

# College Students' English-Speaking Anxiety at the Foreign Language Corner

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## ABSTRACT

English speaking has been perceived as an important professional skill in Taiwan. Many students look for opportunities to immerse themselves in English learning although they may more or less experience foreign language anxiety in English speaking. Given that language anxiety can affect learners' performance and language acquisition, we are intrigued to investigate the phenomenon of English-speaking anxiety in a particular context of English Corner at a national university of science and technology to see how it influences language learning. The results of our questionnaire had covered the factors, effects, and symptoms of English-speaking anxiety. There were audience factors as well as language-related factors which led to English-speaking anxiety. With respect to audience factors, higher percentage of students felt anxious when speaking English with people of opposite sex (89%, M=4.45) and strangers (83%, M=4.4) as opposed to their classmates (79%, M=4.23) and teachers (64%, M=4.00). As for language-related factors, 89% of the students felt pressure when they perceived their English ability to be inferior to others' (M=4.4); 81% of students got anxiety because they were worried about making grammatical mistakes (M=4.36), and 79% worried about pronunciation (M=4.32) in speaking English. Furthermore, English-speaking anxiety was found to bring about both positive and negative effects. For instance, 79% of the participants trained their oral skill in order to overcome English-speaking anxiety (M=4.06), whereas 89% of students indicated that nervousness led to their unnatural performance (M=4.15). Interestingly, the most common physical symptom of English-speaking anxiety for these students was 'laughing' (20%), followed by 'stammering' (17%) and 'avoiding eye contact' (14%). The students at English Corner seemed to use laughing to hide their anxiety of English speaking and might thus develop a habitual pattern of laughing in reaction to English-speaking anxiety. Implications drawn from this study will help teachers to understand the impact of foreign language anxiety and to create a more secure learning environment for English learning.

**Key words:** foreign language anxiety, English Corner, anxiety's symptoms and effects.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Anxiety is a psycho-physical state comprised of cognitive, emotional, somatic, and behavioral elements (Seligman, Walker, & Rosenhan, 2001). As an unpleasant state, anxiety is normally a reaction to fear or worry psychologically and physiologically (Freud, 1924). Foreign language anxiety occurs when students become anxious or nervous in the process of language learning.

Over the last two decades, increasing attention has been drawn to the phenomenon of foreign language anxiety in English learning (Crookal & Oxford, 1991; Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). English-speaking anxiety can lead to either positive or negative effects for students; as a result, it may either stimulate or postpone students' English learning. Nonetheless, anxiety is usually reported to impede foreign language production and achievement, especially in English speaking situations (Young, 1990, 1991, 1992).

The purpose of this study is to examine the phenomenon of English-speaking anxiety and how it affects language learning in a particular context of English Corner at a national university of science and technology. We will explore the distinctions between the anxiety in normal situations and that in English-speaking situations. Our goal is to look for the causes and effects of anxiety from speaking a foreign language. We are also interested in identifying the physical symptoms of English-speaking anxiety such as stammering, palm sweating, fiddling, and laughing.

To sum up, our study is guided by the following three research questions:

1. What is the distinction between anxiety in normal situations and that in English-speaking situations?
2. What are the positive and negative effects of English-speaking anxiety?

3. How do students react when English-speaking anxiety arises?

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the 1970s, foreign language anxiety has become an important issue in second language learning research (Scovel, 1978). It has been reported that anxiety can affect learners' performance and achievement in their target language mentally or physically (Daubney, 2007). As Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) indicate, "anxiety is the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of autonomic nervous system" (p. 125). Anxiety arises from "feelings of worry, nervousness, and stress" (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 61). It has been known that "anxiety has been regarded as one of the most important affective factors that influence second language acquisition" (Zhao, 2007, p. 22).

