

Southern Thai students' anxiety in English language learning: A speaking skill focus

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ABSTRACT

Speaking is one of the important skills in English as a second or foreign language learning. It is believed as a skill that most frequently evokes anxiety among students. Thai students have been learning English for many years, from elementary school to university, but they still do not speak it fluently. They feel anxious when speaking in front of people. Hence, a study was carried out to determine the perceptions among English Language learners of Southern Thailand's Darunsat Wittaya school towards the anxiety they experienced when speaking the second language. There are two main objectives of this research: 1) to identify the levels of foreign language anxiety perceived by southern Thai students in speaking English in EFL classrooms. 2) to investigate the reasons for foreign language anxiety experienced by southern Thai students in speaking English in an EFL classroom. The research design in this study was mixed-method research; the data were obtained through Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) questionnaire and interview and then analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative ways. The respondents of this study were eleventh graders of a private high school in Southern Thailand consisting of 40 students, 9 male and 31 female. The findings showed that in regards to the anxiety level, of the total 40 student respondents, 15 students (6%) were in the medium level, 11 students (4.4%) were in the high level, 10 students (4.0%) were in the low level, 2 students (0.8%) were in a very low level and 2 students (0.8%) were in a very high level of anxiety. Meanwhile shyness and un-confidence, fear of making mistakes, grammar concern, lack of vocabulary, and fear of being laughed at by others were factors that contribute to cause the students' anxiety in speaking English.

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1. Introduction

English is regarded as an international language. As a lingua-franca of the world, English is very important which compels the Thai people to learn and teach English as a foreign language. The ministry of Education, 2002 (as cited in Triwittayayon, 2018) Thailand is now a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations or ASEAN. So, Thai people need to have English skill. Thai students have been studying English for many years, from primary school to the university level. Students should be able to master four basic skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Among these four skills, speaking is considered the most important skill for communicating with people. It is an important aspect of learning English as a foreign language. However, Thai students have



difficulty in speaking a foreign language. According to Fung & Min (2016), in learning the speaking skill, anxiety becomes an interesting variable that can influence speaking ability.

There are some factors causing speaking anxiety among language learners. First, mental block. According to Horwitz et al. (1986), some learners may claim to have a mental block against anxiety when they come to learn to speak a second or a foreign language. It makes students unconfident, stressed, and nervous, which finally distracts their learning processes. Second, the feeling of fear. Pattapong, (2010) stated that in Thailand students' context, some students refrain from speaking because they are afraid of being accused of showing off even if they know how to answer their lecturer's questions. Some others who are unsure about their answers may not speak up because they may be afraid of making mistakes. Third, lack of vocabulary. Akkakoson (2016) found that there are some reported sources of speaking anxiety, such as lack of vocabulary. Another consequence of this lack of vocabulary is that it affects self-confidence. Fourth, the problem with the curriculum of the instruction. Although Thailand has used English books or curriculums written by native speakers, the curriculum doesn't support students' speaking skills because Thai teachers still do not have the expertise and do not truly understand the English language. They focus on grammar skills to get a good score on national examination. (Kongthong & Passornsiri (2014). Furthermore, teacher dominance becomes another problem in causing speaking anxiety among Thai students. Ritthirat & Chiramanee, (2014) stated that English lessons are conducted in a teacher-centred classroom, and Thai teachers are responsible for communicating while students receive only a few opportunities to respond.

This research aims to know the students' level of anxiety and the reason for foreign language anxiety in speaking English in the classroom. It's expected that the results of this research can offer some recommendations to the betterment of the learning of speaking in Thailand.

Literature Review

Horwitz et al. (1986) explain that in the context of foreign language study, a learner may experience anxiety due to an issue connected to one of the three characteristics of anxiety; communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test-anxiety. In regards to communication apprehension, Horwitz et al (1986) explain that communication apprehension is a kind of shyness characterized by anxiety, fear about talking with others, or difficulties speaking in groups and public oral communication. Luca et al 2011 (as cited in Maisarah, 2019), highlight that communication apprehension can be defined by worry and anxiety when talking with others and trouble speaking in public, listening to, or learning a spoken utterance.

The second characteristic of anxiety is fear of negative evaluation. Horwitz et al., (1986) state that fear of negative evaluation is the anxiety about other people's opinions. It may also entail avoiding evaluative settings and expecting others to judge them negatively. Fear of negative evaluation is more prevalent since it is not limited to test settings; rather, it can arise in any social, evaluative circumstance, such as a job interview or speaking in a language course. Unlike other academic subjects, foreign languages need continual evaluation by the teacher's only fluent speaker. Students may also be more sensitive to their classmates' real or perceived evaluations.

