

# Iraqi EFL Students' Perspective on Speaking Anxiety: A Pilot Study

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## ABSTRACT

The study was aimed at understanding the EFL Iraqi students' perspective on speaking anxiety. Specifically, the study investigated the causes of speaking anxiety based on data collected for a pilot study involving two Iraqi EFL postgraduate students in Universiti Utara Malaysia. Pseudonyms were used to refer to the participants as Omer and Sarah. The data were collected through in-depth interviews with the participants. The interview sessions took approximately 15-20 minutes for each participant and were videotaped and audiotaped.

Semi-structured interview with 15 questions and probes were used. The results showed that the speaking anxiety experienced by the two Iraqi students were due to the class atmosphere, the teacher's attitudes, lack of vocabulary, rate of speech, different accent and long conversation, fear of being embarrassed and fear of failing to performance. The causes identified are rooted in Iraqi status of English as a foreign language and method of teaching English as well as the teacher's attitude towards their students.

**Keywords:** In-depth interview, pilot study, speaking skill, speaking anxiety, English as a Foreign Language (EFL)

## INTRODUCTION

Among the four key language skills i.e. reading, listening, speaking and writing, speaking is deemed to be the most important skill in learning a foreign or second language. Baker and Westrup (2003) maintain that the ability to speak skillfully provides the speaker with distinct advantages such as greater chance for better education, finding good jobs, and getting promotion. Likewise Crystal (2003) states that speaking is a pivotal skills to be mastered by English as a foreign language (EFL) learners due its prominent position as a medium of international communication while Nunan (1995) posits that learning the speaking skill is the most important aspect of learning a second or a foreign language and success is measured based on their ability to perform a conversation in the language. Nevertheless, most English as a foreign language (EFL) especially Arab EFL learners find speaking in English to be difficult despite learning the language throughout the first grade until the ninth grade.

There are several factors which contribute to students' difficulty in acquiring speaking skill in an EFL environment. In the first place, acquiring speaking skill itself is a complex process. Kusnierek (2015) contends that it requires the speaker to acquire other important components

i.e. pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension as well as using words and phrases fluently without much thinking when producing sentences in the real communication. Apart from that it also depends upon activation of both linguistic knowledge along with the general knowledge in order to produce the message.

Another factor which contributes to speaking difficulty is acquiring speaking skill depends upon appropriate teaching approach. In many of the Arab countries where English is a foreign language, the traditional teaching method particularly the grammar-translation method in teaching English prevails (Al Hamdany, 2018; Ali, Hameed & Keong, 2015; Elttayef and Hussein, 2017; Raba'bah, 2003). This teaching method deemphasizes speaking and listening skills and focuses mainly on teaching reading and writing besides grammar and vocabulary (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

Speaking skill in English is also ignored because it is not tested in the exam. The exam only covers reading and writing in addition to grammar and vocabulary. Hence the learners face limitations on the use of the target language. They lack sufficient exposure to the language itself and lack of the opportunities to speak the language in the English classes. In real life situation the students also have few opportunities to use English as English is rarely used and the only possible interaction in English is when students meet native speakers of English who come to the country as tourists which rarely happens (Raba'bah, 2003). As a result, the majority of EFL learners still find it difficult to speak in English despite spending 9 years of learning English at school before pursuing tertiary education (Ali, Hameed & Keong, 2015; Raba'bah, 2003). These learners have difficulties when they engage in authentic communicative situation due to their lack of necessary vocabulary, they need to get their message across.

The weaknesses in English of students who join the universities as English language major or as English language learners have been described by Mukattash (1983) who points out that university students continue to make some basic errors in pronunciation, spelling, morphology and syntax. They are also not able to express themselves "comfortably and efficiently either when dealing with academic topics or common every topic" (1983, p.169). Mukattash attributes this difficulty to the students' deficiencies in communication competence and self-expression and this situation is closely related to the methods of teaching. More recent studies on Iraqi EFL students' speaking anxiety reveal that Iraqi EFL learners are still facing the same problem. Ali, Hameed and Keong (2015), and Elttayef and Hussein (2017) state that the majority of Iraqi learners still find speaking in English problematic. Elttayef and Hussein explain that this problem is due to indifferent attitude of teachers as well as students towards English at school level in Iraq. The learners realize the importance of English when they register to study professional courses at the university where all courses are conducted in English. Having low proficiency, they feel helpless and find English is just too difficult for them.