Foreign language anxiety occurs in the process of learning a foreign language and could lead learners to have a hard time in acquiring the language (Tsai, 2008). The anxiety is even found to be a predictor of foreign language achievement (Onwuegbuzie, Bailey, & Daley, 1999). Foreign language anxiety restrains students' English performance and impacts their body reactions. When students have foreign language anxiety, some may give up the chance to speak in English (Hsu, 2009), and others may become too anxious or embarrassed to express themselves in English. Nevertheless, anxiety is not always a bad thing since a bit anxiety can enhance language performance. Some researchers even report that anxiety can bring benefits to students in language learning (Spielmann & Radnofsky, 2001; Tseng, 2008). Tseng (2008) further claims that anxiety is not simply harmful but it may lead to both positive and negative effects for language learning. A little tension in fact can help students keep alert in their learning



process. Positive anxiety helps students to improve their English ability as opposed to negative anxiety which keeps learners from learning or debilitates their language performance (Daubney, 2007). Scholars and educators continue to look for solutions to cope with language anxiety which affects students' learning in a classroom context. With good class management, teachers should be able to help students get over language anxiety and learn more efficiently.

Even though some researchers (Koba, Ogawa, & Wilkinson, 2000) point out that language anxiety is a universal phenomenon, English learners in Confucian heritage cultures are found to have language anxiety problems more often than those from other cultures. In Chinese culture, people care very much about their face and do not like to receive judgments or criticism about themselves (Zhao, 2007).

Foreign language anxiety is an important element that affects students' language performance and acquisition. When experiencing anxious emotions, students would behave abnormally due to stress or nervousness. Foreign language anxiety appears more evidently in output language abilities such as writing and speaking than in input abilities. Hsu (2009) points out that technical college students tend to get anxious, especially when they are practicing English conversations with one another. Students with English-speaking anxiety would have a conflict between trying to overcome anxiety to learn well and avoiding embarrassing themselves in front of others. If they could not balance them, they might give up and become a passive learner who withdraws from learning. The relationship between anxiety and achievement is perhaps not linear but can be influenced by various factors, such as culture and learners' language proficiency.

### III. METHODOLOGY

#### Context

The research context of this study is the Foreign Language Corner at a national university of science and technology established by its Language Center in 2007. It is located on the first floor and at the basement of the Fourth Classroom Building. Foreign Language Corner is a place where college students can look for opportunities to strengthen their English and Japanese ability. People who attend English Corner are expected to use and speak English at all times. The Center recruits voluntary teachers as well as teaching assistants to be in charge of classes to create a good English learning environment on campus. There are various kinds of courses offered at English Corner, such as English conversation, English slang, English writing, and TOEIC, etc. Students can freely attend the sessions they are interested in. Besides English classes, Japanese courses are offered and taught by Japanese teachers and TAs.

Language Center issues Language-Learning Passport to encourage students to take advantage of the resources at the Foreign Language Corner. Attending one session allows students to gain one point in their passport. There are two main reasons why some students come to English Corner more often than others. First, their attendance is required by their teachers. For instance, some students are asked to visit English Corner for at least twenty times to get enough points; otherwise, they will lose twenty percent of their final scores. Second, there are students who aim at the reward provided by Language Center. Once they have collected the assigned points, they can get a certificate as well as prizes such as dictionaries and English examination books.



## Participants

The participants in this study were mainly non-English major students at a national university of science and technology. There were 53 students who participated in this study, and most of them attended the sessions held by teachers. We used questionnaire as our data collection method. As Edward (1991) mentioned, one of the advantages of using questionnaires was that “students will have time to ponder privately before they reply, especially if questionnaires can be taken away and returned later” (p. 46).

## Data Collection Procedure

A questionnaire was distributed to the 53 participants to investigate whether they felt anxious or not about English speaking. The questionnaire consisted of three parts: (a) normal anxiety, (b) English-speaking anxiety, and (c) the effects of anxiety on English learning. There were 26 items in six-point Likert scale, with 6 being the highest. Before we distributed the questionnaire, we had notified the teachers at English Corner first. Then, we explained our purpose to the students. When they were not willing to fill out the questionnaires, they could withdraw. Since it was an anonymous questionnaire, they did not have to leave their names.

## IV. FINDINGS

In tables 1-4, the six options of the Likert Scale are further organized into two extra sections: Agree and Disagree. The column of “Agree” includes the three options of Absolutely Agree (6 points), Strongly Agree (5 points) and Agree (4 points), whereas “Disagree” contains the other three options of Disagree (3 points), Strongly Disagree (2 points) and Absolutely Disagree (1 point).

