

# EXPLORING VIETNAMESE NON-ENGLISH-MAJORED FRESHMEN'S ENGLISH-SPEAKING ANXIETY AT A PUBLIC UNIVERSITY IN VIETNAM

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**Abstract:** The study investigates Vietnamese non-English-majored freshmen's speaking anxiety. 297 non-English-majored freshmen enrolled at a public university in Vietnam answered the Questionnaire of Speaking Anxiety. The results show that participants had a moderate level of English-speaking anxiety, with female students having a higher level of speaking anxiety than male students. To provide insights into sources of speaking anxiety, anxiety-provoking situations and strategies that students use to cope with speaking anxiety, follow-up qualitative data was collected. 24 students from the pool of participants were conveniently recruited and randomly assigned to five focus groups, who answered the semi-structured interview questions. The findings show that students experience a higher level of speaking anxiety when they are called to answer questions by their teacher in class and during a speaking test, and to make an oral presentation than when they perform a role-play in front of the class and work in groups. Besides, students attributed their speaking anxiety to their English-speaking abilities, the nature of teachers' questions, fear of losing face and being judged, and fear of receiving low scores. To cope with speaking anxiety, students reported using social and cognitive strategies. The study provides helpful information for English lecturers to understand the nature of students' speaking anxiety and help students tackle speaking anxiety.

*Keywords:* speaking anxiety, non-English major, Vietnam

## 1. Introduction

English has earned itself the global status of the most commonly spoken language, with billions of learners worldwide recognizing the importance of learning English. In Vietnam, many investments and efforts have been made to improve the quality of English teaching and learning. One specific example is the National Foreign Languages Project 2020, which the government expects to enable students to communicate well in English. Among the four skills, speaking is essential,

especially for those entering the job market. Improved communication skills allow students to apply for better jobs and have higher living standards. Many Vietnamese universities have recently focused on high training quality, international exchange programs, and internationally recognized research publications. Thus, the demand for effective oral communication skills is higher than ever. More and more subjects are being taught in English, so students are expected to have an excellent English-speaking ability to interact with their teachers and peers in the

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classroom and socialize with the international academic community. However, Vietnamese EFL students tend to speak English with difficulty and seem to have trouble communicating in English. Among various issues that hinder oral proficiency, English speaking anxiety is the crucial factor that can impede students' speaking ability.

Thus, this study investigates the speaking anxiety level of Vietnamese non-English-majored first-year students and explores how students experience speaking anxiety, the causes of their speaking anxiety, and strategies they use to address this psychological factor. The findings of this study, which provide some insights into teaching and acquiring speaking skills, can be a great boon to both teachers and students. First, teachers can be more aware of the obstacles their students encounter. Teachers can realize that teaching styles and classroom techniques may impact students' attitudes towards learning English and their oral performance. They can make changes to establish rapport with students and create a supportive learning environment which can result in higher levels of student participation. Understanding the source of problems that cause speaking anxiety, teachers can develop strategies to help students overcome the barriers and enhance their self-confidence. Second, first-year students who have just entered university may not be familiar with new teaching methods and classroom requirements. Learning in a new environment with more emphasis on speaking skills, they will likely encounter problems and face difficulties. By participating in the study, students can identify the factors that make them nervous, develop strategies and learn to control their speaking anxiety, which helps them prepare better for their subsequent learning. The study results can also be used to adjust the teaching methods, program design, and classroom activities.

Accordingly, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What is Vietnamese non-English-majored freshmen's English speaking anxiety level?
2. How do Vietnamese non-English-majored freshmen experience English speaking anxiety?
3. What factors cause Vietnamese non-English-majored freshmen's English-speaking anxiety?
4. What strategies do Vietnamese non-English-majored freshmen use to cope with speaking anxiety?

## 2. Literature

### 2.1. *Anxiety, Language Anxiety, and Speaking Anxiety*

Anxiety is the state of an individual when feeling "uneasiness, frustration, self-doubt, apprehension, or worry" (Scovel, 1978, p. 134). In language learning, Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) defined language anxiety as "a distinguished multipart of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning derived from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (p. 128). Language anxiety can be defined as the adverse emotional reaction experienced by learners when they speak in a second or foreign language (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993). According to Horwitz et al. (1986), language anxiety comprises communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Communication apprehension in language learning is described as "a type of shyness characterized by fear of or anxiety about communicating with people" (Horwitz et al., 1986, p. 127) and the unwillingness of the learner to talk (Cabansag, 2020). Communication apprehension has significantly impacted learners' performance in foreign language classrooms (McCroskey & Anderson, 1976). Test anxiety, which

refers to apprehension over academic evaluation, is a type of performance anxiety caused by fear of failure (Horwitz et al., 1986). Fear of negative evaluation is defined as apprehension about others' evaluations and avoidance of evaluative situations (Horwitz et al., 1986). Anxiety also leads to passive behaviors because anxious students tend to avoid being called on to participate in class. They are also less likely to volunteer answers in spoken classes (Bekleyen, 2009).

Speaking is the skill most affected by anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986). Indeed, speaking has been cited as the most anxiety-inducing skill in language learning, and it is the most conspicuous source of anxiety in the language classroom (Ozturk & Gurbuz, 2013). In recent years, a lot of research has been done to identify language learners' speaking anxiety levels in different contexts. Miskam and Saidalvi (2019) surveyed undergraduates at a Malaysian university and found that most participants had moderate English-speaking anxiety. In Al Nakhalah's (2016) study, observations and interviews revealed some speaking difficulties that fourth-grade students at Al Quds Open University face due to fear of mistakes, shyness, anxiety, and lack of confidence. Liu and Jackson (2008) investigated the unwillingness to communicate and anxiety among Chinese first-year undergraduate non-English-majored learners. Findings revealed that more than one-third of the participants felt anxious in their English language classrooms. Gumartifa and Syahri (2021) conducted a descriptive study investigating some difficulties university students face and found that the majority are depressed when practicing or beginning to speak English in public.

