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Factors Contributing to EFL Students' Speaking Anxiety

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ABSTRACT

This small-scale qualitative study aimed to examine factors that contributed to English as a foreign language (EFL) students' speaking anxiety. Seven international students studying at three universities in Indonesia were interviewed and the collected data were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis. The results revealed that the student participants experienced both facilitative and debilitating speaking anxiety when interacting with their peers during classroom learning. Language barriers, negative attitudes, and intercultural communication apprehension were identified to provoke foreign language speaking anxiety among the students. More importantly, these three factors also contributed to students' feeling of anxiety when communicating with people on a daily basis.

Keywords: *English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety (FLSA), Facilitative and Debilitative Speaking Anxiety,*

INTRODUCTION

In foreign language education, foreign language anxiety (henceforth FLA) has been recognised as a major factor influencing foreign language (FL) students' learning achievement and performance (Awan, Azher, Anwar, & Naz, 2010; Bekleyen, 2009; Hewitt & Stephenson, 2012). Numerous studies have explored the critical roles of FLA in FL students' learning to read (Rajab, Zakaria, Rahman, Hosni, & Hassani, 2012; Sari, 2017; Zarei, 2014), learning to listen (Cheng, 2005; Tahsildar & Yusoff, 2014; Xu, 2011), learn to speak (Suleimenova, 2013; Tóth, 2011; Zhiping & Paramasivam, 2013), and students' learning to write (Balta, 2018; Cheng, 2004; Meng & Tseng, 2013). Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) perceive FLA as a unique type of anxiety that describes a complex facet of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours related to the FL learning process. Students who face the facet tend to encounter anxiousness, apprehension, even alertness, have difficulty concentrating, become forgetful, remain silent, have palpitations and sweat while in FL settings. In addition, students tend to exhibit avoidance behaviour, such as postponing homework and being absent to alleviate their anxiety. This facet is also experienced by international students in Indonesia yet only has attracted little research in the country. Therefore, this study is intended to provide new insights on FLSA among international students in an Indonesian context by addressing the factors contribute to speaking anxiety encountered by international FL students in Indonesian universities. The present study would benefit English practitioners and FL students in identifying factors that restrict the success in spoken communication.

With regards to the role of FLA in students' oral performance, a study by Choubey (2011) has found that FLA discouraged students from producing the TL. Interestingly, such anxiety emerges during communication between English as a foreign language (EFL) learners and native speakers, but also when EFL learners were engaged in communication with English native-like accented interlocutors. In the study, Choubey presented an interview situation wherein the participant confidently answered the interview question spoken in Hindi, but when the interviewee switched to English, the participants' face impersonated tantalised mimics. This indicates that FLA restricted the students from giving their best oral performance in the TL.

In addition, Suleimenova (2013) showed that students' speaking anxiety has a debilitating effect, which hinders learners from speaking, causing them to face 'mental block', stay quiet and feel inferior to others. They suddenly started to panic, which led to them forgetting words

and phrases, undoubtedly demotivating them to speak English and remain silent. Similarly, Ebrahimi (2013) reported that speaking anxiety as a deterring element occurred among 100 students at an Iran university who had ten years of learning English. According to the questionnaire measuring the foreign language anxiety scale (FLAS) consisting of 33 items, almost all participants felt anxious while speaking English, with most of them panicking when they had to speak English without preparation, half of them felt unsure about themselves, and the rest were incredibly nervous when speaking English.

Despite the negative effects of FLA on students' language learning achievement and performance, the literature also suggests the benefits FLA. Selvam, Kamal, Swaminathan, and Baskaran (2016) believe that FLA plays a significant role in motivating students to learn more from their deficiency in producing FL. They investigated 100 EFL students using a 4-point Likert scale questionnaire at a Malaya University to identify facilitative effects caused by their anxiety, finding that the learners with moderate speaking anxiety (SA) felt motivated to learn from their failures, and willing to try to speak better. Another study by Pong (2010) investigated if facilitative or debilitating SA exists among 32 EFL students at a Taiwan university. Student participants were asked to make their speech' videos and upload them on YouTube. Then he asked them to write two journals on their thoughts of posting their own videos along with suggestions for the second semester. The results revealed that the students prepared better and practised harder when the speaking was not in a direct communication but recorded.