As shown in TABLE 1, the majority of the participants (83%) acknowledged that it was easy for them to get anxious in their normal life or non-English speaking situations ( $M=4.13$ ). With regard to different audience, thirty-one participants indicated that they had anxiety when having conversations with people of opposite sex ( $M=3.74$ ). 64% of the participants said that they felt anxious when speaking with teachers ( $M=3.72$ ). Around half of the participants agreed that they felt anxious when talking to strangers ( $M=3.6$ ). Only fourteen participants (26%) felt anxious when having conversations with classmates ( $M=2.98$ ). As for other factors, 79% of the participants felt pressure when their abilities were worse than others' ( $M=4.13$ ), and thirty-eight students (72%) worried about losing face in front of others ( $M=3.96$ ).



TABLE 1: Anxiety in Normal Situations

Questionnaire Item No. (Total: 53 participants)	AD	SD	D	A	S A	AA	Mean	Disagree (AD,SD,D)	Agree (A,SA,AA)
01. It is easy for me to get anxious.	0	3	6	28	13	3	4.13	17%	83%
02. I feel anxious when I have conversations with teachers.	1	1	17	28	5	1	3.72	36%	64%
03. I feel anxious when I have conversations with classmates.	6	7	26	11	2	1	2.98	74%	26%
04. I feel anxious when I have conversations with people of opposite sex.	1	4	17	19	10	2	3.74	42%	58%
05. I feel anxious when I have conversations with strangers.	3	3	17	21	7	2	3.6	43%	57%
06. I often worry about losing face in front of others.	1	2	12	23	13	2	3.96	28%	72%
07. I feel pressure when my ability is worse than others.	1	1	9	26	11	5	4.13	21%	79%

Notes: AD=Absolutely Disagree (1 point); SD=Strongly Disagree (2 points); D=Disagree (3 points); A=Agree (4 points); SA=Strongly Agree (5 points); AA=Absolutely Agree (6 points).

TABLE 2 reports the anxieties of the students in English-speaking situations. A high percentage of students (87%) indicated that it was easy for them to become anxious when they spoke in English. From the perspective of different audience, high percentage of students felt anxious when they had English conversations with people of opposite sex (89%), strangers (83%), and classmates (79%). 64% of the participants agreed that they felt anxious when speaking English with teachers. With respect to language-related factors, 89% of the participants felt pressure when their English ability was worse than

others' (M=4.4). Forty-three students (81%) agreed that they got anxiety because of worrying about grammatical mistakes in speaking English (M=4.36). 79% of the participants worried about pronunciation when speaking English (M=4.32).

From tables 1 & 2, we could see that more students felt anxious in English-speaking situations (87%, M=4.45) than normal situations (83%, M=4.13). It seemed to suggest that the phenomenon of foreign language anxiety occurred in English speaking for the majority of the students.



TABLE 2: Anxiety from Speaking English

Questionnaire Item No. (Total: 53 participants)	AD	SD	D	A	S A	AA	Mean	Disagree (AD,SD,D)	Agree (A,SA,AA)
08. It is easy for me to get anxious when I speak in English.	0	0	7	24	13	9	4.45	13%	87%
09. I feel anxious when I have English conversations with teachers.	0	1	18	17	14	3	4	36%	64%
10. I feel anxious when I have English conversations with classmates.	1	1	9	21	16	5	4.23	21%	79%
11. I feel anxious when I have English conversations with people of opposite sex.	0	1	5	23	17	7	4.45	11%	89%
12. I feel anxious when I have English conversations with strangers.	0	1	8	23	11	10	4.4	17%	83%
13. I feel pressure when my English ability is worse than others'.	0	2	4	25	15	7	4.4	11%	89%
14. I get anxiety because I worry about pronunciation when speaking in English.	0	2	9	20	14	8	4.32	21%	79%
15. I get anxiety because I worry about grammatical mistakes when speaking English.	0	0	10	24	9	10	4.36	19%	81%

Notes: AD=Absolutely Disagree (1 point); SD=Strongly Disagree (2 points); D=Disagree (3 points); A=Agree (4 points); SA=Strongly Agree (5 points); AA=Absolutely Agree (6 points).

