

An Investigation On Mandarin Speaking Anxiety Among Non-Native Mandarin Learners

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ABSTRACT

Anxiety is one of the essential factors in Foreign Language learning. It plays a crucial role in determining the performance of students in the target language. Existence feelings of nervousness, anxious, or uncertain while learning foreign language may prevent them from achieving the desired goal and this is what students usually experience in speaking skills. Hence, the aim of the present study is to investigate the level of Mandarin speaking anxiety and the causes of Mandarin speaking anxiety among non-native Mandarin learners. 100 students taking Foundation Mandarin in UiTM Sarawak were investigated to achieve the aim. Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) was administrated in this study to measure the Mandarin speaking anxiety among non-native Mandarin learners. Statistical package for Social Science (SPSS) was employed to analyze the data. The findings show that non-native Mandarin learners have experienced a certain degree of Mandarin speaking anxiety. The main cause of Mandarin speaking anxiety is speaking Mandarin spontaneously. The findings of this study might help teachers who are engaged in teaching Mandarin as Foreign Language to have a better understanding of how they could help the students to lessen the level of Mandarin speaking anxiety.

Keywords: *Mandarin, Speaking, anxiety, non-native Mandarin learners, speaking activities*

INTRODUCTION

As part of the Silk Road Economics Belt and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road initiatives, the interest to learn Mandarin language among people has increased. In Malaysia, the number of non-native Mandarin learners is also growing in the current era. Most of the universities in Malaysia offer Basic Mandarin language courses for those non-native Mandarin learners who are interested in Mandarin language learning. In University Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Foundation Mandarin (Level 1 & 2) is offered to students at the Diploma level. Students who registered in Foundation Mandarin should complete two levels of this course. Foundation Mandarin focuses on elementary Mandarin vocabulary, grammar, Hanyu Pinyin (Chinese alphabet) and communication skills. Students are required to perform in front of the class through some language activities such as role-play or simulation. However, learning Mandarin as a foreign language is an arduous tasks for non-native Mandarin learners especially the pronunciation of Mandarin language. This is because Mandarin pronunciation has four tones which are totally unlike their mother tongues (Malay or

English language). Speaking in the foreign language is an anxiety-producing experience for most of the students (Young, 1990). In other words, non-native Mandarin learners could experience the feeling of anxiety when they have to speak or perform in Mandarin speaking class. It might cause them the lack of confidence to speak in Mandarin and extinguish the aspiring learners to learn the language.

In the context of Malaysia, Mandarin learners have the opportunity to contact Mandarin native speakers who may provoke speaking anxiety. Therefore, this study is aimed to determine students' anxiety towards speaking in Mandarin and to investigate students' speaking anxiety level in Mandarin language learning. This study further aims to identify the types of activity that may cause speaking anxiety. Based on the objectives, three research questions were formulated as below:

1. Do non-native Mandarin learners experience anxiety when speaking Mandarin?
2. What is the speaking anxiety level of non-native Mandarin learners?
3. What are the major activities that caused speaking anxiety among non-native Mandarin learners?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language anxiety is defined as a form of characteristics which revolves around the aspects of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviors (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986). This is mainly caused by a unique learning process that typically takes place in a classroom language learning. However, Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) claimed that foreign language (FLA) is "a phenomenon related to but distinguishable from other specific anxieties" (Horwitz et al., 1986, p. 129). To further explain, MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) stated that FLA happen when learners feel tensed and apprehensive towards the second or foreign language context. This encompasses the elements of speaking, listening, and learning, which includes "worry and negative emotional reaction when learning or using a second or foreign language" (MacIntyre and Gardner (1994), as cited in Meghavaani, Mogana, Yap, 2014).

With this in mind, the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) was developed by Horwitz et al. (1986) to identify and measure the foreign language anxiety (FLA). FLCAS consists of a total of 33 items designed in a 5-Likert scale question. From this, Horwitz et al.'s theory of foreign language anxiety was found to be a reliable tool to measure the uniqueness of foreign language anxiety which has been widely accepted by other researchers in the same area of interest.

