



## **THE IMPACT OF ANXIETY ON ESL LEARNERS' ENGLISH LANGUAGE FLUENCY**

*Nafiseh Zarei<sup>1\*</sup> & Irma Moussavou<sup>2</sup>*

- \*1. **Nafiseh Zarei**, Language and Letters Department, Bukidnon State University, Philippines.  
2. **Irma Moussavou**, Faculty of Education and Humanities, Unitar International University, Malaysia.
- 

### **Abstract**

Second language learners are generally facing difficulties to use the second language to express their thoughts effectively. They avoid talking in the second language due to psychological. This qualitative study aimed to explore the impact of anxiety on Malaysians ESL learner's fluency in English. An open-ended questionnaire was used to collect data among 30 students from Unitar International University. The findings of the study showed that emotions such as fear, anxiety low-motivation, and the influence of mother tongue affect the learners' English language fluency. Besides, the results of this study revealed that learners need more positive encouragement from both lecturers and peers to be able to communicate in English language more confidently. This will aid them to reduce their level of anxiety in communicating in English.

**Keyword:** ESL learners, anxiety, fear, English language, language fluency

### **Introduction**

English language plays an important role in today modern's world communication. The need to learn a second language has become a significant factor in every student's life due to the competition in today's world. Moreover, in recent years, the Malaysian Government stresses on the use of English in schools. Basically, students who have acquired second language tend to become independent learners as they managed to express more positive attitudes towards school activities.

<b>CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:</b>	<b>RESEARCH ARTICLE</b>
<b>Nafiseh Zarei,</b> Language and Letters Department, Bukidnon State University, Philippines. Email: <a href="mailto:nafisehzarei@buksu.edu.ph">nafisehzarei@buksu.edu.ph</a>	

### *The impact of anxiety on ESL learners' English language fluency*

Since teaching of the language was first introduced in the early-nineteenth century by the British Government, the use and importance of English has undergone many phases. Historically, when the British expanded its empire to South East Asia, including Malaysia, they also introduced the English Language to the regions. The expansion of commerce and trade in this region influenced the need to use English among the people. After the country gained independence, the importance of learning English became more subjective, but in various contexts it has become part of the everyday life of Malaysian society. Its status as the official second language has made the learning of English important as it enables students to use English for specific activities. A study carried out by Huong and Hiep (2010), showed that the English language is generally used as an international language for communication among people from different language backgrounds in all parts of the world. Different questions such as “Why cannot our students speak fluently in English even after 11 years of schooling?” are being asked by ESL teachers on the lack of speaking fluency in English among ESL learners. In fact, the main purpose of learning English is not to acquire native speakers' competency but rather to be intelligible among international English speakers and those within their community (Muniandy, Nair, Shanmugam, Ahmad & Noor, 2010). Speaking in English can prove to be a challenging task to the English language learners, especially if they do not have a good command of the language (Tom, Johari, Rozaimi & Huzaimah, 2013). Speaking is an important linguistic skill that helps the individual to communicate and socialize within his circle or discourse community.

Hamouda (2013) argued that fear of mistake is the main factors of students “reluctance to speak English in the classroom”. In addition, Hiew (2012) explained that students feel afraid of the idea of making mistakes because they are afraid that their friends will mock them and receive negative evaluations from their peers, if they make mistakes in speaking English language. The fear of making mistakes by students in Speaking English has been one of the common issues. Hanh (2020) stated that students are afraid of making mistakes or losing face so they decline to express their opinion in English as their second language. Moreover, a study done by Timina (2015) revealed that that the majority of the Taiwanese university first year students were reluctant to speak English loudly due to the fear of not being or misunderstanding the teachers' queries or tasks. The findings reported that the students also complained that English language teachers speak too fast and use many difficult words. These factors are likely to cause anxiety among foreign language learners. Similarly, a study by Tercan & Dikilitas (2015) was carried out among 159 Prep class students to find out to what extent proficiency level, gender, and onset of learning affect foreign language speaking anxiety. The findings confirmed that the degree of speaking anxiety differ in terms of mode and context of speaking. Students experienced relatively less anxiety in contexts where they found themselves less threatened. Bozavli & Gulmez (2012) asserted that in a language classroom, the activity of speaking by a learner in front of the class provokes anxiety which means that the foreign language anxiety is closely related with the verbal aspects of the language learning.