Interestingly, both positive and negative effects of FLA on FL students' SA are not only experienced by FL students who stay in their home countries but also international students studying abroad, as many international students must adapt to new languages and diverse cultures. A study by Hellsten and Prescott (2004) explored internationalism of an Australian university's curriculum, and how this affects 48 international EFL students from 16 countries. The findings highlighted international students' commentaries on communication issues between teachers and their peers, with some participants suffering debilitating SA and others experiencing SA as a facilitative facet.

Several factors have been identified in literature concerning international students who experience both facilitative (FSA) and debilitating speaking anxiety (DSA) on their EFL

learning, including language barriers, negative attitudes and intercultural communication apprehension (Amiri & Puteh, 2018; Azarfam & Baki, 2012; Yang, Salzman, & Yang, 2015; Zhiping & Paramasivam, 2013). These factors have interfered with their speech performance, not only when the learners generate ideas but also during speaking, but under other conditions (i.e. moderate SA), it assisted the learners to perform better orally.

Factors contributing to FLSA among international students

Numerous studies (Blume, 2013; Seyitoglu, Guven, & Kocabulut, 2015; Stewart & Tassie, 2011; Zhiping & Paramasivam, 2013; Zhou, 2014) have explored several factors contributing to FLSA, some of which are language barriers, negative attitude and intercultural communication apprehension. Language barriers such as poor grammar, lack of vocabulary, unclear pronunciation, and interlocutors' language deficiency have been considered as major factors that contribute to international FL learners' anxiety to speak in a target language. Blume (2013) examined SA as a barrier to undergraduate students' leadership, adaptability, and multicultural appreciation in a mid-western university. The results showed that SA was negatively associated with their willingness to take on leadership opportunities, multicultural appreciation, and adaptability to new environment, which accordingly prevented the students from reaching their full potential. For instance, a student may be quite good at communicating in English, but when SA arises, it prevents them from actively engaging in conversation opportunities that may serve to their benefit.

In addition, Brown (2008) conducted an ethnographic study of 150 international postgraduate students at a university in the South of England, performing in-depth interviews with 13 students and 150 students' observation during a twelve-month academic year. She utilised purposive sampling to choose specific participants and was a lecturer in English at the university. One of the major themes which emerged from her study was students' anxiety due to their level of English language. They felt embarrassed, inferior, and anxiety, often being distressed by their poor spoken English even though they had enrolled in their course with a minimum level of IELTS 6. Low self-confidence also arose as they perceived that they were ill-equipped to engage in class discussion and in social interaction that used English as a means of communication. A typical reaction to stress caused by language problems was to retreat into collateral communication with students from the same nations, further hindering progress in the language.

The literature also suggests the role of students' negative attitude in promoting FLSA. Some negative attitudes, such as fear of being in public and shyness, unwelcoming gestures and facial expressions, interlocutors' corrections, and high expectations towards the learners have been drivers for the students not to involve in FL communication. Hammad and Ghali (2015) examined 340 Palestinian EFL pre-service teachers SA level, and its potential causes. They distributed 61 open-question item questionnaires and 279 closed-question item questionnaires among the students, showing that their SA was excessive. Most students felt afraid of committing mistakes and they insisted on a high level of EFL oral performance, tending to speak in the TL on a standard level discourage them as they think much of inaccuracy they were going to make. In addition, Zhiping and Paramasivam (2013) investigated the factors of international students anxiety and how to alleviate their anxiety. The data consisted of observations and semi-structured interviews of eight international postgraduate students at a Malaysian university. The interviews were administered before and after the class, and during the class break. The data were analysed using discourse analysis. The findings revealed that when speaking in a FL, anxious students did not want to make mistakes, feeling that they were tested all the time and every correction they received meant a failure. Moreover, Amiri and Puteh (2018) explored factors that contributed to SA among international doctoral students from several Malaysian universities. Applying a qualitative method, they conducted observations and interviews, analysing the students' experiences in communicating with the examination panel during academic presentations (e.g., proposal and viva). The results showed that the doctoral students were apprehensive of the academic presentation, and that the examination panels were severe, strict and moody leading to students' reluctance to speak.