## ***2.2. Factors Causing English Speaking Anxiety***

Factors affecting and causing speaking anxiety among language learners

vary across Asian contexts. According to Rajitha (2020), "many factors such as linguistic, psychological, physiological and cultural factors affect and cause the second language speaking anxiety" (p. 1055). Rajitha (2020) conducted a qualitative study among 50 undergraduates in India. The primary anxiety factors are language factors, lack of knowledge of grammar, pronunciation factors, stage fear, lack of confidence, shyness, and peer factor. Debreli and Demirkan (2016) documented factors that cause speaking anxiety among 196 Turkish students enrolling in the English Preparatory School of a university in Cyprus, including pronunciation difficulties, being asked immediate questions by the teacher, and failure to understand the teacher's questions. Likewise, Manley (2015) did a quantitative survey using a modified Horwitz et al.'s (1986) FLCAS among 832 first-year students in a Korean university. The results showed that the main factors contributing to English classroom speaking anxiety involve anxiety about class performance, uncomfortableness when speaking, pressure for tests and preparation, comparisons to peers, and negative attitudes towards English class. Similarly, through classroom observation, self-reported questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews, Tian (2019) pointed out that the major causes of English-speaking anxiety among 22 sophomores at a national university in Korea include negative attitude towards the speaking task, preparation time, language proficiency, and negative feedback from peers.

Similar findings were reported for the Southeast Asian contexts regarding sources of classroom speaking anxiety. For instance, using the Anxiety Scale in Spoken English as a Lingua Franca, Wilang, and Singhasiri (2017) found that fast speech and understanding the meaning behind an utterance were anxiety-provoking situations among undergraduates in Thai universities.

Batiha et al. (2014) used a mixed-method approach to investigate the causes of speaking anxiety among Indonesian students. The authors concluded that factors that provoked foreign language anxiety include test anxiety, fear of failing the course, instructor-learner interaction, vocabulary, negative evaluation, and high expectations. Other causes were reported by Jugo (2020), who revealed that negative self-perception, error correction, fear of making mistakes or being negatively evaluated are significant sources of anxiety for Filipino learners. Likewise, Milan (2019) documented that Filipino students experienced speaking anxiety due to grammatical errors, lack of opportunities to speak the language, internal motivation, and misconceptions about spoken English fluency. Besides, Milan (2019) pointed out that lack of personal training in the target language, instructional materials unrelated to students' interest or major, and concerns about being corrected or ridiculed caused speaking anxiety.

Studies among learners in other EFL contexts, especially in the Middle East and Arab world, reveal a common cause of speaking anxiety: low proficiency in the language. Sabbah (2018) conducted a study among students in a Qatar college and found that causes of anxiety included a lack of necessary basics of English, the discrepancy between the teaching methods and techniques used in class, and fear of being laughed. Ahmed et al. (2017) surveyed 240 students at the University of Balochistan in Pakistan using the adapted FLCAS. The participants attributed their anxiety to the disappointment caused by a failure to speak English fluently, poor accent, and inefficiency in using English structures. In the same context of Pakistan, Bahtti et al. (2016) studied 145 intermediate-level EFL students of different public colleges in Hyderabad, Sindh. They found that the learners' speaking anxiety was caused by

their feeling of low proficiency, nervousness, or lack of confidence. Shabani (2012) disclosed that Iranian students ascribed their speaking anxiety to fear of failing and leaving unfavorable impressions on others (Shabani, 2012). Mohtasham and Farnia (2017) found several causes: lack of preparation, lack of practice, self-doubt, fear of making pronunciation and grammar mistakes, and negative reactions from teachers and classmates among learners in Afghanistan. In a study among 373 English major students at Taif university in Saudi Arabia, other anxiety-provoking situations were found to be "worrying about the consequences of failing, forgetting things they knew and feeling uneasiness during language tests" (Alsowat, 2016, p. 193).

In addition to psychological and cultural factors, demographic factors, i.e., gender, may influence the anxiety level among language learners with mixed findings. Mohtasham and Farnia (2017) interviewed 40 Iranian EFL learners and found that females' anxiety level was significantly higher than that of males in impromptu speaking activities. Similarly, Park and French (2013) examined gender differences in language anxiety among 948 university students in Korea and pointed out that females reported higher anxiety levels than males. Likewise, surveying 383 Turkish university students, Öztürk and Gürbüz (2013) found that female students got more anxious than male students while speaking in English in the classroom. This finding was confirmed by Çağatay (2015), who found that female students seem more anxious when speaking English. However, Lian and Budin (2014) found that Malaysian male students were more anxious than females in the English class. Meanwhile, gender was found to have no significant impact on English-speaking anxiety in other countries such as Saudi Arabia (Alsowat, 2016), Turkey (e.g., Debreli & Demirkan, 2016), and Jordan (e.g., Batiha et al., 2016).

