

Exploring Students' Speaking Anxiety at Akademi Laut Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the speaking anxiety of 106 first year nautical and marine engineering cadets at the Akademi Laut Malaysia (ALAM). As the English language is the language of instruction in the maritime education and training institutions, it creates inconvenience to students in coping with the language requirements and classroom instructions. The promulgation of English as the working language of the maritime industry has increased this anxiety even more. Ironically, in both classrooms and on board merchant ships, students must be able to communicate effectively especially in communicating essential information for the safety of operations. Hence, it is worthwhile to explore the possibility of speaking anxiety in both nautical and marine engineering classrooms for the benefit of industry. A quantitative survey, adapted from Horwitz's (1986) Foreign Language Anxiety Scale (FLAS) was administered on respondents and the data collected were then analysed by SPSS version 22 for further analysis and understanding. The results of this study show that there is a significant level of speaking anxiety among the survey respondents which needs to be addressed effectively.

Keywords: Maritime English, speaking anxiety, effective communication, working language

INTRODUCTION

Speaking is the most productive skill of all the four language skills (Ozturk and Gurbuz, 2014). To a second language learner, speaking can be complicated despite its importance in today's job industry. Yalcin and Incecay (2014) reported that students in foreign language classrooms particularly English believed that speaking in the target language is the most anxiety producing task. There have been numerous studies on the area of student anxiety in Malaysia but none focuses on the maritime industry especially in Maritime Education and Training institutions. This calls for an action to address this situation as communicative competence i.e. speaking has been regulated as a mandatory requirement by the STCW Codes 1978, as amended (International Convention for Standard of Training and Certifications for Watch-keeping). Therefore, the maritime authorities, administration and educationists have to prioritize on speaking so as to ensure the teaching and learning comply with the STCW 1978 Codes, particularly in ensuring this communicative competence is being nurtured and achieved.

LITERATURE REVIEW

It has been proven by related research that anxious foreign language learners due to their lower performance and proficiency that normal students are less willing to participate in classroom activities (Horwitz, 2001; Aida, 1994; MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991). This is because they have to communicate in the target language which happens to be the language that they have not yet completely mastered, as reported by Cagatay (2015); Suleimenova (2013); Tsiplakides and Keramida (2009); Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986).

In the English as a second language (ESL) classroom, teachers or trainers are aware of this anxiety but they are not sure whether it has been caused by student's lack of motivation or increased level of anxiety (Yalcin and Incecay, 2014). As such, the classic research on speaking anxiety by Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) has concluded that anxious ESL learners have symptoms such as 'sweating, palpitations, worry, forgetful and most importantly, difficulties in language learning' (p.3). Cagatay (2015), Humphrey (2011), Harmer (2004), MacIntyre (1999), Gardner & MacIntyre (1993) and Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986), reported that speaking anxiety is the most common problem in language learning process in which students need to process linguistic input and produce their thoughts at the same time.

As the most prominent researchers in foreign language anxiety, Horwitz et al. (1986) concluded in their studies that students with high levels of anxiety received lower grades than normal students. In another similar study, Aida (1994) discovered that anxious students obtained lower grades than students who were less anxious. In addition, Samimy and Tabuse (1992) found that anxiety had a negative impact on learners' performance in Japan. As for speaking, Dalkilic (2001) discovered that there was a significant relationship between students' anxiety level and their success in speaking class. This was further supported by Huang's (2004) findings whereby speaking tasks provided the highest anxiety for Chinese EFL students in Taiwan. This had impacted their grades for the English subjects. In China, Liu and Jackson (2008) reported that students' unwillingness to communicate and inability to complete speaking tasks were caused by high speaking anxiety level. In another related research, Tsiplakides and Keramida (2009) revealed that 40 percent of respondents in their study had faced speaking anxiety due to fear of negative evaluation from peers. Ay (2010) asserted that students were anxious the most when they were required to speak spontaneously in class. A research on speaking anxiety in Kazakhstan showed that there was a high level of speaking anxiety as claimed by Suleimenova (2013). This was due to the fact that the educational system there was not designed to increase students' communicative competence.