### *The impact of anxiety on ESL learners' English language fluency*

Boonkit (2010) carried out a study on the factors increasing the development of learners' speaking skill. The results represented that the use of appropriate activities for speaking skill can be a good strategy to decrease speakers' anxiety. The results also revealed that the freedom of topic choice urged the participants to feel comfortable, persuaded to speak English, and increased the speaking confidence among learners. Jugo (2020) carried out a quantitative study on language anxiety among 242 undergraduate teacher education learners in The Philippines. The findings of this study revealed that the speaking activity, error correction, and communicating with English speakers are sources of high anxiety of the Filipino learners. The results also showed that the writing activity, negative self-perception, and noncomprehension are sources of moderate anxiety.

A qualitative study by Oad, Khan and Khoso (2020) investigated the factors affecting English Language Anxiety among Learners at Higher Education Level. The samples of the study included Pakistani students and teachers of public sector university of Karachi. They found out that some factors such as: lack of confidence, fear of failure, social cultural differences, gender, and peer pressure among the students create anxiety in English language communication. In addition, Mehdi and Kumar (2019) examined the relationship between English language anxiety and the communicative performance of the learners through a quantitative study in Delhi, India. The findings of his study proved that the anxiety resulting from the factors like tests, social evaluation and communication apprehension is indeed very strong. This anxiety directly affects the communicative performance of the students especially the oral performance. According to Mehdi and Kumar (2019) the students are afraid of speaking publicly.

It is worth noting that learning English language can be seen as difficult especially when it involves the students in the rural area. In fact, many children in rural areas begin learning a language that they are not familiar with and do not fully understand. This is seen and known in the Malaysian context, whereby the children in the rural area have difficulties in learning English, and it might be due to the surrounding that does not support the exposure of English language as mentioned by Ming, Ling, Jaafar (2011) that for some quarters of the Malaysian population, learning English may be like learning a foreign language and they have limited need for the language in daily life. Therefore, they face difficulties in learning English language. "Despite the fact that English is a second language in Malaysia, many students from rural areas in Sarawak view English as a foreign language which is spoken only during language lessons (Tom et al., 2013)". Hiew (2012) stated that students usually experience moderate anxiety and are reluctant to speak in English and have fear of being judge negatively by their peers. They might feel shy to speak English within their community apart from having fear of being criticized. On the other hand, rural students, are living in an environment where English is a foreign language and they have no opportunities to practice it with their peers who are facing the same problem due to the fact that, their parents are not educated enough to give them the necessary educational support and their families' socioeconomic status do not allow them easy access to books, CD's, and even television in some cases (Gobel, Thang, Sidhu, Oon & Chan, 2013). Thus, this is why students' mother tongue will be used more often in their speech. If speaking like a native speaker is made a standard,

## *The impact of anxiety on ESL learners' English language fluency*

it is said that most language learners will fail, because few learners are able to speak like a native speaker. It is important to remember that speaking form is a part of the shared social activity of talking.

### **Methods**

This study employed a qualitative research method in which the researchers collected the data through an open-ended questionnaire among 30 Malaysian ESL learners at Unitar International University. The undergraduate students were selected purposefully from the English Language Department. In order to ensure that the findings of this study are valid and reliable, after developing the open-ended questionnaire according to the main objective of this study, the researchers pilot tested the questionnaire before carrying out the actual study. Some of the questions were revised according to the data collected via the pilot study. Finally, the obtained data were analyzed qualitatively using thematic analysis.

### **Results and Discussion**

This qualitative study aimed at exploring the impact of anxiety on Malaysians ESL learner's fluency in English. Based on the learners' feedback, most of the participants shared similar opinions and thoughts about the anxiety encountered in English speaking fluency. Some of the learners' responses are as follows:

L (1) "I get upset when I do not understand what the teacher is explaining or correcting, and I lose confidence when I am asked to contribute my opinions in English to a group discussion".

L (3) "I never feel sure of myself when I am pronouncing English words in language class. It also bothers me in language class when I cannot speak well English because of my grammar mistakes."

L (15) "Sometimes, I feel anxious and scared because I do not like when people stare at me while I am speaking. It makes me forget my English words in and confidence".