Test-anxiety is the third anxiety characteristic. Horwitz et al. (1986) explain that test anxiety is performance anxiety caused by a fear of failing. Test-anxious students typically place unreasonable expectations on themselves and believe that anything less than ideal test performance is a failure. Test-anxious students in foreign language classes will most likely struggle because tests and quizzes are common, and even the brightest and most prepared students make mistakes. For insensitive students, oral tests can induce both test and oral communication anxiety.

2. Method

This research utilized mixed-method research model. According to Creswell & Plano (2011), mixed method is the type of research in which a researcher or team of researchers combine components of qualitative and quantitative research methodologies in research. They further state as: "*The reason that more opting for these types of research is both of qualitative and quantitative data simultaneously collected, analyzed and interpreted*". As for the research setting and participants, the research was conducted at Darunsart Wittaya school for three weeks long on 10-28 February 2022 involving 40 students of the stated school of Mattayom 5 or grade 11.

In this study, questionnaires and interviews were used as the data collecting techniques. The questionnaires were taken from Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) adopted from Horwitz, et al. (1986). The questionnaire consists of twenty-two items on a five-point scale. The points scales are *strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree*. It's distributed to the participants through Google form. Meanwhile, for the interview stage, the interview guide consists of seven items adopted from Price (1991:103) in Musthachim (2014) journal entitled "*Students' Speaking Anxiety in EFL Classroom*". For the interview, it involved seven students and conducted using video call due to the pandemic situation. After the data were gathered, the questionnaire data were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) and Microsoft excel. Meanwhile, data from the interview were analyzed qualitatively involving such stages as transcribing, member checking, data coding, data interpreting, and conclusion drawing.

3. Findings and Discussion

Findings

3.1. The anxiety level perceived by southern Thai students in speaking English in EFL classroom

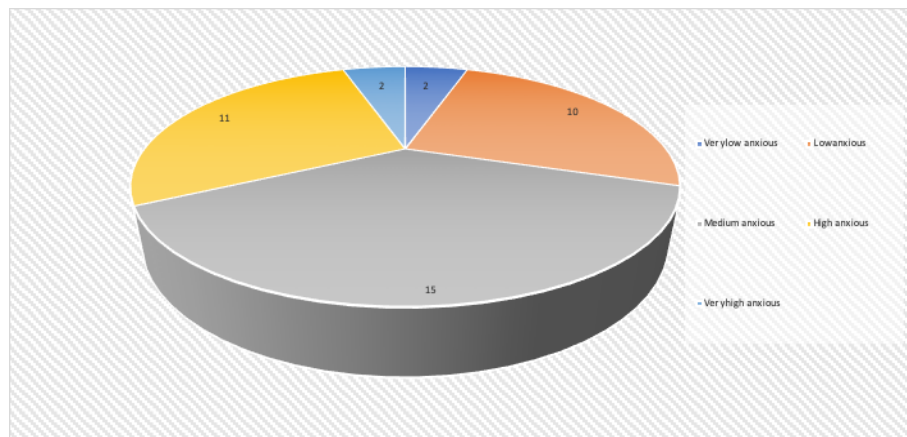


Chart 3.1 showed the results of the questionnaire. Based on it, it can be concluded that of the total 40 student respondents, the majority of them, which was totaling of fifteen students (37.5%), were in a medium level of anxiety. The second and third places were occupied by students with high and low anxiety level with eleven (27.5%) and ten (25.0%) total number of students respectively. Meanwhile there were two students (5.0%) who were in a very low level of anxiety and another two students (5.0%) were in a very high level of anxiety. In regards of the type of anxiety characteristics, it's found out that Thai students perceived fear of negative evaluation as the most the aspect that made them most anxious with total percentage of 31.35%.

3.2. The reasons for foreign language anxiety experienced by southern Thai students in speaking English in an EFL classroom

Data on reasons for foreign language anxiety experienced by southern Thai students in speaking English in an EFL classroom were gathered through interview with seven student respondents who were randomly selected. The interview was done through video call due to the Covid19 pandemic situation. After being analyzed meticulously following the qualitative analysis protocol starting from data transcribing, member checking, data coding, data interpreting, and conclusion drawing, it was concluded that there are four categories of reasons why Thai students feel anxious when learning speaking. The following interview excerpts depicted the details of the respondents' statements regarding the issue:

a. Shyness and Unconfident

Out of the seven interviewees, most of them stated that un-confidence and shyness were the most reasons they felt when speaking in English. They were particularly unconfident when they learnt to speak English and feeling nervous and shy as well. Interviewee 6 stated it very clearly as follows:

"I like English, but I lack confidence and am nervous when I speak English".
— Interviewee 6

b. Fear of Making Mistake

The next reason of being anxious when learning to speak in English was due to factor of fear of making mistakes. For this reason, interviewees 6 and 7 stated as follows:

"I'm afraid of saying something wrong from what I have learned before". — Interviewee 6