However, there were also studies which resulted low or moderate level of speaking anxiety. Saltan (2003) and Balemir (2009) found that Turkish university students experienced a moderate level of speaking anxiety in their English classes. Ozturk and Gurbuz (2014) highlighted in their studies that majority of their respondents experience a low level of speaking anxiety in class. However, students were aware of the factors that cause this anxiety in class and had worked to mitigate them accordingly. The studies of Yalcin and Incecay (2014) also discovered a low level of speaking anxiety due to several methods that had been regularly employed by lecturers in class.

This research functions as an exploratory study into 106 students' speaking anxiety at the Akademi Laut Malaysia (ALAM). More significantly, it also highlights the need of maritime educators to take into consideration their students' anxiety in class for further improvement in classroom interaction and lesson delivery. Ultimately, this leads to students' understanding of the lessons and thus fulfils the learning objectives.

METHODOLOGY

Respondents

This study was conducted on 106 respondents (7 female and 99 male) from the Akademi Laut Malaysia (ALAM), Kuala Sungai Baru, Masjid Tanah, Melaka. Their ages ranging from 18 to 22 years old and they were undertaking Diploma in Nautical Studies and Diploma in Marine Engineering programmes. The subject of focus which featured speaking tasks was Maritime English for both nautical and marine engineering streams.

Research design and instrumentation

A survey which used self-administered questionnaire was conducted to obtain quantitative data from 106 respondents. The survey duration was 1 week which began after 4 weeks of class in both programmes. Data collection was conducted in the fifth week of class. In the preceding 4 weeks, classes were conducted primarily via Communicative Approach which prioritizes on students' ability to respond to variety of speaking tasks particularly in ship to ship and ship to shore marine communication. The questionnaire set consisted of 30 questions and it was divided into 2 sections namely Section A and Section B. Section A used multiple choice format for obtaining demographic data from respondents through 6 questions. Section B had 24 questions that focused on students' speaking anxiety and had been adapted from Horwitz's (1986) "Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale" (FLCAS). The adapted questions used 5 point *Likert Scale* ranging from 1) *Strongly Disagree*, 2) *Disagree*, 3) *Unsure/Neutral*, 4) *Agree* and 5) *Strongly Disagree*.

Data analysis

All collected data were analysed by the SPSS software version 22. Accordingly, a reliability test on all questions was measured by using *Cronbach coefficient alpha* of the SPSS software. The *Cronbach coefficient alpha* value was obtained at 0.769. Nunnally (1978) recommended a minimum alpha 0.7 for basic research's reliability. Hence, it can be summarized that there is a high level of reliability in all self-constructed and adapted questions used in this research.

Research questions

The research questions of this study have been formulated as follows:

1. What is the level of student's speaking anxiety at ALAM especially during Maritime English classes?
2. What are the causes of students' speaking anxiety at ALAM?
3. Which are the highest and lowest factors that cause students' speaking anxiety at ALAM?

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Range of Mean Scores

The ranges of respondents' feedback in this research are represented by the range scores and levels as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1 Level of respondents' feedback

Range of Mean Scores	Level of responses
0.0 – 1.99	Low
2.0 – 2.99	Moderate
3.00 – 3.99	High
4.0 – 5.0	Very High

Suffice to mention that the ranges above will be used to identify the level of speaking anxiety as experienced by all respondents. Moreover, this will also assist the researchers to make more concrete analysis and conclusion based on the feedback received. The four levels of responses identified as *Low*, *Moderate*, *High* and *Very High* will be used to indicate the actual level of responses for better discussion and conclusions.

Analysis on Research Question One: What is the level of student's speaking anxiety at ALAM especially during Maritime English classes?

