a barrier while speaking in English and to investigate the reasons for students' fear. Using the quantitative research method, the researchers used questionnaires to collect the data from 40 undergraduates studying in English Department at a university in Bangladesh. The findings showed that fear plays a role as a barrier to improve English speaking. Owing to their fear the participants did not have enough opportunity to practice English speaking. Most of them, therefore, are afraid of giving speech or making presentations in front of the audience. They become nervous while speaking as they were afraid of receiving negative criticisms. In this study, it is concluded that fear of being laughed at or mocked by others are the most significant barrier to improvement of student speaking skills.

Recently, Kammungkun et al. (2020) studied English speaking anxiety among the first-year students at Mahamakut Buddhist University. The participants were 92 the first year students studying in English major program, Faculty of Humanity and Faculty of Education, Mahamakut Buddhist University. The questionnaires were used to collect the quantitative data. The findings of this study were presented in the following: The students had anxiety in speaking English at a moderate level. The three main factors triggering the anxiety among students were speaking English with no preparation, fear of not passing the English Speaking courses and unfamiliar classroom activities.

Based on the findings of previous studies, anxiety in speaking English among students has been caused by several factors. It is important to note that the studies reported different main factors indicating that the sources of anxiety were context-specific. With different research focus and scope, context of study, participants, methods of data collection and research instruments, the findings from previous studies yield context-specific and inconclusive results. Yet, as students' anxiety in speaking English is non-static psychological state depending on intervening factors which can vary from context to context (Horwitz et al., 1986 as cited in Akkakoson, 2016), further investigation on the factors contributing to the anxiety of English major undergraduates in the HCU context is needed.

## **2. Objectives of the study**

This study aimed to investigate the factors causing anxiety in speaking English among EFL students. It also aimed to investigate types of communicative situations that the students experience anxiety and the degree of anxiety.

### Research questions of the study

1. What are the factors causing students' anxiety in speaking English?
2. What types of communicative situations do the students face anxiety in speaking English? And what is the degree of anxiety in each situation?

### 3. Research Methodology

This study investigated the factors causing anxiety in speaking English and the types of communicative situations the students experience anxiety. With a quantitative research method, the researchers used Student Questionnaire for collecting the data. The Student Questionnaire was designed to survey students' perceptions of the factors causing anxiety in speaking English and the types of communicative situations they encountered anxiety. The questionnaire was online questionnaire on Google Form consisting of 3 parts. Part 1 contains 5 items eliciting demographic information of the participants: gender, age, year of study, frequency of speaking English. In Part 2, 5 closed-ended statements with the 5 Likert rating scale (strongly agree =1 to strongly disagree =5) were used to investigate students' perceptions of the factors of anxiety. In Part 3, 10 closed-ended questions with the 5 Likert rating scale (strongly agree =1 to strongly disagree =5) were used to survey the types of communicative situations the students experience anxiety and the degree of anxiety in each situation.

The participants of the survey were thirty third-year undergraduate students studying in English major, English Program, Faculty of Liberal Arts, Huachiew Chalermprakiet University. The participants were randomly selected and they were homogeneous in experiences of studying English courses. They were voluntary to participate in this study. The researchers collected the data in the the first semester of the academic year 2022. The researchers distributed the Student Questionnaire to the participants by sending the QR code and the link of the questionnaire to the target group. After the questionnaire administration, the researchers analyzed the quantitative data from the participants' rating responses using descriptive statistics. The percentages, means and standard deviations were calculated in order to answer the research questions.

### 4. Results

The quantitative results obtained from the questionnaires were analyzed for the percentages, means and standard deviations. To answer the research questions, the results were presented in the following order: the demographic information of the participants, the factors caused students' in speaking English, the communicative situations the students experienced anxiety in speaking English and the students' motivational factors of speaking English.

The demographic information of the participants obtained from the questionnaire were presented in Table 1.