Intercultural communication apprehension may also play a role in international FL learners SA. The learners with different cultures are gathering pace with their hosts when they try to exchange information verbally (i.e. Seyitoglu et al., 2015; Zhou, 2014). The link between the different cultures and communication has formed intercultural communication. These students usually have different world views, norms, and behaviour patterns as evidenced by Seyitoglu et al. (2015). Indeed, this condition may cause anxiety, fear and worry among the learners during communication with their hosts. According to Zhiping and Paramasivam (2013), learners have a concept of "saving face", so when addressed by someone who commits

a face-threatening act, they save face loss and the communication breaks down. Also, in comparison to Westerners, they tend not to make eye contact while conversing, as confirmed by Stewart (2011), that cultural differences and misunderstandings certainly influence public speaking encounters. Gopang and Bughio (2015) explored the Intercultural communication apprehension (ICA) and FLA among students in a university in Balochistan, collecting data via questionnaires and interviews. The results indicated that despite having positive views about other cultures, some students still encounter anxious feelings, often being distracted and confused if they communicate with people who have distinct beliefs and values. They also revealed that they tend to feel shy speaking in front of people and are less interested to know about their set of beliefs and values.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Design and participants

The current study employed a qualitative approach by applying a case study design to obtain in-depth information regarding the phenomenon of FLSA in an Indonesian tertiary context. Eight international students studying at three universities in Indonesia participated in the study. They were selected randomly on a voluntary basis and ease of access. They were two males and six female students. Prior to the study, it was established that they started learning English in kindergarten and primary school up to tertiary level, they also attended English courses in their spare time in their home countries, so were familiar with English for approximately twelve years. None of them had ever visited any English-speaking country and their background is detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. Background of the participants

Name*	Nationality	Age	Sex	Major	Languages	Year of stay
Sokha	Cambodian	21	M	Management	English, Khmer, Indonesia	2 years
Mirjam	Yemen	20	F	Indonesian language	English, Arabic, Japanese, Indonesian	1 year
Akara	Thai	22	M	English teacher training & pedagogy	English, Thai, Indonesian	3 years
Bormey	Cambodian	23	M	Geo Engineering	English, Khmer, French	8 months

Gianna	Ecuadorian	21	F	English	English, Spanish, Indonesian	10 months
Mai	Vietnamese	22	F	Indonesian	English, Indonesian, Vietnamese	1 year
Nassima	Algerian	23	F	Indonesian	English, French, Arabic, Indonesian	1 year

**The participants have been given pseudonyms*

Data collection and analysis

In the current study, students' anxiety to speak in a FL was explored through a semi-structured interview. Eight interview questions were developed under four topics as suggested by Tóth (2011, p.43) and shown in Table 2. The interviews were audio-recorded and each interview lasted between six until thirty-seven minutes.

Table 2. Four topic areas adapted from Tóth (2011, p.43)

Topics	
Language learning history	Starting when, where, what language, memories of English in primary/secondary school, time spent in English speaking countries, frequency of contact with native English speakers
Attitudes to English	Effort expended, satisfaction with competence, ease or difficulty
Impression of and to university English classes	Atmosphere likes and dislikes, teacher personality, problems/difficulties when being a first-year student
Attitudes to communication in English	In and outside classroom, ease of communication, problem areas, aspects to be improved

The qualitative data from the interview were transcribed verbatim, with non-verbal expressions such as pauses, hesitations and intonations also highlighted in the transcript. The transcript from the audio were read and re-read to allow the researchers to be familiar with the data, then the data were coded and themed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings from the semi-structured interviews revealed that all student participants experienced FSA and DSA when using English for daily communication. Several contributing factors to FLSA were identified, including language barriers, negative attitude, and ICA.

Language barriers

Language barriers such as poor grammar, lack of vocabulary, less exposure, pronunciation, and interlocutors' language deficiency were identified as the drivers for FLSA. Gianna for example, expressed her communication problem related to grammar by saying:

The only thing I am not working is, past tense and future. I tend to... I tend to...mix tenses. Like present with past, past with future. I'm mostly thinking "*OMG did I say the verb with -ed or OMG*" every time, every time. (Gianna).