Table 2 below shows the mean and standard deviations of 9 questions which specifically focus on students' speaking anxiety in Maritime English class. These 9 questions are listed randomly in the questionnaire to obtain immediate responses that represent actual levels of speaking anxiety in class. The overall mean scores obtained by all statements indicated that students' level of anxiety ranged from 1.41 to 2.73. 2 items obtained mean scores below 2.00 (*mean score < 2.00*) which indicate low level of speaking anxiety. Moreover, 7 items obtained mean scores of more than 2.00 but below 3.00 (*mean score > 2.00 and < 3.00*). These represent moderate level of speaking anxiety of respondents. From all items, item No. 16, *I often feel like not going to my English class* obtained the lowest mean score of 1.41 from all 106 respondents. The highest mean score of 2.73 was obtained by item No. 26; *I get nervous when the English teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance*. The mean scores obtained by all the 9 items were lesser than 3.00 (*mean score < 3.00*). Based on Table 1, it can be asserted that the level of speaking anxiety of all 106 respondents in this study was at the Low (*mean score = 0.0-1.99*) and Moderate levels (*mean score = 2.0-2.99*).

Furthermore, Table 2 also shows that none of the items/questions obtained mean score of more than 3.00 (*mean score > 3.00*). This indicates that none of the item qualifies to be in the significant range of speaking anxiety. Hence, it can be concluded that the level of respondents' speaking anxiety in this study is only at the moderate level. So, even though it is not that alarming, still, there is evidence showing that the speaking anxiety case requires sufficient attention and further analysis of the situation.

Table 2 Mean scores of 9 items on Speaking Anxiety

No.	Statements	Mean
12	I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in English class.	2.71
13	In English class, I can get so nervous that I forget things I know.	2.62
16	I often feel like not going to my English class.	1.41
18	I can feel my heart pounding when I'm going to be called on in English class.	2.65
22	I feel more tense and nervous in my English class than in my other classes.	1.72
23	I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my English class.	2.29
25	I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak English.	2.44
26	I get nervous when the English teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance.	2.73
27	I worry about the consequences of failing my English class.	2.68

There is a statement above which receives mean score more than 3.00 and 3.50 (*mean score* > 3.50). Statement number 11, "*I keep thinking that other students are better in English than I am*" receives a total score of 3.51. This is significant for discussion as it reflects respondents' perception on the overall level of English proficiency especially speaking. In a more positive point of view, it gives the indication that respondents are very judgemental in evaluating each other's communicative ability especially the ones emphasized and demonstrated in classrooms. In language learning especially in speaking, this is seen as a result of positive observation, in which it makes students to be more motivated to improve themselves in the next tasks or classes.

Analysis on Research Question Two: What are the causes of students' speaking anxiety at ALAM?

From the survey questions in Section B, 10 questions had been listed down to obtain respondents' feedback on the possible causes of their speaking anxiety. These questions were adapted from Horwitz's "Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale" (FLAS). These questions were placed at random in Section B for anonymity like in questions no. 10, 12 and 20. To increase reliability also, there were questions being placed in sequence as in questions 24-27. This is to allow respondents to better analyse the factors thus place their feedback more effectively. Table 3 below shows these 10 statements and their mean scores for further analysis.

Table 3 Statements indicating the possible causes of students' speaking anxiety

No.	Statements	Mean
8	I don't worry about making mistakes in English class.	3.70
9	It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in English.	2.97
10	I keep thinking that other students are better in English than I am.	3.59
12	I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in English class.	3.08
20	I feel very self-conscious about speaking English in front of other students.	3.16
24	I get nervous when I don't understand every word the English teacher says.	2.44
25	I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak English.	2.44
26	I get nervous when the English teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance.	2.73
27	I worry about the consequences of failing my English class.	3.16
30	I am afraid that my English teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make.	2.21

Listed in Table 3 above are statements/questions in which students gave feedback on the possible causes of their speaking anxiety in class. The range of means obtained by all the 10 statements is between 2.21 and 3.70 and it falls under the categories of *moderate and high (mean score > 2.00 and mean score < 4.00)*. The lowest mean score was obtained by item no. 30, "*I am afraid that my English teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make*" with 2.21. The highest mean score of 3.70 in this category was obtained by item no. 8, "*I don't worry about making mistakes in English class*".