**Table 1** Demographic information of the participants

<b>Gender</b>	<b>N &amp; Frequency of Speaking English</b>		<b>N</b>
<b>Percent</b>		<b>&amp;Percent</b>	
Male	8 (26.6%)	Never	3 (10%)
Female	22	Rarely	5
(73.3%)		(16.66%)	
<b>Age</b>	<b>N &amp;</b>	<b>Sometimes</b>	<b>14 (46.6%)</b>

Gender Percent	N & Frequency of Speaking English &Percent		N
18-20 years old (26.6%)	8	Often	5 (16.6%)
21-23 years old (73.3%)	22	Always	3 (10%)
Over 25	0	(0%)	

#### 4.1 The factors caused anxiety in speaking English among the students

As shown in Table 2, the factors causing students' anxiety in speaking English were varied in degrees. The participants perceived that limited vocabulary knowledge was the main factor of their anxiety in speaking English. With the highest mean score of 3.73 (SD = 1.1), the statement "I have limited vocabulary" was rated as the highly significant factor. In their perceptions, speaking English with their peers and other interlocutors and losing confidence when making mistakes were also two important factors of their anxiety.

The statements "It's difficult for me to speak English with friends or another person" and "I lose my confidence when I make a mistake in speaking English" were rated as moderately significant factors with the same mean scores of 3.46 (SD= 0.95, SD=1.21) respectively. Meanwhile, worry about speaking with bad English accents and worry about speaking English in daily life were perceived as moderately significant factors, with the mean score of 3.35 (SD= 1.06) and of 3.31 (SD= 1.12) respectively.

**Table 2** Percentages, means, standard deviations of factors causing students' anxiety in speaking English

Statement about sources / factors of anxiety	Percentage (%)					Mean	S.D
	5	4	3	2	1		
1. I worry to speak English in daily life.	11.55	38.46	26.92	15.38	7.69	3.31	1.12
2. I have limited vocabulary.	15.38	57.69	19.24	0	7.69	3.73	1.1
3. My English accent is quite bad.	15.38	26.92	38.46	15.38	3.86	3.35	1.06
4. It's difficult for me to speak English with friends or another person.	11.54	38.46	38.46	7.69	3.85	3.46	0.95
5. I lose my confidence when I make a mistake in speaking English.	15.38	50	7.69	19.24	7.69	3.46	1.21
<b>Overall</b>						<b>3.46</b>	<b>1.07</b>

#### 4.2 The communicative situations the students experience anxiety in speaking English and the degree of anxiety

As shown in Table 3, overall, the participants experienced anxiety at different degrees ranging from moderate to high levels in these communicative situations. With the highest mean

of 3.73 (SD= 1.0), the most anxious situation was when “they were expected to respond and could not escape from conversation”. Making presentations in classrooms and speaking English in unprepared situations were rated as the second and the third highly anxious situations. The statements “I feel anxious to speak English in making presentation and answering questions in the classroom” and “I feel anxious to do impromptu speaking with no preparation.” had the high means of 3.58 and 3.5 (SD=1.1, SD =1.17) respectively. Speaking with native speakers of English and losing confidence when making mistakes were perceived as anxious communicative situations at a moderate level, with the same mean score of 3.46 (SD=1.03, SD=1.17) respectively.

**Table 3** Percentages, means, standard deviations of communicative situations the students experienced anxiety in speaking English

Communicative situations	Percentage (%)					Mean	S.D
	5	4	3	2	1		
1. I feel anxious to speak English in making presentations and answering questions in the classroom.	19.23	42.31	19.23	15.38	3.85	3.58	1.1
2. I feel anxious to speak English with native speakers.	11.53	42.31	34.62	3.85	7.69	3.46	1.03
3. I feel anxious and lose my confidence to speak English when I make a mistake in speaking English.	15.39	46.16	15.38	15.38	7.69	3.46	1.17
4. I feel anxious to speak English in the situation I am expected to respond and could not escape from communication.	19.23	50	19.23	7.69	3.85	3.73	1.002
5. I feel anxious to do impromptu speaking with no preparation.	15.38	46.15	23.08	3.85	11.54	3.5	1.17
<b>Overall</b>						<b>3.55</b>	<b>1.09</b>