### **2.3. Effects of Speaking Anxiety**

Speaking anxiety does not permanently harm language learners. On the one hand, the positive force, i.e., facilitating anxiety may benefit language learners in several ways. According to Milan (2019), anxiety is not negative because a certain percentage of anxiety can enhance students' motivation to learn. The feeling of anxiety indicates that a person dares to be a successful language learner (Sutarsyah, 2017). Using three instruments in collecting the data: a speaking test, questionnaire, and interview, Christy and Mukhaiyar (2020) found out that the students having low levels of anxiety performed well in the speech test. This finding implies that anxiety positively affects students' performance. Employing observations, interviews, and a questionnaire, Djahimo et al. (2018) also revealed that anxiety impacted speaking performance and asserted that low-level anxiety students could perform better thanks to high motivation and self-confidence.

On the other hand, debilitating anxiety may cause learners to withdraw from the language task and lead to avoidance behaviors (Scovel, 1978). Many researchers and instructors also recognize anxiety as a hindrance for those learners who want to achieve good speaking abilities (Fleury, 2005). Studies have found that anxiety may significantly impact students and prevent them from participating in classroom speaking activities (Cabansag, 2020). Students' anxiety may also result in physical and psychological effects such as increased heart rate, trembling, sweating, hesitance to speak, stage fright, and avoidance of eye contact with their teachers (Milan, 2019). Studies have pointed out the negative impacts of speaking anxiety on students' performance, apart from adverse behavioral and emotional reactions. Melouah (2013) concluded that speaking anxiety greatly affects students' oral performance.

According to Mohamed and Wahid (2009), speaking anxiety can lead to low performance in both speaking skills and oral performance. In a semi-structured interview, most participants reported that anxiety negatively affects their speaking performance, causing a lack of logic, fluency, and accuracy in their utterances (Wang & Roopchund, 2015).

### **2.4. Speaking Anxiety in Vietnam**

For many Vietnamese learners of English, speaking is considered the most challenging skill, and speaking anxiety has been seen as a significant factor contributing to their English-speaking difficulties. Several studies on English-speaking anxiety have been conducted to explore this issue in Vietnam. Ngo and Nguyen (2018) surveyed 40 high school students at a high school in the southern part of Vietnam who had been learning English for approximately seven years. The authors confirmed the negative impact of test-taking anxiety on EFL learners' speaking performance and demonstrated that students with high anxiety levels had low speaking achievement.

Tran (2019) conducted a study using FLCAS to examine anxiety levels in the language classroom among 39 first-year students at Hanoi National University of Education. The participants reported low English proficiency, demonstrated through their reticence and passivity in class, unwillingness, and uncertainty in using the language. Based on the findings, the author suggested that speaking anxiety did exist in the foreign language classroom, and the participants experienced a high level of anxiety. The main causes were a lack of confidence in communication and worrying about the consequences of failing. The respondents also felt anxious about tests, speaking activities, teachers' speaking speed, and feelings of inferiority toward classmates.

Le and Tran (2020) used a descriptive research design to conduct a study among 123 first-year students at Thai Nguyen University. The authors found that the participants experienced a moderate level of speaking anxiety. The main causes were fear of being laughed at (95%), fear of making mistakes (86%), and lack of confidence (75%). Other causes, such as fear of negative evaluation and fear of being the focus of attention were also reported. However, regarding the main effect of anxiety levels, the mean levels of proficiency for Low anxiety ( $M = 2.22$ ,  $SD = 0.70$ ) was significantly larger than for High anxiety ( $M = 1.68$ ,  $SD = 0.66$ ),  $p = .002$ . These results indicated that higher levels of anxiety hindered academic performance.

### **2.5. Strategies to Tackle Speaking Anxiety**

Some studies have been carried out to identify the self-coping strategies used by language learners. Alotumi (2021) used an online Google-Forms-based survey to collect data among 300 EFL college Yemeni students aged 21-26. The results showed the students had a medium level of learning environment regulation and high levels of task value activation, regulation of affect, and classroom environment. Lizuka (2010) studied learners' anxiety-coping strategies among 108 Japanese EFL college students. Based on the results from an open-ended questionnaire, the students were most likely to use positive strategies such as having better preparations or making greater efforts. Furthermore, the students also asked their peers for help, especially when failing to understand what the teacher explained.

Ardi (2007) investigated Indonesian university students' foreign language anxiety and demonstrated that participants used four strategies to handle their language anxiety: preparation, relaxation, positive thinking, and peer seeking. Likewise, Pabro-Maquidato (2021) found that Filipino university students used several strategies to

cope with their nervousness, such as utilizing helping learning tools, putting their thoughts into writing, overcoming shyness by speaking practice, and making requests for teacher feedback. Chou (2018) surveyed 638 second-year undergraduates from four universities in Taiwan and highlighted that the more frequently university students practiced speaking and used rehearsal and paraphrasing strategies, the less likely they reported having speech anxiety.

In addition to positive strategies, passive strategies such as giving up, ignoring, or distancing oneself from difficult situations were also reported. Genç et al. (2016) did a quantitative study among 232 EFL students at a university in Turkey. Using the Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety Scale and Anxiety Coping Strategies Scale to investigate the anxiety-coping strategies used in the classroom, Genç et al. (2016) revealed that students mostly used the resignation strategies to cope with their anxiety (e.g., giving up, stopping paying attention, and accepting the situation). Though the participants looked for support from their classmates for relaxation, they used positive thinking the least.