Living in EFL environment and with school features which do not support effective instruction, Iraqi EFL learners may be under stressful condition when they are required to speak English in the classroom (Oxford, 2002). This situation is impacted further by other psychological factors which influence language learning process. Factors such as anxiety, attitude, motivation, and beliefs about foreign language learning also may cause problem to acquire speaking skill. One of these factors which has been well researched is anxiety. Horwitz (2001) and McDonough and Shaw (1993) posit that the most important factor that makes speaking skill difficult is anxiety.

As can be seen there are many challenges faced by EFL learners in acquiring speaking skill: the process of acquiring speaking skill, the teaching method, the teachers and the environment itself apart from the psychological factor i.e. anxiety. The current study highlights the issues of speaking anxiety from the perspectives of Iraqi ESL learners. Specifically, this article presents the findings of the pilot study of a dissertation that the researcher conducted in order to understand the EFL Iraq students' perspective on the anxiety they experienced in an English-speaking course taken at their university.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In general, foreign learning anxiety can be defined as "the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness and worry associated with an arousal of autonomic nervous system" experienced by many people when learning a foreign language especially in classroom situation (Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope, 1986, p.125). Many studies describe language learning contexts as a provoking factor for language anxiety which is peculiar to language learning situation (Hammad & Abu Ghali, 2015; Horwitz et al., 1986; Mukminin, Masbrorotni, Noprival, Sutarno, Arif&Maimunah, 2015; Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2014). Their studies reveal that speaking particularly in foreign language is an anxiety producing experience for most of the students. Considering the importance of anxiety as one of the factors influencing EFL speaking performance, researchers have begun to investigate the causes and effects of speaking anxiety on EFL learners (Ali et al., 2015; Akkakoson, 2016; Batiha, Mustafa & Noor, 201 Hammad & Abu Ghali, 2015; Huda, 2018; Kayaoglu & Saglamel, 2013; Mukminin, Masbrorotni, Noprival, Sutarno, Arif & Maimunah, 2015; Ozturk and Gurbuz, 2014; Rafada&Madini, 2017; Siagian & Adam, 2017; Shuying, 1999; Yahya, 2013).

Mukminin, et. al (2015) conducted a study in order to describe and understand the sources of senior high school students' English language speaking anxiety at senior high schools in Jambi, Indonesia. 25 senior high school students participated in this study. Data were collected through demographic profiles and semi-structured interviews with senior high school students. An analysis of the interview data revealed that five major themes were related to students' English language speaking anxiety including; 1) low speaking skill due to the lack of vocabulary and grammar, 2) fear of negative responses from others, 3) low self-esteem to speak in English. 4) fear of being evaluated by teachers, and 5) cultural difference influences on speaking English due to more teacher-centered style.

Batiha, et al, (2016) examined the factors contributing to EFL speaking anxiety in Jordanian context. The Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety Scale (FLSAS) was administrated to 112 freshmen in Jadara University. The results revealed that four main factors were responsible for causing learners' speaking anxiety, namely; fear of negative evaluation, unpreparedness, fear of being in public and shyness, and general speaking class anxiety. Rafada and Madini (2017) conducted a mix method study on the major causes of speaking anxiety. 126 participants were sampled at King Abdul Aziz University Woman's Campus and the woman's college as well as 10 semi-structured interviews were conducted with Saudi female students from the elementary, pre-intermediate, intermediate levels. The qualitative study revealed that the major causes of female Saudis' learners speaking anxiety were referred to the teachers' role in raising or reducing anxiety including; 1) lack of support. 2) lack of understanding due to language barrier. 3) the fear of teacher's negative feedback. 4) time limitation for practicing the target language. 5) lack of vocabulary. 6) the weak educational system at schools. 7) peer anxiety. 8) test anxiety. On

the other hand, the results of the questionnaire indicated the causes of speaking anxiety which can be categorized in to three main domains: causes related to the classroom atmosphere, causes associated with EFL teachers, and others related to the test.