FIGURE 1 compares the audience factor between normal anxiety and English-speaking anxiety. The mean anxiety of the participants was the highest when they spoke English with people of opposite sex (M=4.45) but their mean anxiety was only neutral when they spoke in non-English situations (M=3.74). Participants became more anxious when they spoke with strangers in English (M=4.4) than in normal situations (M=3.6). Much more participants became anxious when they had conversations with classmates in English (M=4.23) than in non-English speaking situations (M=2.98).

The participants felt anxious when they spoke with teachers in English (M=4) than in non-English speaking situations (M=3.72). In terms of audience factor, speaking with people of opposite sex made most of the participants feel anxious.

This figure had provided evidences for students' higher anxiety in English-speaking situations than in normal speaking situations no matter who the audience was. Therefore, speaking in a foreign language seemed to make students become much more anxious as opposed to their normal life situations when they spoke in their mother tongue.





FIGURE 1: Audience Factor for Normal Anxiety and English-Speaking Anxiety

TABLE 3 shows the students' perspectives of the presumably positive effects from English-speaking anxiety. It was found that many students (79%) trained their English oral skills to overcome their anxiety (M=4.06). Thirty-two students (60%) agreed that nervousness pushed them to get ready for English presentations (M=3.68). However, only 49% of the participants agreed that anxiety could stimulate them to improve their English (M=3.55). Less than half of the students (47%) agreed that they practiced their English oral speech

because of the nervousness (M=3.4), and only 43% of the participants agreed that nervousness improved their thinking ability in speaking English (M=3.36). Just twenty-one students (40%) agreed that nervousness inspired them to well express their ideas in English (M=3.36). It seemed that English speaking anxiety could more or less stimulate students to practice English as a high percentage of the students would train their oral skills to overcome the anxiety from speaking English.

TABLE 3: Positive Effects from English Anxiety

Questionnaire Item No. (Total: 53 participants)	AD	SD	D	A	SA	AA	Mean	Disagree (AD,SD,D)	Agree (A,SA,AA)
16. Anxiety stimulates me to improve English.	1	3	23	20	4	2	3.55	51%	49%
17. Nervousness inspires me to express myself better in English.	2	2	28	17	4	0	3.36	60%	40%
18. Nervousness motivates me to practice English oral speech.	3	2	23	22	2	1	3.4	53%	47%
19. Nervousness enhances my thinking ability in speaking English.	3	3	24	18	5	0	3.36	57%	43%
20. Nervousness pushes me to get ready for my English presentations seriously.	1	2	18	27	2	3	3.68	40%	60%
21. I train my oral skills to reduce anxiety.	1	2	8	28	10	4	4.06	21%	79%

Notes: AD=Absolutely Disagree (1 point); SD=Strongly Disagree (2 points); D=Disagree (3 points); A=Agree (4 points); SA=Strongly Agree (5 points); AA=Absolutely Agree (6 points).





As for negative effects, the majority of the students (89%) indicated that nervousness led to their unnatural performance in speaking English (M=4.15). 79% of the students considered that anxiety caused them to mispronounce some English words (M=4.09). Forty-six students could not express themselves

properly due to English-speaking anxiety (M=4.08). 64% of the participants became reluctant to speak English because of their anxiety (M=3.68). In sum, nervousness seemed to affect students' language performance so as to make them mispronounce words and feel reluctant to express themselves in English.

TABLE 4: Negative Effects from English-speaking Anxiety

Questionnaire Item No. (Total: 53 participants)	AD	SD	D	A	S A	AA	Mean	Disagree (AD,SD,D)	Agree (A,SA,AA)
22. I am reluctant to speak English due to nervousness.	1	3	15	29	3	2	3.68	36%	64%
23. Nervousness is an obstacle for me to express myself properly in English.	2	2	3	31	13	2	4.08	13%	87%
24. Nervousness leads me to unnatural performance in speaking English.	2	1	3	31	13	3	4.15	11%	89%
25. Anxiety makes me mispronounce some English words.	3	2	6	23	14	5	4.09	21%	79%

Notes: AD=Absolutely Disagree (1 point); SD=Strongly Disagree (2 points); D=Disagree (3 points); A=Agree (4 points); SA=Strongly Agree (5 points); AA=Absolutely Agree (6 points).