## **3. Method**

### **3.1. Participants**

The participants were 297 non-English-majored freshmen (77 males and 220 females) aged 18 who were enrolled in different disciplines at a public university in Vietnam: accounting-auditing ( $n = 69$ ), e-commerce ( $n = 64$ ), real estate ( $n = 42$ ), business administration ( $n = 71$ ), tourism ( $n = 34$ ) and insurance ( $n = 17$ ). At the time of data collection, the participants had an average of 9.6 years of learning English and had just completed the Business English course in their first term. The participants were conveniently recruited and consented to respond to the Questionnaire of Foreign

Language Speaking Anxiety. After the survey, 24 students from the pool of surveyed participants were conveniently selected and assigned to five focus groups to participate in the semi-structured interview. Each focus group has 5 participants, except the final focus group with only 4 participants. Participants signed the informed consent forms before the interviews, and their identities were kept confidential. Pseudonyms were used to protect their identity.

Table 1 details the participants' demographic information.

**Table 1**

*Participant Demographics*

<b>Participants</b>	<b><i>n</i></b>	<b>%</b>
Participants	297	100
Gender		
Male	77	25.9
Female	220	74.1
High school location		
City	206	69.4
Rural areas	91	30.6
Disciplines		
Accounting-auditing	69	23.2
E-commerce	64	21.5
Real estates	42	14.1
Business administration	71	23.9
Tourism and travel	34	11.4
Insurance	17	5.7
Years of learning English		
6-9	115	38.7
10	102	34.3
>10	80	26.9

### 3.2. Instruments

#### 3.2.1. Questionnaire of Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety

The Questionnaire of Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety was adapted

from Horwitz et al.'s (1986) Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) and Bashori et al.'s (2021) Questionnaire of Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety (FLSA). Horwitz et al.'s (1986) FLCAS comprises 33 items with high internal reliability ( $r = .93$ ), which was widely used and validated across studies (e.g., Aida, 1994; Aydın et al., 2016; Park, 2014; Toyama & Yamazaki, 2018). As the analytical factors were not provided for Horwitz et al.'s (1986) FLCAS, Aida (1994) was the first to conduct a factor analysis of FLCAS to examine constructs that represent Japanese students' foreign language anxiety. Four factors were retrieved: (1) speaking anxiety and fear of negative evaluation, (2) fear of failing the class, (3) comfortableness in speaking with Japanese people, and (4) negative attitudes toward the Japanese class. Meanwhile, Park (2014) found two factors in his Korean version of FLCAS: (1) communication apprehension and understanding and (2) communication apprehension and confidence. In a study conducted on Japanese undergraduate students' foreign language anxiety, Toyama and Yamazaki (2018) found two factors: communication apprehension and fear of failing.

Besides, the foreign language speaking anxiety scale, adapted from Horwitz et al.'s (1986) FLACS, has been modified for EFL/ESL population (e.g., Bashori et al., 2021; Gökhan & Nurdan, 2014). For instance, Bashori et al. (2021) modified 18 items from Horwitz et al.'s (1986) FLCAS. They validated the foreign language speaking anxiety scale on secondary school Indonesian students with high internal validity ( $r = .92$ ). Also, Cabansag (2020) adapted 17 items from the same FLCAS to measure speaking anxiety among Filipino undergraduates but did not provide information about the reliability value. In this study, 18 items that Bashori et al. (2021) adapted from Horwitz et al.'s (1986)

FLACS were adapted to measure Vietnamese students' English-speaking anxiety (See appendix).

### 3.2.2. Semi-Structured Interview Questions

The semi-structured interview includes five questions that explore how students experience speaking anxiety in different classroom situations (e.g., responding to teachers' questions and taking part in group discussion), the sources of their speaking anxiety, and the strategies they use to cope with speaking anxiety (See Appendix).

## 3.3. Data Analysis

### 3.3.1. Quantitative Findings

SPSS (version 25) was used to analyze the quantitative findings. Descriptive statistics, including mean and standard deviation, provided information about the level of speaking anxiety among Vietnamese non-English-majored freshmen. Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient is used to provide internal reliability of the adapted instrument. One-way analyses of variance were computed to assess the differences among Vietnamese non-English-majored freshmen of different gender, disciplines, years of learning English, and high school locations in terms of speaking anxiety.

### 3.3.2. Qualitative Findings

Inductive content analysis was used to analyze the qualitative results providing insights into how Vietnamese non-English-majored freshmen experienced speaking anxiety. Data were transcribed verbatim and subsequently translated from Vietnamese into English. The steps of data analysis follow Creswell's (2002) guidelines. In the initial reading of text data, the researchers read the gathered data in detail until they were familiar with its content and understood the themes and events in the text.

The researchers identified relevant text segments connected with research objectives in the second step. The researcher wrote codes for the relevant texts to label text segments to create categories and marked the text segment copied into emerging categories. The researchers reduced overlapped codes and removed redundant codes or categories to create a small number of categories. The researchers searched for sub-topics within categories, including contrasting views and new insights, and selected suitable quotations to represent the core theme or category. The researchers combined or linked similar categories under a superordinate category. Regarding the reliability procedure, both researchers-cum-authors conducted multiple transcript reviews to reduce the mistakes in the participants' narratives of experiences and revisited the students for further clarification.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Speaking Anxiety Level of Vietnamese Non-English-Majored Freshmen

The Cronbach alpha value for the adapted FLSA,  $r = .90$ , indicated that FLSA has high internal consistency. The results show that participants had a moderate level of English-speaking anxiety ( $M = 3.34$ ,  $SD = .63$ ). Further analyses show that female students ( $M = 3.39$ ,  $SD = .64$ ) had a higher level of speaking anxiety than male students ( $M = 3.20$ ,  $SD = .61$ ) and this difference was statistically significant,  $F(1, 295) = 5.16$ ,  $p = .02 < .05$ . Likewise, there was a statistically significant difference among students of different disciplines in terms of speaking anxiety,  $F(4, 275) = 5.14$ ,  $p = .001 < .01$ . Accounting-Auditing students had the highest level of speaking anxiety ( $M = 3.54$ ,  $SD = .64$ ), followed by E-Commerce ( $M = 3.43$ ,  $SD = .60$ ), Real Estates and Tourism students ( $M = 3.30$ ,  $SD = .69$ ). Meanwhile, Business Administration



students had the lowest level of speaking anxiety ( $M = 3.01$ ,  $SD = .55$ ). Although differences in speaking anxiety were observed among students of different gender and disciplines, no significant difference was found among students with different years of learning English,  $F(2, 294) = .62$ ,  $p = .54 > .05$  and between those who attended high school in the city and rural areas,  $F(1, 295) = 3.49$ ,  $p = .06 > .05$ .