According to the data collected, most of the learners (28 out of 30) understood what English language fluency means and explained why and how fear and anxiety affect their fluency in English. Some examples of the learners' feedback are as below:

L (23) "English language fluency means that English is the ability of a person to speak the language quickly or easily and confidently with the correct pronunciation. I feel less confident because it feels like everyone is looking down at me when I say something wrong. So, I feel anxious because I am not confident. Lack of self-confidence in speaking English makes me scared and feel bad to voice out my opinions in English."

### *The impact of anxiety on ESL learners' English language fluency*

L (28) "English language fluency means that I can talk in English with confidence, although I just use a simple English, and be able to talk with no grammatical errors. When the lecturer asks me to participate in a formal discussion, the other participants are fluent in English and it makes me feel insecure. They can talk with no grammatical errors and have high vocabulary words. I feel insecure and fearful because I think I am different with my classmates in terms of social cultural background".

L (30) "English language fluency means that I can speak very well, similar to the real speaker of English without making any errors in pronunciation, my sentences and my grammar words. I feel anxious in speaking English because I am afraid of failures."

Based on the on the above statements shared by the students, it can be concluded that fear does affect ESL learners' fluency in English. Majority of the learners mentioned that even though they are eager to improve their fluency in English, due to high level of anxiety and fear they lose confidence and feel ashamed in front of their peers, especially when it comes to class activities in group sessions. Hiew (2012) explained that students feel afraid of the idea of making mistakes because they are afraid that their friends will mock them and receive negative evaluations from their peers, if they make mistakes in speaking English language. The fear of making mistakes by students in Speaking English has been one of the common issues.

Furthermore, the learners were asked to share their opinions about what prevents them from improving their English language fluency. Majority of them stated that their mother tongue involvement is their weakness which does not allow them to improve their fluency in speaking English. On the other hand, some learners mentioned that this occurs when they speak to those peers who are using the same mother tongue. Here are some examples of the learners' responses to the questions:

L (4) "I think, things that prevent me to improve my English language fluency is peers. Most of my friends are from the same race as me (Chinese), and they do not really speak English even in English class, and whenever I speak in English with them, they will instantly ignore me".

L (13) "Mother tongue is the cause of my weakness, because if I explain in English, sometimes I have to think about certain words in Malay language which is my mother tongue".

L (21) "When my friend starts to underestimate my English, it makes me feel down and anxious because they do not understand my English".

Moreover, some students stated that they feel concerned about how others think about their English language fluency. This causes lack of self-confidence due to their peers' judgments towards their efforts to perform better.

### *The impact of anxiety on ESL learners' English language fluency*

L (6) “Nowadays people tend to humiliate other people rather than correct them politely. So, in order to avoid being humiliated, I try not to make mistakes but it is inevitable. This feels me anxious.”.

L (10) “I am concerned about how others think about my English language fluency and I wished they can correct me whenever I say something wrong, but they just laugh at me and they make me feel upset.”.

L (27) “I am losing confidence and feel scared when my lecturer asks me to participate in a formal discussion in English classroom. This is because my speaking skill of English is not good enough. On the other hand, I usually panic when it comes to talk in front of other people due to my poor pronunciation”.

Based on the data collected via the open-ended questionnaire, the learners mentioned that they sometimes have trouble finding the right words to express themselves in English, and that is why they feel anxious to attend their English class. According to them “the more they learn new English vocabularies in the class, the more they feel anxious to memories and use them”.

L (14) “I sometimes have trouble finding the right words to express myself in English class. I rather keep quiet and just observe around my peers and always wish my lecturer does not look at me to ask me any questions. You know, this feeling is like anxiety or sadness”.

L (19) “When I am on my way to English class, I am not so happy because I know I am going to have new words to learn that I would not be able to keep in mind. So, I really feel stressed”.

L (25) “I am interested in learning English and speaking fluently, but I worry about the consequences of failing in English class because I do not know if I am doing good or not especially when I need to use the new vocabularies taught in the previous class”.