Ariyanti (2016) investigated psychological barriers faced by Indonesian students which affect their speaking performance. Moreover, as this research is a qualitative study, direct observation was done to capture all of phenomenon happened in the speaking class in natural setting. In addition, interviews were also conducted by the researcher to identify psychological factors which influence their oral performance in the class. The research findings from observation and interview show that the students tended to feel anxious when performing their speaking because they were afraid of making mistakes. The feeling of fear of making mistakes, somehow related to the students' lack of self-esteem in using English so that they often combined their speaking with their mother tongue.

Psychological barriers also appear in discussion session, where in this case some students did not want to participate because they were afraid of making mistakes, lack of self-esteem and motivation so they preferred to keep silent in the class. From the natural phenomenon happened in the speaking class, it can be concluded that psychological factors which hinder the students in performing their speaking are possibly caused by the feeling of too worried of making mistakes and the lack of self-esteem which are related to shyness and their anxiety level. By looking at this phenomenon, it is better for teacher to give their students assistance so that they can perform their English-speaking tasks better.

In addition, there are studies which found effective strategies for reducing students' foreign language speaking anxiety. Rafada and Madini (2017) conducted 10 semi structured interviews that are used to identify the coping strategies for speaking anxiety. The participants mentioned the following strategies; first, improving language by watching English movies, using English internet sites, traveling abroad and talking to native speakers, doing more presentations, practice reading English books and joining English institutes over the summer vacation can help to reduce speaking anxiety. Second, the role of instructor who motivates, encourages and guides students in their speaking tasks help to reduce speaking anxiety among learners. Third, choosing some topics of their interest and suitable for their level of proficiency. Fourth, guiding students to use the body language in order to give a chance for the teachers to follow their instructions. Fifth, attending one hour instead of long hours in English classroom devoted to speaking practice in lab.

This solution will not only reduce the long boring hours of English instructions but also will give the students the opportunity to practice the language more. Sixth, implementing some approaches that focus on helping the students to be in the center of the learning process will be really effective and students will be encouraged and motivated to learn.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Participants**

Creswell (2012) maintains that participants in a qualitative study is selected based on non-probability sampling in which individuals are chosen because "they are available, convenient, and represent some characteristics the investigator seeks to study" (p. 145).

For this pilot study, to achieve the rationales above, the researcher conducted a pilot study to review the interview questions formulated to obtain data. Two Iraqi students (one male and

one female) from a university in the north of Malaysia were interviewed. The researcher conducted the pilot interview in Malaysia because she was in Malaysia for study purposes. The languages that were used during the two interview sessions were Arabic and English. Pseudonyms: Omer and Sarah, were used to refer to the participants. The purpose of using pseudonym was to make the participants feel comfortable in answering the interview questions. The participants were able to understand all the questions and the interviews were recorded in order to help the researcher in transcribing the interview. The responses from the participants helped the researcher to find the themes or categories that might emerge in the actual research and to refine the interview questions where necessary. The reasons for conducting the pilot interview were to familiarize the researcher with the interviewing technique and questions, to make sure that the interview questions were clear and understandable, and to create the circumstantial suitability of the situations in getting the participants' responses (Creswell, 2012).

### **Data Collection Technique**

The data were collected through in-depth interviews with the two participants. The interview session was conducted face-to-face with each participant. The nature of the in-depth interview was to understand in details about the anxiety participants experienced going through the speaking task. The interview session took approximately 15-20 minutes for each participant and was videotaped and audiotaped. Semi-structured interview with 24 questions and probes were used. The interview questions can be seen in the Appendix.

### **Data Analysis**

The researcher followed some steps suggested by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007). The steps were as follows: (1) the recorded interviews were transcribed as soon as the researcher finished the interview; (2) the researcher read the interview transcripts carefully, repeatedly, and coded, classified, and categorized the responses to the interview questions; (3) the researcher looked for repetition of words, phrases, and sentences as well as positive or negative reactions to the interview questions or any frustrating aspects of speaking tasks; (4) the researcher drew conclusions and verification of data where the data were displayed and interpreted. After applying the above steps, the researcher classified the interview data into three themes: (1) causes of speaking anxiety; (2) Effects of speaking anxiety; and (3) strategies that the students use to reduce speaking anxiety. In analyzing the data, all the recorded interviews were transcribed and crosschecked with the note-taking.