#### ***4.2. English Speaking Anxiety Experienced by Vietnamese Non-English-Majored Freshmen***

In general, Vietnamese non-English-majored first-year students in this study experienced diverse dimensions of speaking anxiety in many different situations. For instance, when asked to answer questions in the English class, most participants in the five focus groups shared that they experienced similar negative emotions (e.g., worried, afraid, confused, panicked, scared, and anxious), especially when receiving the teacher's random questions.

FG1S4: in unexpected situations or when things come all of a sudden, I feel anxious.

FG2S6: I feel anxious and worried

FG3S11: I feel confused, panicked, and worried...

FG3S13: I feel anxious, and I shiver

FG4S18: I shiver even when I know the answer.

FG2S6: I'm afraid my answer is wrong when I answer the questions that I haven't prepared for.

Also, most students experienced a high level of anxiety when their lecturer asked them a question during a speaking test, feeling "scared" and "shiver[ing]" (e.g., student FG1S1, FG2S6, FG3S13, and FG4S21). However, from many participants' sharing, making an oral presentation triggers the most negative emotions.

FG1S1: Making a presentation in Vietnamese in front of the class is difficult, let alone English. So the level of anxiety will double. Not everyone can present confidently in a language other than mother tongue, so I feel rather anxious and worried.

FG3S11: I feel anxious and embarrassed and afraid of forgetting what I'm going to say.

FG3S13: The possibility of me shivering when making a presentation is multiplied by 100 times. If I speak too softly, others cannot hear me. I likely forget things when I shiver. Sometimes I even cannot say anything. I am just at a standstill.

FG5S23: I shiver a little. If I present in front of people I don't know, I may forget what to say.

Meanwhile, when working in groups, only some students experienced anxiety (e.g., worried, anxious, scared) because 'working in groups is less scary than speaking with teachers' (FG3S13). Most students felt more comfortable working with helpful and respectful teammates at the same English level and could help them correct mistakes and improve.

FG2S6: I feel more comfortable. My friends help me improve my pronunciation.

FG3S13: I don't feel scared because if I say things wrong or I don't understand, my friends can correct my mistakes. I work with friends and talk to them, so I feel more comfortable.

FG5S23: I feel rather happy because my teammates respect me and help me correct my pronunciation. They make me comfortable. I can learn a lot from them.

Likewise, only a few students felt

anxious when performing a role-play or dialogue in front of the class. For instance, they "shiver" (FG3S11, FG3S13) and feel "scared" (FG3S14). In contrast, most students had positive emotions, especially when working with a similar English-level partner in role-play activities.

FG1S 3: We are at the same level of English, so we can work together in a comfortable way.

FG4S16: We feel very happy when we work together.

FG5S22: I feel better working in pairs.

FG4S18: My partner and I are at the same level, so we can speak comfortably.

Another anxiety-provoking situation includes starting a conversation with a native speaker, which worries many students. They posited that they were worried about not being able to understand the native speaker's questions and not being understood. Some students described their feelings as "worried", "confused", "awkward" and "embarrassed" but emphasized that they did not feel nervous.

FG2S6: I used to speak with native speakers. I feel that I speak so badly that they cannot understand me. I feel embarrassed and worried.

FG1S2: I'm afraid they will not understand my answer.

FG3S15: I feel worried and scared, but I will try to give them the answers because they ask me.

FG4S16: I feel a little confused because I'm afraid I cannot answer them. But I don't feel nervous at all.

FG4S20: I will try to answer. I feel a bit embarrassed if I don't know the answer, but I feel happy.

Meanwhile, some students had entirely positive feelings when speaking with foreigners because they considered it a chance to speak without caring about

judgments. Several others see speaking English with native speakers as an opportunity to practice English. Thus, they do not experience any feelings of anxiety.

FG3S11: I think it's interesting to speak with a native. I look forward to having a chance, I don't feel scared.

FG3S13: I feel OK. Native speakers may start a conversation with me by asking something, I enthusiastically reply to them. Because they need my help, they will not make judgments like when I'm in class or take a test. I feel comfortable when I speak, I'm not afraid of making mistakes.

FG4S16: I don't feel anxious. I feel happy when I have a chance to speak with native speakers. But my grammar is limited, I try to converse in the shortest ways, I cannot speak fluently and fully express my ideas.

FG4S18: I feel like speaking with a native, although I cannot always reply to them. I don't feel nervous at all.

### ***4.3. Causes of Speaking Anxiety Among Vietnamese Non-English-Majored Freshmen***

#### **4.3.1. English Speaking Abilities**

Participants ascribed their speaking anxiety to several reasons related to actual English oral abilities: poor pronunciation, lack of idea arrangement, and problems with vocabulary, which prevented them from fully expressing their ideas.