On the other hand, other are very few learners who stated that it is not a problem for them to express themselves in English because they do not encounter any issues with their language fluency. They added that the more they speak in English, the more it becomes easier for them to speak English without feeling anxious. Based on the learners' feedback to the questions it can be concluded that anxiety and fear are the serious problems that the ESL learners encounter when it comes to speaking English. This causes the learners to lose self- confidence to communicate in English not only with the English teacher but also the classmates. The lack of self- confidence leads them to lose interest and motivation to improve their English language fluency. Therefore, as mentioned by majority of the participants, they prefer to use their mother tongue to communicate among peers and friends as compared to English even in English class.

### **Conclusion**

The results of this study showed that majority of the ESL learners feel anxious while speaking English which affects their language fluency. The learners are concerned about the



### *The impact of anxiety on ESL learners' English language fluency*

lecturers' corrections as well as peers' judgments against them if they are not able to communicate using a fluent English. In addition, the learners found it difficult to express themselves fluently in English due to lack of knowledge on English vocabularies. The learners need more positive encouragement from both lecturers and peers to be able to make more efforts in speaking English confidently. This will aid them to reduce their level of anxiety to speak English. Having a higher level of motivation and lower level of anxiety aid the learners to speak the second language more confidently. Thus, students should have a friendly and cooperative environment that can help them overcome their difficulties in language fluency performance. Teachers should understand their students' difficulties and feelings to help them improve their self-confidence, and choose the best teaching method(s) to keep their learners involved in the speaking fluency activity. They should build a friendly relationship with the students to reduce the students' anxiety and fear in order to improve their interest and motivation in speaking the second language.

### **References**

- 1) Boonkit, K. (2010). Enhancing the development of speaking skills for non-native speakers of English. *Procedia-social and behavioral sciences*, 2(2), 1305-1309.
- 2) Bozavli, E., & Gulmez, R. (2012). Turkish Students' Perspectives on Speaking Anxiety in Native and Non-Native English Speaker Classes. *Online Submission*.
- 3) Gobel, P., Thang, S. M., Sidhu, G. K., Oon, S. I., & Chan, Y. F. (2013). Attributions to success and failure in English language learning: A comparative study of urban and rural undergraduates in Malaysia. *Asian Social Science*, 9(2), 53.
- 4) Hamouda, A. (2013). An exploration of causes of Saudi students' reluctance to participate in the English language classroom. *International Journal of English Language Education*, 1(1), 17-34.
- 5) Hanh, N. T. (2020). Silence Is Gold?: A Study on Students' Silence in EFL Classrooms. *International Journal of Higher Education*, 9(4), 153-160.
- 6) Huong, T. N. N., & Hiep, P. H. (2010). Vietnamese teachers' and students' perceptions of global English. *Language Education in Asia*, 1(1), 48-61.
- 7) Jugo, R. R. (2020). Language anxiety in focus: The case of Filipino undergraduate teacher education learners. *Education Research International*, 2020.
- 8) Mehdi, Y., & Kumar, S. (2019). English Language Anxiety and its impact on the Communicative Performance of the Learners wrt the Students of B-Schools in Delhi NCR, India. *International Journal of Recent Technology and Engineering (IJRTE)*. ISSN, 2277-3878.
- 9) Ming, T. S., Ling, T. S., & Jaafar, N. M. (2011). Attitudes and motivation of Malaysian secondary students towards learning English as a second language: A case study. *3L, Language, Linguistics, Literature*, 17(1).

*The impact of anxiety on ESL learners' English language fluency*

- 10) Muniandy, M. K., Nair, G. K. S. N., Shanmugam, S. K. K., Ahmad, I., & Noor, N. B. M. (2010). Sociolinguistic competence and Malaysian students' English language proficiency. *English language teaching*, 3, 145-151.
- 11) Oad, L., Khan, N., Khoso, F. (2020). Factors Affecting English Language Anxiety among Learners: A Case Study of a Public Sector University. *Pakistan Social Sciences*, 4(3), 1059-1078.
- 12) Tercan, G., & Dikilitaş, K. (2015). EFL students' speaking anxiety: a case from tertiary level students. *ELT Research Journal*, 4(1), 16-27.
- 13) Timina, S. (2015). Causes of English-Speaking Anxiety among Taiwanese University Students. *2nd International Conference on Education and Social Science*, 1305-1309.
- 14) Tom, A. A., Johari, A., Rozaimi, A., & Huzaimah, S. (2013). Factors contributing to communication apprehension among pre-university students. *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, 2(8), 665.