Qian (1999) is the first researcher who adapted FLCAS as the instrument to investigate Mandarin language classroom anxiety among foreign students from various countries. The result showed that these foreign students experience certain level of anxiety because of their nationality and self-evaluation. Qian further investigated the issue of affective variables (such as age, gender, learning motivation learning duration etc.) related to language learning. Findings indicated foreign students' Mandarin language anxiety was not affected by the affective variables.

In the study by Shi (2007), 50% of the foreign students experience moderate level of language anxiety. Employing FLCAS, open-ended structured interview and classroom observation, Li (2013) conducted a study in Guangxi High School to investigate the Mandarin language learning anxiety among Southeast Asia (SEA) Mandarin learners. The result indicated that most of the Southeast Asia Mandarin

learners experience moderate level of anxiety. The demographic background (learning experience, perception of Mandarin proficiency level etc.) also caused anxiety among the Mandarin learners.

To investigate Mandarin language learning anxiety among Turkmenistan preparatory students, Hao (2014) conducted a research at an international cultural exchange school in Central China Normal University. The study utilized the quantitative and qualitative research methodology. The result of the study revealed moderate level of anxiety among students because of the learning environment, the feature of Mandarin language, self-evaluation, translation on the teaching materials, the way of instructor correcting, the English proficiency level of the learners, cultural differences and learning habits.

In Malaysia, Ting (2016) conducted a study on 221 non-Chinese learners in Universiti Teknologi MARA, Sarawak branch. The results of the study illustrated most of the non-Chinese learners experienced moderate level of anxiety while learning Mandarin and the main factor that contributed to their language anxiety was communication apprehension.

To add, Zhang (2016) investigated Mandarin learning anxiety of learner from Northern University of Malaysia. The result showed higher anxiety than others studies. There is no significant effect on Mandarin learners' anxiety regarding gender differences or year of study. Learners' mandarin anxiety and Mandarin result showed negative correlation.

Speaking anxiety can play a vital role in FLA. As stated by Horwitz et al. (1986), it is common for learners to feel anxious when communicating with another person in a second or foreign language, due to the need for communication. There were studies conducted to investigate Mandarin speaking anxiety. Liu (2017) examined the level of Mandarin speaking among beginner and intermedia Mandarin learners from central Asian countries. The result showed that the Mandarin speaking anxiety of learners from central Asian countries are higher than learners from others countries. Li's (2016) study investigated foreign language classroom anxiety in Chinese speaking class among 24 short-term overseas students in China. The result revealed that this group of students is in the low level of anxiety. Li's study also proposed anxiety coping strategies in order to reduce students' anxiety in Chinese speaking class.

Ma (2016) also conducted a research among Indonesian students in Chinese speaking anxiety. As shown in the result, it shows that Indonesian students are in the moderate level of anxiety. Ma further investigated the correlation between Mandarin speaking anxiety and background demographic (such as age, gender, duration of learning Mandarin, the level of proficiency Mandarin etc.), and its achievement. However, the result shows no significant relationship between Mandarin speaking anxiety and background demographic, which means the background demographic does not affect the Mandarin speaking anxiety among Indonesian students. Similarly, Luo (2014) investigated Mandarin speaking anxiety among beginners of Tajikistan. The result of study indicated that these beginners from Tajikistan experience moderate level of speaking anxiety.

Apart from that, Zhang (2001) also looked into the relation between foreign students' learning anxiety and their fluency of spoken Chinese through recordings. Zhang (2002) conducted a study that involved 90 foreign students to find out the correlation between Mandarin language anxiety and the Mandarin speaking result and interestingly, findings showed no significant relationship.