FG1S3: If the question is that I cannot answer, I feel more anxious because I have to think about how to arrange ideas.

FG5S23: I worry about my pronunciation. It does not sound good, so people may misunderstand me.

FG4S19: I feel scared because I don't know how to express my ideas fully.

FG3S12: ...when it comes to discussing in English, I don't have enough vocabulary to express my ideas fully.

#### 4.3.2. Lack of Speaking Self-Efficacy

Also, some students attributed their speaking anxiety to a lack of speaking self-efficacy, and worrying about their speaking skills, pronunciation, and vocabulary, which might obstruct comprehension.

FG2S10: I feel a bit embarrassed because I'm afraid that I don't have enough vocabulary and I make grammatical mistakes.

FG3S15: I feel scared and don't feel like speaking with a native because I think my speaking skill is not good, and I'm not confident to speak.

FG3S23: I'm afraid my pronunciation is not good enough and others cannot understand me.

FG2S7: I'm worried that they cannot understand what I say.

#### 4.3.3. Nature of Teachers' Questions

Besides, many students stated that they felt worried and anxious when their teachers posed challenging, unrelated questions, especially those with complicated, unfamiliar terms and concepts and those that did not allow students time to prepare.

FG1S1: At first, I feel a little anxious and worried... if the question is too difficult, I will find it difficult to answer.

FG1S2: I usually feel anxious if the question is not related to the lesson.

FG2S9: I don't feel very confident if the question has special terms.

FG3S11: I feel confused, panicked, and worried because I'm surprised and not prepared to answer.

#### 4.3.4. Fear of Negative Evaluation

A few students shared that they feared losing face and being judged. In particular, they mentioned that they felt embarrassed and were afraid of being criticized for giving wrong answers when performing a role-play or being called to answer questions in front of the class.

FG3S11: I feel very embarrassed if I mispronounce the words or make grammatical mistakes.

FG3S12: I feel worried. I will be embarrassed if I give wrong answers, which is very important.

FG3S13: I feel anxious, and I shiver. Sometimes, I cannot understand what the teacher asks, and I will likely keep silent. I'm afraid to be criticized. Likewise, some students explained that they feel worried and afraid of being judged when working with more proficient partners or making an oral presentation.

FG1S2: When working in groups, I feel a bit worried that the others will make judgments and think I'm not good... Presenting in front of others is frightening to me. I am afraid of being judged and laughed at.

FG4S17: I worry about grammar. Specifically, I don't know how to use the correct verb tenses. I'm afraid people will laugh at me.

FG4S19: I feel anxious if my teammates are so good and speak English fluently. They may make judgments if I make mistakes.

#### 4.3.5. Test Anxiety

Test anxiety occurred when the students received low scores, contributing to speaking anxiety. For example, when answering their lecturer's questions during a speaking test, some students attributed their speaking anxiety to the fact that their marks

might be affected if they could not give answers.

FG1S1: I'm afraid of getting lower marks.

FG2S6: I'm afraid of getting low marks.

FG5S21: I feel scared and anxious because it may affect my marks.

FG4S17: I feel really anxious about things related to marks or scores. I'm afraid I will have to retake the course if my marks are too low.

#### ***4.4. Strategies Used to Cope With Speaking Anxiety by Vietnamese Non-English-Majored Freshmen***

##### **4.4.1. Social Strategies**

Some students reported using social strategies (e.g., seeking help from teachers and others) when they did not know how to answer their teacher's questions individually and in pairs.

FG3S15: If I cannot understand, I will ask the teacher to repeat.

FG4S16: We can help each other correct mistakes.

FG5S22: We can exchange ideas and correct mistakes for each other.

##### **4.4.2. Cognitive Strategies**

Besides using social strategies, some students mentioned using their mother tongue and the translation strategy to answer teachers' questions to help them avoid feeling anxious.

FG4S19: If I don't know what to say, I will answer in Vietnamese, and the teacher will help me translate it into English.

FG4S16: If I don't understand the question, I feel confused and anxious at first, then I translate the meaning and be calm to answer.

FG1S3: My teammates often speak in Vietnamese and then complete the

task in English, so I feel confident to contribute.

FG5S23: We make outlines in Vietnamese, then translate and practice English.

When a native speaker asked a question, some students shared positive feelings because they could make themselves understood by using a mental outlining strategy, i.e., giving the main ideas, answering to the point, and using necessary content words.

FG3S11: I feel OK. I will reply to them because I think they just need to get the main ideas. They don't care about grammar.

FG3S12: I feel OK. I just need to answer to the point, and I don't need to be too formal.

FG3S14: I will try to come up with the words necessary to give them the answers

FG4S19: I will give short answers if I know. Otherwise, I will say "I don't know".

Besides, some students reported that preparing in advance helped them feel less anxious to cope with speaking anxiety when making an oral presentation.

FG1S5: If I have prepared before and presented in front of the people I know, I feel less anxious and more confident.

FG4S20: I feel more confident when presenting in front of the class because I have preparations beforehand.

FG5S21: I think I don't feel nervous because I have prepared before.

Also, some used entertainment and learning methods such as watching movies, listening to music, and playing games.

FG3S12: I play games, and I pair up with a foreigner. When I make

mistakes, they can help me correct them.

FG4S18: I learn new vocabulary by watching films.

FG4S19: I watch cartoons because they are easy to understand and entertaining.

FG4S20: I watch movies with subtitles to learn more.

Students shared that they used other strategies to avoid speaking anxiety, including practicing alone with apps, podcasts, Youtube, Google Translate, self-translate, and voice recording.