The results obtained are considered significant as it clearly indicates the factors of students becoming anxious in their English classes. However, for better discussion and understanding, the causes/factors are divided into two parts according to the mean scores obtained. Item no. 8 which stands for the factor, "*students do not afraid to make mistakes in class*" is not considered as a factor, judging from the significantly high level of mean score obtained. Therefore, it can be concluded that respondents in this study experienced high level speaking anxiety due to these four factors, "*I keep thinking that other students are better in English than I am; I worry about the consequences of failing my English class; I feel very self-conscious about speaking English in front of other students and I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in English class*" (mean score > 3.00).

On the other hand, from the results or survey, four moderate causes of student speaking anxiety in this study were identified. They are "*It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in English; I get nervous when the English teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance; I get nervous when I don't understand every word the English teacher says and I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me*

when I speak English” (mean score >2.00 but <3.00). The discussion in this section leads to the next research questions in identifying the highest and the least causes of students’ speaking anxiety in this study.

Analysis on Research Question Three: What are the highest and lowest factors that cause students’ speaking anxiety at ALAM?

Research Question Three requires the researchers to identify the highest and the lowest factors that cause students’ speaking anxiety in this research. To address this question, the item which has the highest mean score can be considered as the highest or the most common cause of speaking anxiety in class while the item with the lowest mean score in the category, can be taken as the lowest factor of speaking anxiety. Table 4 lists down the two items in the survey questionnaire for the purpose of discussion.

Table 4 The highest and lowest causes of speaking anxiety

No.	Statements	Mean
10	I keep thinking that other students are better in English than I am.	3.59
30	I am afraid that my English teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make.	2.21

From the results presented in Table 4 above, it is concluded that most respondents believed that item no. 10 is the most common cause of their speaking anxiety. Hence, with a high mean score of 3.59, the highest possible cause for students to experience anxiety in speaking is when they think other students or their colleagues have higher level of English proficiency than them (*I keep thinking that other students are better in English than I am.*) This indicates that students are not comfortable in class especially when they believe that they are more inferior to their classmates or colleagues in terms of their English proficiency.

In contrast, students do not find that their teacher’s roles in class especially in correcting their mistakes as significant in causing speaking anxiety. The low mean score of 2.21 clearly indicates that students understand the roles of their teachers and do not take this as great concerns in causing anxiety compared to other factors discussed earlier. Hence, it can also be asserted that item no. 30, *I am afraid that my English teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make* is the lowest factor in causing students’ speaking anxiety in this study (mean >2.00 but <3.00).

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION OF STUDY

This study focuses on ALAM students’ speaking anxiety especially the factors that cause it. From the results obtained, it is obvious that there exists a significant level of speaking anxiety in all 106 respondents in the study. Even though the level is only between the range of moderate to high (mean scores >2.00 and <4.00), the results indicate that speaking, even though is an essential skill, is not that preferable by students judging from the pressure and anxiety that it presents to them. This finding is rather alarming as speaking i.e. communicative competence is one of the two ultimate goals in the STCW’s Maritime English subject for both nautical and marine engineering programmes. In a long term situation, this goal shall be greatly hampered if certain actions are not taken to address the situation. This

brings maritime educators and educationists to the next level where more engaging yet effective teaching and learning approaches should be integrated in order to mitigate the effects of speaking anxiety.

This study paves way for more research into ALAM students' speaking anxiety. One of the immediate solutions is to consider the integration of other student engaging methods in teaching so that the anxiety could be further addressed or reduced. It is also timely now to consider Digital Learning as part of the strategies in addressing students' speaking anxiety whereby learners become more responsible and engaging in their learning via digital technologies as practised in flipped classroom, gamification, MMLS (Multimedia Learning System), blended learning and tactile learning. Indeed, the Communicative Method as emphasized by the STCW needs to be merged with other powerful tools of learning so as to reduce the level of speaking anxiety. Hence, the shift of speaking tasks shall drastically shift from accuracy to fluency without having to yield so much to the factors or the effects of speaking anxiety. The emphasis is still in line with the STCW 1978 as amended, when the 2010 Manila Amendments clearly emphasises on having effective communications on board merchant ships worldwide.

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