In addition, limited vocabulary was identified as a factor contributing to FLSA, as expressed by two other students, Nassima and Bormey suggesting that they:

I feel confused when they talk about subject or concept I don't have too much vocabulary. I'll let them finish my sentence, I cannot... I cannot speak any more and I'll be just quiet. (Nassima)

"Learning English is fun but I'm a bit...you know, I hate to speak because sometimes my brain's not flexible. I have learned a little vocabulary that's why I cannot speak fluently". (Bormey)

Another problem was less exposure due to infrequent contact with English speakers, with participants expressing that they were not able to practice or communicate in English with peers. Some students such as Akara, Mai and Bormey said:

I'm lazy to talk in English since I'm used to talk in Indonesian daily. I feel worried *cause* I barely talk in English. (Akara)

I didn't have chances to talk to people in English when I was in Vietnam. So, it's making me worried to speak English. (Mai)

I am not often speaking English at my school or somewhere else, so I cannot improve my speaking. (Bormey)

Another common issue leading to the student's FLSA relates to students' perception of their inappropriate English accents. Mai asserted that her Vietnamese background influenced the way she pronounced English words, she stated:

I feel nervous about my pronunciation, how my speaking in certain sentence. Because the way I speak English isn't natural. (Mai)

The final factor was interlocutors' language deficiency. Many of the students interviewed mentioned their unwillingness to communicate in English due to the interlocutors' incompetence in English, for example, Mai and Gianna commented:

I don't use much English because I think for me here English isn't really popular for everyone. (Mai)

I just feel like "*OMG I don't know they [host people] are gonna understand or no*". (Gianna).

Language barrier as a key contributor to FLSA is in line with a study by Brown (2008), who found that language barrier is one of the factors that successfully diminishes students' oral performance due to English incompetence. Poor grammar and inadequate vocabulary are supported by Ahmed (2016), who found that students would remain silent during English speaking because of deficient vocabulary and not clearly understanding the grammar rules. Pronunciation also contributes to FLSA. Indeed, Azarfam and Baki (2012) suggest that pronunciation is one of crucial aspects of FL learning by many students. In the present study, one participant stated that she did not like her own pronunciation due to differences in her tones [Mai, Vietnamese] compared to English. Along with less opportunity to speak English, the students tended to refrain from communicating in English simply because it is unusual for them to talk in English daily. This could be also be because they were not satisfied with their speaking proficiency. Moreover, interlocutors' language deficiency made the students reluctant to engage in conversation or interact with their hosts. Similarly, Amiri and Puteh (2018) found that the incompetency of examiners in the English language was one of the major concerns of the international doctoral students at several Malaysian universities. The student was increasingly anxious during his proposal presentation when he discovered that the examiners were not proficient in the second language, hence had difficulty in understanding his accent.

Negative attitude

In addition to language barriers, the present study also revealed that negative attitudes influenced students' speaking performance. In the interviews, it was revealed that students' negative attitudes were often affiliated with their emotions and some conditions involving interlocutors' unwelcome attitude, afraid of making mistakes, shyness, and interlocutors' judgemental view. With regards to the interlocutor's negative attitude, Gianna and Akara expressed:

I don't feel included especially when I don't relate with the jokes [in Indonesian]. If we're [she and her Myanmar friend] outside the class, they [host students] wouldn't talk to us in English. It's okay I don't, I just...(silence) it would be nice if like, um... they make a little effort to include us in their comments or things. (Gianna)

I started learning English, but no one wanted to be my friend. I talked in English when I first came to this university, but no one responded, only some. So, I tried to learn Bahasa Indonesia and until now, I'm talking Bahasa Indonesia. (Akara)

Furthermore, being afraid of making mistakes was also considered as a factor which reduced students' enthusiasm in speaking English, as evidenced in the following excerpts:

I always feel worried about making mistakes when I'm speaking English. (Mai)

I'm afraid of making mistakes about speaking. I feel worried when I make mistakes while speaking English. (Bormay).

I don't like, to.. to... make mistakes, so I'm quite like, I'm.. a.. little perfectionist so I don't like making mistakes. (Gianna).