FG2S6: I use Google Translate to check whether I have the correct pronunciation or not.

FG4S23: I watch movies and listen to music. I also try this way: I translate an article I have read into English, then I tell my friend to see if they can understand or not.

FG3S14: I record my voice, listen again and improve myself.

FG3S15: I practice alone or watch clips on Youtube and try to imitate.

FG4S17: I listen to podcasts on Spotify.

Besides, some students take a course or join clubs to practice speaking and listening skills. They also opt to find a partner to practice.

FG1S3: I learn vocabulary, improve communication skills, join English clubs or find someone who has the same interest and desire to improve my English as me.

FG4S19: I will take a speaking course.

FG4S16: I think I should find a partner to practice with and help me improve. I will take an English course... to improve my pronunciation. I can practice in front of the mirror.

## 5. Discussion

This study revealed insightful findings about speaking anxiety among Vietnamese non-English-majored first-year students. Regarding English language speaking anxiety, the quantitative and qualitative analysis results indicated that most participants had a moderate level of anxiety, which conforms to what Le and Tran (2020) concluded in their studies about Vietnamese learners. It is worth noting that although the anxiety level was average, it caused the students to have adverse psychological reactions and hindered their oral performance. For example, the students cannot deal with questions, forget things when making presentations and give answers in fragments, just as Milan (2019), Wang and Roopchund (2015), and Mohamed and Wahid (2009) stated in their studies. In addition, it can be pointed out that speaking anxiety varies according to gender. Female students were found to be more anxious compared to male ones, which is similar to the findings by Çağatay (2015), Mohtasham and Farnia (2017), Öztürk and Gürbüz (2013), and Park and French (2013).

Interestingly, students of different disciplines in this study experienced different anxiety levels, which have not been mentioned in previous studies; thus, further investigation is necessary. Besides, as for the anxiety-provoking situations among the students, this study found that most of the participants experienced anxiety in activities that involve interaction with others, such as answering teachers' questions and giving oral presentations, which is in line with what Horwitz et al. (1986) stated about communication apprehension. Data from the interview also provided new findings that might enrich the existing literature. Contrary to several previous studies in which peer factor was found to be a source of anxiety (e.g., Rajitha, 2020; Debreli & Demirkan, 2016; Tian, 2019), the results of this study

indicated that the students felt less anxious working with their peers. They also experienced less anxiety when speaking in front of their friends or people familiar with them. This finding aligns with what Liu and Jackson (2008) stated about the importance of relationships with classmates: students can speak English freely when classroom intimacy increases.

Furthermore, a prominent finding is that the students feel optimistic about conversing with native speakers. Also, the participants attributed anxiety to various factors such as English speaking abilities, lack of speaking self-efficacy, and fear of negative evaluation. These causes are also common in studies conducted in Asian contexts where English is spoken as a second or foreign language (e.g., Milan, 2019; Mohtasham & Farnia, 2017; Jugo, 2020; Sabbah, 2018). Test anxiety (e.g., fear of receiving low scores and failing) was also reported (Batiha et al., 2014; Shabani, 2012).

In contrast to Genç et al.'s (2016) findings, the participants in this study did not report any passive strategies. Nevertheless, the students employed social and cognitive strategies to handle speaking anxiety, such as preparation and peer seeking, which were previously reported by Lizuka (2010) and Marwan (2007). Besides, it is essential to note that the students resort to their mother tongue when speaking English, indicating that students use code-switching and translation to reduce speaking anxiety. However, this finding has not been reported in previous studies.

## 6. Implications

The findings in this study provide valuable information to improve instructional practices. First, teachers must be aware of speaking anxiety in the English language classroom. As females often make up a large percentage of students in foreign language classes, teachers may need to

consider this finding when carrying out classroom activities. Teachers should pay more attention to female students' emotional reactions and give timely support and encouragement to help them avoid uncomfortable feelings when speaking English. Furthermore, the findings shed some light on material preparation and task design. The content of the tasks should be carefully and suitably chosen to arouse students' interests. The topics of speaking assignments should be related to their majors to help them comfortably and confidently speak about what they know. Apart from tasks that require individual performances, teachers can design activities that involve student-student interaction, such as pair work or group work, so that students can partake with greater confidence and better feelings. Moreover, to help students alleviate nervousness, teachers should also consider students' proficiency levels when pairing and grouping them.

Interestingly, the students feel positive about speaking to foreigners. Thus, more foreign teachers should be recruited to assist students in their learning process. As fear of losing face is understandable in Asian cultures, mistakes should be allowed, accepted as unavoidable, and treated with leniency. Students should acknowledge that they can learn from their mistakes and develop positive attitudes towards errors. It is, therefore, suggested that the rating scale focus on accuracy makes up a small proportion of the marking criteria.

With regard to strategy use to tackle speaking anxiety, social strategies were found to be commonly used by the participants. Thus, teachers play a pivotal role in creating a relaxed learning environment in which student-student and teacher-student rapport is established and enhanced. In addition, to make students feel more comfortable when seeking help, teachers should be friendly and empathetic

and motivate them by giving them encouragement or compliments. Specific strategies should be explicitly taught through activities organized in the classroom so that students can recognize the benefits of learning strategies and refrain from using the ones that hinder their performance. Furthermore, to improve English speaking proficiency and build self-confidence, students should proactively seek opportunities to expose to the language and practice speaking English in different situations.