From the two pilot interviews, the researcher found that the participants, Omer and Sahara, understood all the questions except for two questions. As a result, the researcher made slight changes to these two questions. The first question was: where do you feel most comfortable speaking in English? Why? The two participants were definitely confused about where they found themselves most comfortable. So, the researcher decided to add some probes, which was "where do you feel most comfortable? Why? To "Where do you feel the most comfortable place to speak in English? Probes: class, street, or home and Why?" The second question is what kind of English-speaking anxiety makes you anxious? The two participants could not understand it as it is related to the next question which is "What kind of situations in English make you anxious?" So, the researcher decided to change the second question, which was "what kind of English-speaking anxiety makes you anxious?" to "What kind of situations in English makes you anxious?" The two interviews were conducted in Arabic because the researcher felt that the participants could not express their feelings fully in English.

## FINDINGS

### Omer

The first interview was conducted with Omer who was a Master student at the College of Information Technology (IT) at the university.

**Causes of Speaking Anxiety:** Omar admitted experiencing difficulties in speaking in English.

These difficulties were related to the speed, accent, the class atmosphere, and the topic of dialogue. He revealed that when the other speaker spoke too fast and when the speaker pronouncing words different from his, he had difficulty understanding the message and could not respond accordingly. The stress he experienced was heightened by his fear of getting low marks and the thought of embarrassing himself in front of his peers if he did poorly in his speech. He also confessed that he did not have enough vocabulary to understand and to deliver the speech. His English-speaking classes were dominated by teacher's talk and he and his classmates were not given any speaking practice. Consequently, speaking in English became a formidable task for him. He was also afraid of speaking in group of more than two persons.

**Effects of Speaking Anxiety:** He also experienced some physical anxiety symptoms when speaking English such as sweating, redness, increasing heart rate, and vibrating his feet. He considered anxiety as affecting his performance but not at a high rate.

**Strategies to Reduce Speaking Anxiety:** He mentioned some strategies that he used to reduce his speaking anxiety such as practicing his speaking skills by having some time to think, taking long breath, and speaking with his friend to calm him down. Omer mentioned that long conversation and multiple-choice questions made him less anxious.

### Sahara

The second interview was conducted with Sahara who was a Master student at the College of Art and Science at the university.

**Causes of Speaking Anxiety:** She attributed her anxiousness towards speaking tasks to the topic of speaking, especially topics which she was not familiar, teacher's attitudes, class atmosphere, and long conversations. Sahara said that she could not speak much on religious and politics topics as she did not have enough knowledge and was not familiar with English terms in the field. These difficulties were related to her inability to produce speech when speaking in a dialogue for the first time because she did not have adequate vocabulary to express her idea in her speech and she was also not able to distinguish between speakers in the dialogue. Without adequate vocabulary and her unfamiliarity of the topic, she was not able to sustain her conversation particularly if the task was a long conversation. Sahara described her English speaking classes as teacher-centred in which the focus was more on grammar and sentence development. Students also did their speaking tasks without opportunity for in class speaking practice. Sahara expressed her wish for opportunity to practice speaking about a specific topic before performing it. Sahara also confessed that her fear of failure and the thought of being embarrassment in front of her classmates induced anxiousness which affected her speaking performance.

**Effects of Speaking Anxiety:** Sahara admitted experiencing sweaty palms and increased heart beat. She considered her anxiety in speaking as medium.

**Strategies to Reduce Speaking Anxiety:** Sahara listed the following strategies she used to reduce her anxiety when speaking English: practicing speaking tasks more, preparing common sentences that could help in any spoken activity and using self-motivation.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings showed Omer and Sahara shared similar causes of anxiety when speaking English: the class atmosphere, the teacher, topic of speech and lack of vocabulary. As stated by Kusnierek (2015) speaking skill requires the speaker to acquire other important components i.e. pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. However, in Iraq, the traditional method in which speaking and listening skills are deemphasized (Al Hamdany, 2018; Ali, Hameed & Keong, 2015; Elttayef and Hussein, 2017; Raba'bah, 2003). The teachers focus mainly on teaching reading and writing besides grammar and vocabulary (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Hence, despite the course attended was an English-speaking course, the focus was still grammar and sentence construction.