Generally, most of these studies mostly focus on the non-native learners from Western, Japan and Korea (Hao, 2014), while there is only one research study (Ting, 2016) conducted on the examination

among non-native Mandarin learners in Malaysia. Therefore, the main focus of this study will be on non-native learners in Malaysia context and focuses on Mandarin language learners' speaking anxiety.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Sampling

This study utilized purely a quantitative approach where the instrument used to collect the data was in a form of questionnaire. The respondents were 100 students (18 male and 82 female) who are taking Foundation Mandarin in UiTM Sarawak. The age of participants ranged from 18 to 21 years. Students involved in this study were asked to respond to the questionnaire. A set of questionnaire named Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) which was developed by Horwitz et al. (1986) was adapted. FLCAS has been extensively tested and widely used to investigate foreign language anxiety (Aida, 1994; Matsuda & Gobel, 2001). However, since speaking anxiety is underscore in this study, 18 items about speaking anxiety were modified from 33 items of FLCAS. These items were also used by Saltan (2003) and Öztürk (2009) and found to be directly related to foreign language speaking anxiety where the Cronbach's Alpha for these items showed good internal consistency reliability for the scale (Sibel, 2015). The respondents were asked to rate each item on a five-point Likert scale: 1 ("strongly disagree"), 2 ("disagree"), 3 ("Neutral"), 4 ("Agree"), 5 ("strongly agree"). From the questionnaire, 18 items of speaking anxiety range from 18 to 90, with three levels of speaking anxiety among non-native Mandarin learners: 18-53 as low level anxiety, 54-71 as moderate level anxiety, and 72-90 as high level anxiety. SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Science) version 22 was used in this study to calculate the data and the data obtained is presented in the form of descriptive statistics such as mean, standard deviation, frequency and percentage.

FINDINGS

The questionnaire adapted for this study consisted of 18 items which ranged from 18 to 90. Overall, the level of Mandarin speaking anxiety among non-native Mandarin learners was obtained by calculating the total anxiety score of respondents for each level of Mandarin speaking anxiety. The levels of Mandarin speaking anxiety were classified into three categories as follow:

Level	Scores	Level of Mandarin speaking anxiety
1	18-53	Low
2	54-71	Moderate
3	73-90	High

The means score of the levels of Mandarin speaking anxiety for the whole samples (n= 100) is M= 58.82, SD = 7.325 which indicates a moderate level of speaking anxiety among non-native Mandarin learners (as presented in Table 1). The results showed that there were only two respondents who experienced high Mandarin speaking anxiety. However, more than half of the respondents felt moderately

anxious while speaking in Mandarin. Also, 22% of the respondents indicated low level of speaking anxiety in Mandarin.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistic of Mandarin speaking anxiety

Mean	Standard Deviation
58.82	7.325

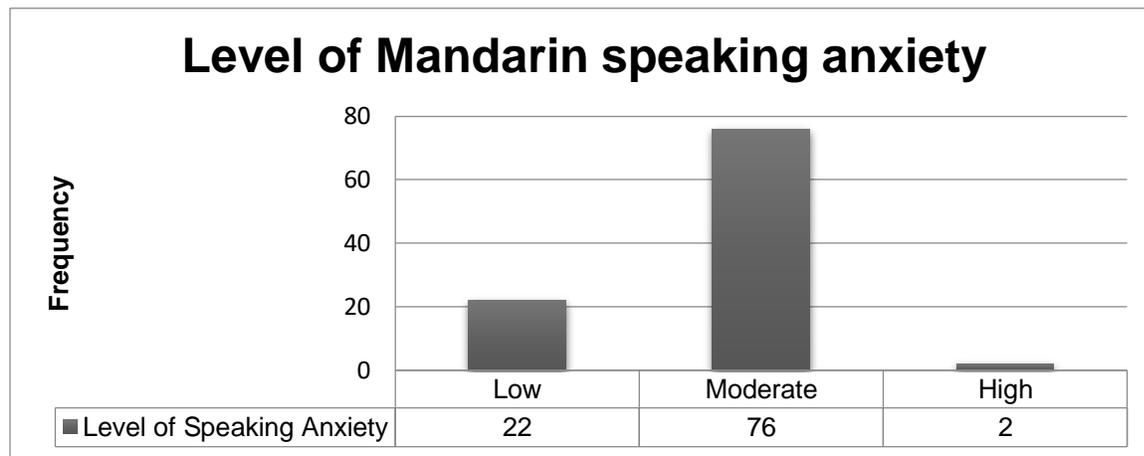


Figure 1 Level of Mandarin speaking anxiety among non-native Mandarin learners

Although the mean of Mandarin speaking anxiety among non-native Mandarin learners was not extremely high, a number of learners did experience a high level of speaking anxiety. The items which scored above 50% of responses were gathered in Table 2 to summarize the major activities which caused the Mandarin speaking anxiety among the non-native Mandarin learners.