## 7. Conclusion

Based on the research results, it can be concluded that speaking anxiety exists in the language classroom in Vietnam and the anxiety level varies according to gender and discipline. The participants have a moderate level of anxiety. Myriad factors cause them to feel nervous when they speak English, such as lack of speaking self-efficacy, actual English oral abilities, fear of losing face and being judged, and the nature of the teachers' questions. However, the students show reasonable efforts to improve their speaking skills and have taken various measures to cope with anxiety, including social and cognitive strategies. The study provides insights into students' speaking problems, which helps teachers make adjustments and devise possible solutions to assist their students. Teachers should be aware of students' speaking difficulties and employ various teaching strategies to keep anxiety levels at bay. The study recruited a limited number of participants from a public university, so the findings may not be generalizable to all Vietnamese university students. Thus, future studies are necessary to explore speaking anxiety and speaking strategies further.

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## Statements and Declaration

The authors declare that this manuscript is original, has not been published before, and is not currently being considered for publication elsewhere. The authors can confirm that the manuscript has been read and approved by all named authors and that there are no other persons who satisfied the criteria for authorship but are not listed.

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### Appendix

#### Questionnaire of Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety (English)

Thank you for taking the time to respond to the following questionnaire. Please give your most candid and thorough responses to the questionnaire below. Rest assured that the information you share here is confidential. Please read each statement carefully and respond accordingly.

#### Personal Information

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Birthyear: \_\_\_\_\_

Year at university: \_\_\_\_\_

Gender: \_\_\_\_\_

Originality:    North                      Central                      South

Location of high school:    Urban                      Rural

How long have you been learning English? \_\_\_\_\_

#### Speaking Anxiety

Please read the following statements carefully and choose the answer to each statement that best describes your speaking anxiety.

SA = strongly agree; A = agree; N = neither agree nor disagree; D = disagree; SD = strongly disagree.

Speaking anxiety	SA	A	N	D	SD
1. I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in the English class.					

2. I tremble when I know that I'm going to be called on in the English class.					
3. It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in English.					
4. I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in the English class.					
5. It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my English class.					
6. I feel nervous speaking the foreign language with native speakers.					
7. I get upset when I don't understand what the teacher is correcting.					
8. I feel confident when I speak in the English class.					
9. I am afraid that my English teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make.					
10. I can feel my heart pounding when I'm going to be called on in my English class.					
11. I always feel that the other students speak English better than I do.					
12. I feel very self-conscious about speaking English in front of other students.					
13. I get nervous and confused when I am speaking English in my English class.					
14. I get nervous when I don't understand every word the English teacher says.					
15. I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules I have to learn to speak English.					
16. I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak English.					

17. I would probably feel comfortable around native speakers of English.					
18. I get nervous when the language teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance.					

### Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. How do you feel
  - a. when your lecturer asks you a question in your English class?
  - b. when you take part in a group discussion in your English class?
  - c. when you perform a role play or a dialogue in front of your class?
  - d. when you give an oral presentation in front of your class?
  - e. when your lecturer asks you a question during the speaking test?
  - f. when you start a conversation with a native speaker?
  - g. when a native speaker asks you a question?
2. In what other situations do you feel anxious about speaking?
3. What do you think was the source of your speaking anxiety in those situations?
4. What do you think you can do to cope with speaking anxiety?

## TÌM HIỂU TÂM LÝ LO LẮNG KHI NÓI TIẾNG ANH CỦA SINH VIÊN NĂM THỨ NHẤT KHÔNG CHUYÊN TIẾNG ANH TẠI MỘT TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC CÔNG LẬP VIỆT NAM

Hồ Đình Phương Khanh, Trương Thị Như Ngọc

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**Tóm tắt:** Bài nghiên cứu này khảo sát tâm lý lo lắng khi nói tiếng Anh của sinh viên năm thứ nhất không chuyên ngữ tại Việt Nam. 297 sinh viên năm thứ nhất không chuyên tiếng Anh tại một trường đại học công lập ở Việt Nam đã tham gia trả lời Bảng Khảo sát tâm lý lo lắng khi nói tiếng Anh. Kết quả cho thấy người tham gia khảo sát có tâm lý lo lắng khi nói tiếng Anh ở mức trung bình, trong đó nữ có mức độ lo lắng cao hơn nam. Để hiểu rõ hơn về nguyên nhân gây ra tâm lý lo lắng khi nói tiếng Anh, các tình huống dẫn tới lo lắng và các chiến lược sinh viên sử dụng để ứng phó với sự lo lắng này, dữ liệu định tính cũng đã được thu thập. 24 sinh viên trong tổng số người tham gia làm khảo sát đã được lựa chọn ngẫu nhiên và được phân vào năm nhóm phỏng vấn tập trung để trả lời các câu hỏi phỏng vấn. Kết quả cho thấy sinh viên cảm thấy lo lắng hơn khi phải trả lời câu hỏi của giáo viên trong lớp, trong khi thi nói và thuyết trình so với khi nói theo cặp và theo nhóm. Ngoài ra, sinh viên cho rằng sự lo lắng gây ra bởi khả năng nói tiếng Anh, bản chất câu hỏi của giáo viên, tâm lý sợ bị đánh giá, sợ mất mặt và sợ bị điểm thấp. Để ứng phó với sự lo lắng này, sinh viên cho biết họ sử dụng các chiến lược nhận thức xã hội. Bài nghiên cứu cung cấp thông tin hữu ích giúp giảng viên môn tiếng Anh hiểu được bản chất tâm lý lo lắng khi nói tiếng Anh của sinh viên và giúp sinh viên ứng phó với sự lo lắng này.

*Từ khóa:* tâm lý lo lắng khi nói tiếng Anh, sinh viên không chuyên tiếng Anh, Việt Nam