Both students also expressed their wish to practice their speech but the teachers did not provide such opportunity. In Iraq where English is learnt as a foreign language, the opportunity to speak English in language classes is imperative as this is the only avenue for them to use English. The anxiety faced by Omer and Sahara were similar to the anxiety experienced by participants of Ali et al. study (2015) who found the students' lack of practice induced anxiety as they felt unprepared and were unable to structure their speech. The students' anxiety was heightened when they were given topics which they were not familiar. Without much knowledge about the topics as well as words commonly used in the field, the speaking task was just too difficult for them. This is in line with Kusnierek's statement (2015) that speaking depends upon activation of both linguistic knowledge along with the general knowledge in order to produce the message.

Omer's and Sahara's anxiousness due to lack of vocabulary is also in line with the findings of the studies conducted by Mukmininet. al (2015) and Rafada and Madini (2017) who attribute low speaking skill to the lack of vocabulary. Omer also referred to two other causes of his anxiety i.e. the speed of speaking and different accent. A study by Huda (2018) had similar finding in which the participants became anxious when they could not comprehend the other speakers who spoke at a fast rate and with a different accent. Similar to the participants of other studies, Omer wished that the other speaker would decrease the speaking rate so that he would be able to follow. Sahara also identified another cause of her anxiety i.e. long conversation. Akkakosanet al (2016) found that a long conversation is a difficult task because it places the students under great pressure as they are required to speak more and at the same time searching for ideas and words.

In addition, fear of poor performance and the thought of being embarrassed in front of their classmates also affected Omer's and Sahara's performance. Batiha et al. (2016) and Ariyanti (2016) reported the same causes of anxiety faced by the Jordanian and the Indonesian students respectively.

In brief the findings reveal the following causes of anxiety experienced by the two Iraqi students: the class atmosphere, the teacher's attitudes, lack of vocabulary, rate of speech, different accent, long conversation, fear of being embarrassed and fear of failing to performance. The causes identified are rooted in Iraqi status of English as a foreign language, method of teaching English as well as the teacher's attitude towards their students. Consequently, the students view the English-speaking class as anxiety inducing in which students are confronted by a constant sense of fear most of the time and as a result they become self-conscious, insecure and incapable. Apart from these psychological effects, their fear is manifested through physical symptoms of anxiety i.e. sweating, redness, increasing heart rate, and vibrating feet. The two students highlighted their desire

to be given the opportunity to practice speaking. To assist the students, the teacher plays an imperative role to provide proper guidance, support and encouragement to enable their students to succeed in their task and subsequently help to raise the students' self-belief and foster a conducive atmosphere to acquire English speaking skill.

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## APPENDIX

In the first part, the four questions were demographic questions to describe the profiles of the participant their questions are:

1. How old are you?
2. Where do you live in Iraq?
3. Have you ever studied in an English-speaking country?
4. What is your major in university?

The second part of interview guide included questions related to speaking anxiety in general. These questions are:

1. Which language skill (listening, reading, writing and speaking) do you consider as the most difficult? Why?
2. Do you think that speaking in English is difficult for students? Why?
3. How would you describe your experience in speaking process in English? (bad, medium, interesting)

The third part of interview guide include question about the causes of speaking anxiety. These questions are:

1. Which kind of speaking do you believe may cause problem to students?  
Probes: Short Conversation, long conversation, individual, or groups.
2. What makes speaking tasks difficult for you?
3. What kind of speaking topics are difficult for you? And what kind of physical reactions occur when you feel that speaking English language is difficult?
4. Do you experience anxiety while speaking English language? Probes: in most situations?
5. How do you rate your speaking anxiety in English? Probes: low, average, or high
6. What kind of English-speaking tasks make you anxious?
7. In which situation do you experience low anxiety and perform better in relation to speaking?
8. What do you think the causes of speaking English in classroom and another situation? Why?
9. What do you think the causes of speaking anxiety or factory that can lead to speaking anxiety? Why?

10. In your opinion, why do some student experience anxiety in doing speaking task? Do you think that your teacher or peer may make more anxious in this issue?

The Fourth part of interview guide included questions about the effects of speaking anxiety. These questions are:

1. How do you feel when speaking English language tasks or examinations?
2. How does speaking anxiety affect you personally?
3. How you shared your experience of speaking with your classmates?
4. To what extent do you think speaking anxiety affects you in learning English language?
5. Describe your physical reactions when you feel anxious in English speaking class?

The Fifth part of interview guide included questions about the strategies that the students used to reduce speaking anxiety?

1. What are the strategies that you used to reduce speaking anxiety?
2. Do you have any ideas or Ways to make the speaking classes less stressful?

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