## 5. Discussions

### 5.1 What are the factors causing students' anxiety in speaking English?

The findings on the factors causing students' anxiety in speaking English reveal that limited vocabulary knowledge of students was the main factor of their anxiety in speaking English. Other important factors of their anxiety were speaking English with their peers and other interlocutors, losing confidence when making mistake, worry about speaking with bad English accents and worry about speaking English in daily life. These findings are in line with the findings of Kamungkun et al. (2019) which found that the students were anxious to speak due to their problems of vocabulary, accents and lack of confidence. Besides, the students became

most anxious when students have to speak in unpredictable and forceful situations such as when speaking English in their daily lives. Similarly, Khongsamruai et al. (2018) reported that fear of making grammatical mistake and fear of being laughed by classmates when saying something wrong are important factors that lead to English speaking anxiety.

5.2 What types of communicative situations do the students face anxiety in speaking English? And what is the degree of anxiety in each situation?

The quantitative results showed that the students coped with varied degree of anxiety when getting involved in different communicative situations. The participants felt anxious at the highest level in the situation that they were expected to respond and could not escape from conversation. Making presentations in classrooms and speaking English in unprepared situations were perceived as the second and the third highly anxious situations. In students' perceptions, speaking with native speakers of English and losing confidence when making mistakes in speaking were the communicative situations the students felt anxious at a moderate level.

From the perspectives of English language teachers, when considering the communicative situations students faced anxiety, it can be explained that worries and anxiety were triggered when they need to speak English without any preparation. As the students learn English as a second or foreign language and their native language is not English, they fear of saying something wrong, fear of losing face, become nervous when speaking in front of audience and lack confidence. This is consistent with the findings of Kitano's (2001) research which found that students were nervous in speaking a second language. Students had a high level of individual concerns. They became excited, worried and stressed when speaking English (Kitano K., 2001).

In this study, the findings on the factors causing students' anxiety in speaking English and the types of communicative situations the students experienced anxiety can be a basis information for helping students overcome their anxiety. As the main source of anxiety was from students' limited vocabulary knowledge. Language teachers should consider providing explicit or implicit instructions and learning activities to help students expand their vocabulary. In addition, teachers should encourage students to speak English and promote classroom interaction between teachers and students and among students. With more opportunities to interact with peers and teachers in English, students can develop their speaking fluency and be more confident in speaking. It is also important to provide relaxing learning atmosphere in the classrooms so that students would sense a safe learning environment. By promoting classroom interaction and creating a relaxing atmosphere, it can help establish good student- teacher and student-student relationships. When speaking English in class with their teachers and peers in relaxing learning atmosphere, students may become more relaxed and do not feel uncomfortable when making mistakes.

## **6. Limitations, Recommendations for further studies and Conclusion**

### **6.1 Limitations and Recommendations for further studies**

Due to the time constraint, the number of participants participated in this study is limited and only questionnaire was used for quantitative data collection. These limitations have resulted in the generalizability of research findings. Thus, a large sample size and broader scope of participants' areas of study is suggested for further study. With broader scope of participants, the research results may bring more useful implications. Qualitative instruments should be included so that it allows the researchers to gain more in-depth information and triangulate the data.

## 6.2 Conclusion

This study investigated the factors contributing to students' anxiety in speaking English and the types of communicative situations that the students experienced anxiety. Thirty third-year undergraduate students studying in English Program, Huachiew Chalemprakiet University participated in the study. Student Questionnaire with closed-ended questions were used to collect the quantitative data. The findings revealed that the participants perceived that limited vocabulary knowledge of students was the main factor of their anxiety in speaking English. Other important sources of anxiety were speaking English with their peers and other interlocutors, losing confidence when making mistake, worry about speaking with bad English accents and worry about speaking English in daily life. The findings also reveal that the participants experienced with varied degree of anxiety when getting involved in different communicative situations. The most anxious situation for the participants was when they were expected to respond and could not escape from conversation. When making presentations in classrooms and speaking English with no preparation were also the situations they felt anxious at a high level. In students' perceptions, when speaking with native speakers of English and losing confidence because of making mistakes in speaking were the situations the students felt anxious at a moderate level.

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