Table 2 Major activities cause Mandarin speaking anxiety (above 50%)

Item	Percentage
I get nervous when the Chinese teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance.	68
I start panic when I have to speak without preparation in Mandarin class.	66
I always feel that other students speak the Mandarin better than I do.	63
*I would not be nervous speaking Mandarin with native Chinese speakers.	60
It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in Mandarin class.	59

I get nervous when I don't understand every Mandarin word the language teacher says. 58

M= Mean, SD= Standard Deviation

As shown in Table 2, it can be noted that majority of them reported that they will start to “get nervous when the Chinese teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance,” to which 68% responded affirmatively; “I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in Mandarin class,” to which had affirmatively responses of 66%. Of these two items, it appears that speaking spontaneously was the most common activity that caused learners to get anxious. Speaking in second language or foreign language need more knowledge, more thinking, and also with an intermediate proficiency of the target language. Yet in this study, the proficiency level of respondents does not reach the level where they can speak Mandarin spontaneously, which may result in getting nervous or panic if they are not ready to speak in the target language. For this reason, language instructors or educators should give students some time for speaking preparation. When students are given time to prepare before they speak, they feel more comfortable and less anxious.

The next activity pointed out by the respondents (63%) is “feel that other students speak the Mandarin better than I do”. Young (1991) and MacIntyre, Noels, and Clement (1997) perceived the factors of learning anxiety was provoked because of self-derogation. The learner might feel afraid that they would make mistake in front of their peers. Asian students, due to cultural factors, are typically afraid of the possibility of being embarrassed or being laughed at in front of other people in the language classroom (Liu & Jackson, 2008; Liu, 2007). Interestingly, they “would not be nervous speaking Mandarin with native Chinese speakers” (60%). Language instructors or educators might provide opportunities in simulated contact with native speaker speech. The more familiar students are with native speaker's manner of speech, the higher their confidence would be in being able to understand native speaker speech and accordingly, be able to respond confidently (Chan, 2012).

Respondents also expressed their Mandarin speaking anxiety in the statements including “It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in Mandarin class” (59%); “I get nervous when I don't understand every Mandarin word the language teacher says” (58%). Horwitz (1987) states from her own experience that many anxious language learners believe that they are supposed to understand every words in their foreign language class. It caused them to be frustrated when they cannot comprehend the meaning of the words in a conversation. It is seen that students show a good example of having a perfectionist attitude. However, over-perfectionist attitude makes them anxious and may cause negative effects on their performance. Language instructors or educators should consult students in order to decrease or prevent speaking anxiety among students.

CONCLUSION

Based on the result of quantitative data, it can be concluded that non-native Mandarin learners experience moderate level of Mandarin speaking anxiety. The main cause of Mandarin speaking anxiety is speaking Mandarin spontaneously. Therefore, language instructors or educators should take this into consideration. Students should be given time to prepare their ideas, and arrange their ideas before they speak in front of the class. This study revealed that anxiety is still proven to be a major factor affecting foreign language learning and it influences both speed and accuracy of learning. Language instructors have the role of guiding and aiding students' transitions from their position as beginners to proficient language users in their

language learning process (Elaldi, 2016). Motivation and consultation from the instructor is crucial to lessen the feeling of anxiety among learners in order to minimize its effect in Mandarin language learning.

This present study focused on non-native Mandarin learners' Mandarin speaking anxiety. It is possible to further investigate the same topic with a larger population through qualitative data such as interviews, classroom observation and teacher interviews which will be useful to give a better understanding of the issues of Mandarin speaking anxiety among non-native Mandarin learners. By understanding anxiety and its effect on learners' overall psychological perception, perhaps it could facilitate language acquisition among language learners.

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