"I'm afraid to pronounce the wrong words and my friends don't understand what I speak. This is hard for having conversations together". — Interviewee 7

c. Lack of Vocabulary

Lack of vocabulary was perceived to be another reason of being anxious when learning speaking. Three out of seven student respondents/ interviewees agree that lack of vocabulary has made them feel anxious during the learning of speaking English especially when they do it in front of the class. Interviewee 1 has made it clear through the following excerpt:

"When I was learning English, there was a vocabulary that we didn't know. It made me not fully understand the whole sentence properly...this is my problem" — Interviewee 1

d. Grammar Concerns

Another reason of the anxiety in English speaking experienced by Thai students was problems related to grammar. Total three out of seven student respondents/interviewees respondents were worried about using the wrong grammar when learning speaking. The excerpt of interview of interviewee 3 portrays it as the followings:

"I don't like to speak in front of many people because I am afraid of being wrong, and my friend laughed at me. Because I don't remember any structure of grammar. It's really difficult for me. So, I try to avoid everything in English class"— Interviewee 3

e. Being laughed at by others

Being laughed by others revealed to be another reason that made Thai students experienced anxiety during their learning of speaking. The excerpt below depicts it:

"I'm afraid when I said some word wrong then my friends will laugh at me. When my friends laughing at, I'll lose my focus and blank, I can't think of the next word to say"— Interviewee 6

Discussion

Based on the results of the questionnaire, the findings of this study show that Darunsat Wittaya School students are moderately anxious about speaking English. The participants in this study have a moderate level of anxiety. This is probably because these learners believe they can communicate in English as a foreign language. When they are in speaking class, these learners are mostly confident. They are typically at ease throughout English examinations and may feel relaxed volunteering in their English class as well.

However, some learners in this study have high anxiety levels. This is quite an unfortunate condition as various studies conclude that high anxiety significantly impacts students' achievement. And worse that their low achievement may lead to their becoming more anxious learners.

Meanwhile, in relation to the reasons causing anxiety among Thai students when learning English speaking, it's found out that being afraid of making mistakes is the dominant cause. The feeling of fear to make mistakes during a language learning process is called Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE). In this research, it's found out to be the most significantly dominant speaking anxiety. This conclusion is similar to Asyfyta et al. (2019) findings which conclude that most

participating students in their study had a moderate level of foreign language learning anxiety. These findings, however, differ from the study of Sofian Hadi et al. (2020), who researched Thai Student Association members in Indonesia who have been studying in areas of Jakarta and West Java, which revealed that these students had high levels of anxiety and they felt difficulty during their classrooms of speaking English as a second language.

Furthermore, based on the interview results, it was found out that there are some factors that have caused the students to feel anxious during their speaking learning process. The first is factor of being unconfident and shy. When learning to speak, the students usually expect that their oral presentation be as perfect as possible. Furthermore, they also feel un-confident because of that high expectation. This situation has made them anxious because they're self-imposed to perfection. The second factor is because the students are afraid of making mistakes, especially in the aspects of pronunciation and word spelling. Meanwhile, lack of vocabulary becomes the third factor. Vocabulary is considered crucial for students who learn to speak English either as second or foreign language. Furthermore, the mastery of vocabulary can support students in speaking particularly when they do communicating or making oral presentations. Due to this reason, lacking vocabulary is believed to be potential to make students have difficulty in speaking, which is in turn makes them anxious as well. The fourth factor in making anxiety among Thai students is grammar concern. Based on the interview results, it's found out that the students often feel hesitant when learning speaking English since they want to produce as many grammatically accurate sentences as possible. In addition to grammar concern, being afraid if their friends will laugh at them if they make mistakes during the speaking process becomes the last factor causing anxiety among Thai students. This has resulted in them being anxious and feeling unconfident to speak in English in front of their friends and their teacher. This particular factor has been supported by theory from Krashen (2003) in Sulastri & Ratnawati (2018) stating that learning English is a distant learning incorporating emotional variables like trepidation, fear of being wrong, lack of confidence, anxiety, and other emotive factors which have an effect on one's language power.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, in regards to the anxiety level, the majority of the students in Darunsat Wittaya school Thailand has a moderate level of speaking anxiety. The details are: of the total 40 student respondents, fifteen students (6%) were in a medium level, eleven students (4.4%) were in high level, ten students (4.0%) were in low level, two students (0.8%) were in a very low level and another two students (0.8%) were in a very high level of anxiety.

The students had different levels with different difficulties or factors in speaking English. There are some factors causing speaking anxiety faced by the students. First, being unconfident and shy. The second is fear of making mistakes. Lack of vocabulary and grammar become the third and fourth factors. Finally, being afraid that their friends will laugh at them becomes the last factor causing students to experience anxiety during the process of learning speaking.

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