I'm afraid of speaking wrong. Because of the fear, it leads me to make me quiet". (Akara)

The interlocutors' judgemental view was also been identified as a contributing factor to FLSA. During the interviews, students were observed to pay attention more to people's opinions that they considered inappropriate. Sokha for example asserted:

When someone mocks or curses me while evaluating my speaking, I don't want to. I don't like it! (shakes his head). (Sokha)

The final factor was concerned with shyness, a prevalent issue experienced by three out of seven students. In the interviews, students were shown to be confused, nervous and frustrated about their own self. Gianna expressed:

When I have to give a presentation in front of the class, I definitely super nervous, super nervous. Really-really nervous and I super insecure totally all the time. All the time that I normally try to think before I'm speaking and because of that I get a little frustrated. (Gianna).

The findings above are in line with many theories discussed in the literature. Azarfam and Baki (2012) suggest that students' negative attitude plays a prominent role in influencing their oral performance in English. Amiri and Puteh (2018) highlighted the roles of unwelcoming interlocutors' attitude and judgemental view that influence students' speaking performance. The literature also discusses the role of other aspects that affect FLSA, such as feeling afraid of making mistakes (Ebrahimi, 2013; Hammad, & Ghali, 2015), shyness (Zhiping, & Paramasivam, 2013), and psychological factors like stress and pressure (Tóth, 2011). These factors have driven the students to feel reluctant to speak, negatively impeding successful communication.

Intercultural communication apprehension

ICA is concerned with EFL similarity and social context issues experienced among the interlocutors. EFL similarity can happen when people come from the same area (i.e., Malaysia-Indonesia; Africa-Gambia and America-Canada), so there are few differences. Conversely, if they come from a different country with peculiar cultures and a distant perspective of the world, they may experience some problems to interact. According to the present study, the Thai and Algerians feel anxious to talk to British and American people due to English being their native language, but when the Algerians come to talk to Koreans or Japanese, they feel genuinely fine

as the Korean and the Japanese are FL of English. This occurs because of the differences of languages, the British and American use English as a mother tongue, whereas Algerians use English as their FL:

When I talk to European, you know, the sound of English from Europe and America. I feel sometimes scary if I will do some mistakes because their language is English. But when I speak to Korean and Japanese, I feel fine. I feel comfortable when I speak with people whose English isn't their mother language. (Nassima)

I'm worried to talk with American due to my less exposure. (Akara)

With respect to social context issues, the students' background/culture plays a pivotal role contributing to their FLSA, due to their social environment being different to the country they are living in. Sokha discussed the difference in English teacher's methods in Cambodia and Indonesia, in his home country, the English teacher teaches his students full English, while in Indonesia, the English teachers tend to use a mix of Bahasa Indonesia with English. This bothered Sokha, he preferred his English teacher to use full English, whereas Mai thought it was more acceptable if she talked to Indonesians in English rather than Vietnamese. In fact, the environment in Vietnam is intensely judgemental in giving opinions to English non-natives who want to try to speak in English, consequently her willingness to talk in English with Indonesians is understandable. As stated Sokha and Nassima:

In English class here, I want all my friends and teachers leave the class in English. No Bahasa is spoken. It's like my class in Cambodia, no Khmer is spoken. If someone speaks Khmer, the teacher will give him something to write at least 100, 200 words to punish my school mate. (laughs hard) (Sokha)

I am afraid about people judging me. Especially with Vietnamese people. Because you know, Vietnamese people always judge you, judge your English, more than foreigners. (Mai)

All these findings are corroborated by earlier studies on SA among host and international students as well as its factors, such as those discussed by Akkakoson (2016);

Selvam, Kamal, Swaminathan, and Baskaran (2016); Suleimenova (2013); Zhiping, and Paramasivam (2013).

CONCLUSION

In summary, this study has qualitatively investigated FLSA among seven international tertiary students in an Indonesian context, showing that all students experienced SA, despite learning English for between nine to twelve years. The data analysis demonstrated that many factors contributed to their SA, both in their daily and school environment. There were three main themes of FSA and DSA, such as language barriers (Blume, 2013), negative attitudes (Hammad & Ghali, 2015), and ICA (Seyitoglu et al., 2015; Zhou, 2014), which deter them from fulfilling their full potential performance in speaking, but not successful enough to stop them learning and communicating in English. Most of them still struggle to learn English and advance their oral communication skills.

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