FIGURE 2 shows the results of a close-end question which requires the participants to circle their own physical symptoms of English-speaking anxiety. The most common symptom of English speaking anxiety for the students turned out to be laughing (20%), while stammering (17%) and avoiding eye-contact (14%) were also quite common. The other common symptoms the students reported included looking around (11%), palm sweating (8%), scratching hair/head (8%), fiddling with fingers (6%) and shivering (6%). The symptoms with less than 5%

of students had all been combined into the portion of 'others' in the figure.

Interestingly, laughing appeared to be the most common physical symptom of English-speaking anxiety rather than other common physical symptoms such as stammering and avoiding eye contact. We suspected that the students used laughing to hide or release the anxiety that had aroused and might thus develop a habitual pattern of laughing or giggling when they had English-speaking anxiety.







FIGURE 2: Physical Symptoms of English-Speaking Anxieties

## CONCLUSION

This paper had provided insights into the impact of English-speaking anxiety on non-English major students engaged in a particular learning context of Foreign Language Corner at a national university of science and technology. Our findings revealed that a high percentage of students became anxious, especially when speaking English with people of opposite sex, strangers, classmates and teachers. As for language-related factors, higher percentage of students felt anxious when their English ability was worse than others'. The majority of students got anxiety because of worrying about grammatical mistakes as well as English pronunciation. Interestingly, laughing was found to be the most common physical symptom of English-speaking anxiety, followed by stammering and avoiding eye contact. When students' anxiety arouse, they seemed

to use laughing to hide their anxiety. As a result, laughing became a habitual pattern when students had English-speaking anxiety. In this study, English-speaking anxiety had brought about both positive and negative effects. A high percentage of students reported that they practiced English harder in order to overcome their anxiety. With respect to negative effects, high percentage of students reported that nervousness led to their unnatural performance in speaking English, such as mispronouncing some English words. English-speaking anxiety also caused higher percentage of students to feel reluctant to speak English since they could not express themselves properly. The implication drawn from this study should help English teachers as well as students to face situations of English-speaking anxiety and to create a secure learning environment for speaking English.

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## 外語學習園區之英語口說焦慮

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### 摘 要

英語口說能力為台灣相當重視的語言專業能力。然而，學生在增進口說能力的過程中，有著不同程度的外語焦慮。外語焦慮會影響學生的口語表現與語言習得。本研究旨在調查口說焦慮對於一所國立科技大學外語學習園區之學生，所造成的影響與衝擊。我們的問卷結果包含了英文口說焦慮的成因、影響及焦慮所引起的生理徵狀。誘發英文口說焦慮的因素可以分為聆聽對象和語言能力兩部分。本研究結果顯示出不同聽眾對於英語口說焦慮所造成的影響：89%的學生跟異性講話時最為緊張(M=4.45)，其次為陌生人(83%，M=4.4)，對於同學(79%，M=4.23)以及老師的焦慮則較低(64%，M=4.00)。

至於語言能力方面，高達 89%的學生感到焦慮是因為他們怕自己的英文能力低於他人(M=4.4)，其次是怕文法錯誤(81%，M=4.36)或是發音不正確(79%，M=4.32)。除此之外，英文口說焦慮能造成正面跟負面的影響，正面影響是激勵學生加強口語能力以降低焦慮，進而提升口說表現；負面影響則是由於外語焦慮而導致學生表現失常。多數的同學表示自己焦慮時，會以傻笑化解尷尬；一部分的同學則會講話結巴，無法用英語正確表達，此外，學生也會避免視線相對而四處張望。我們的研究可以提供老師作為調整教學方法的參考，以減少焦慮帶來的損害，讓同學們在輕鬆自在的環境下有效的學習英文。

**關鍵字：**外語焦慮、英語學習角落、外語焦慮徵狀與影響。

