
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Investigating English Speaking Anxiety among Vocational College Students in Saudi Arabia: An Empirical Study

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| ABSTRACT

Effective communication in English is becoming increasingly essential for students in vocational education programs. Despite this professional necessity, learners encounter significant anxiety when obligated to communicate in English as a part of routine classroom activities. This study investigates the determinants of English speaking anxiety among female vocational college students from various technical education colleges in Eastern Province, KSA. Considering the rising involvement of women in the Saudi workforce under the Vision 2030, it is crucial to investigate the language-related issues encountered by female vocational second language learners of English. A survey was administered to 152 female students participating in vocational English communication courses. The questionnaire examined various aspects of speaking anxiety, including but not limited to fear of negative evaluation, restricted lexicon, pronunciation issues (mostly arising due to Mother Tongue Interference), social pressure to participate in class and fear of peer assessment. Statistical study indicated that oral presentations in classroom, insufficient vocabulary, and impromptu speaking activities were the primary sources of learner anxiety. The results demonstrate that elevated speaking anxiety of learners correlates with diminished willingness to communicate in English. Regression analysis revealed that linguistic and social factors significantly predicted willingness to communicate, accounting for 42% of the variance. The results indicate that overcoming both linguistic and psychological obstacles is crucial for enhancing students' speaking confidence. The study provides pedagogical advice for language instructors in vocational contexts and contributes to continuing discourse in applied linguistics concerning affective aspects in second language acquisition.

| KEYWORDS

speaking anxiety, vocational education, foreign language anxiety, willingness to communicate, applied linguistics, second language learning

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

English has become the lingua franca of business, education, and technology around the world. Proficiency in English is becoming increasingly important for students in vocational education programs, since many occupations require interaction with clients, colleagues, and foreign partners in the primary language of global commerce and communication, which is English. Despite the growing importance of English communication skills, many language learners experience significant language anxiety while engaging in conversation in the target language (referred to as English throughout this paper). Speaking anxiety can negatively affect language learning results by hindering participation in communicative activities. Students with heightened language anxiety often avoid speaking opportunities, even within safe confines of a classroom, give only one word responses, or switch back to their mother tongue to converse easily.

Foreign language anxiety has been thoroughly investigated in Applied linguistics (**Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner,**

1994), especially in formal academic settings; however, only limited study has been done till date on language production skills on vocational learners in Middle East in particular KSA. It is worthwhile to note that, vocational learners represent a distinct group, as their second language target goals aim at mastering practical communication skills in target language rather than solely improving academic language proficiency when compared to university students. Mastering speaking skills in target language plays a pivotal role in cracking job interviews, being a team member in a professional setting or making technical presentation in front of a group. Industry experts agree that communicative competence in English play a pivotal role in workplace readiness.

Furthermore, in Middle Eastern educational scenario, particularly in KSA, no systematic study has been done till date on the impact of language anxiety on female vocational college students as the female participation in job market has increased to 34% in 2024 from 19% in 2017. In the light of recent government initiatives like , Saudi Vision 2030, it is crucial that skilled workforce armed with effective communication skills in English are readily available in the job market. Therefore , investigating impact of English speaking anxiety in vocational education setting is crucial for stream lining the educational outcomes with the industry needs.

It is widely recognized that, in most technical education institutes students may come from diverse educational backgrounds and may have had limited opportunities for communicative language practice in English before entering vocational training at secondary level. Often the exposure to target language is minimal during the formative years in school. Consequently, impromptu classroom speaking activities in target language aimed at improving communicative competence such as presentations, role-plays, and workplace simulations elicit significant learner anxiety.

Understanding the factors that contribute to speaking anxiety in professional environments is crucial for improving language teaching strategies. Identifying these aspects can aid educators in establishing favorable learning environments that enhance student participation in speaking activities. This study aims to investigate the factors influencing English speaking anxiety among vocational college students and evaluate the affect of these factors on students' willingness to communicate in the classroom.

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the main factors which lead to developing to English speaking anxiety among vocational college students?
2. Which classroom speaking activities generate the highest levels of anxiety among vocational students?
3. In what ways do language competency and social evaluation affect students' willingness to communicate at vocational level?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Foreign Language Anxiety

Foreign language anxiety otherwise referred to as Foreign Language classroom anxiety (FLCA) is defined as the feelings of tension and apprehension associated with second language "Foreign language anxiety is defined as a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning." **Horwitz et al. (1986)**.

One of the most influential theoretical frameworks was proposed through the concept of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety, developed by **Elaine K. Horwitz and colleagues(1986)**. Elaine K. Horwitz et al. (1986) define foreign language anxiety as a multifaceted construct encompassing learners' self-perceptions, beliefs, and emotional reactions within language learning environments. This framework identifies three major components of language anxiety: communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety. Subsequent studies have shown that worry can profoundly impact learners' cognitive processes. **Peter D. MacIntyre and Gardner (1994)** contend that worry disrupts linguistic input processing, memory, and output production. **Zoltán Dörnyei (2005)** underscores that affective variables, including anxiety, are crucial in influencing language acquisition success. **Rebecca L. Oxford (1999)** emphasizes that anxiety affects learners' motivation, the methods they use, and their engagement, which then influences their overall learning results.

2.2 Role of Speaking in SLA

Speaking is inherently connected to the development of language, as it requires learners to produce speech instantly. Unlike skills like reading and listening, which involve comprehension, speaking necessitates the concurrent utilization of syntax, vocabulary, pronunciation, and semantic understanding. **Levelt (1989)** suggests that speech production constitutes a complex

cognitive process involving thought, planning, and verbal expression. Needless to say, the cognitive strain will be even higher on second language learners of English.

2.3 Speaking Anxiety in Second Language Learning

Speaking is sometimes seen as the most anxiety-inducing language skill for second language learners, as it necessitates immediate processing, minimal planning time, and often limited opportunities for self-correction. According to **Stephen Krashen (1982)**, "Anxiety serves as the affective filter that hinders learners from fully engaging with the input they receive." **Peter MacIntyre and Robert C. Gardner (1994)** assert that students frequently identify speaking in a foreign language as their most anxiety-inducing experience.

Research work by **Peter D. MacIntyre and Gardner (1994)** further demonstrates that anxiety can interfere with cognitive processing, thereby affecting language production. Fear of negative evaluation involves concern about how others judge language performance. Test anxiety relates to stress associated with assessment situations. Research has shown that foreign language anxiety can interfere with cognitive processing during language learning tasks (**MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994**). **Dolly J. Young (1991)** identifies multiple sources of anxiety, including personal, interpersonal, and instructional factors. These findings highlight the multifaceted nature of speaking anxiety and its significant impact on learners' willingness to communicate.

Several studies have identified factors that contribute to speaking anxiety. These factors include worries about making grammatical mistakes, not having enough vocabulary, difficulties with pronunciation, and a lack of self-confidence (**Young, 1991; Woodrow, 2006**). **Chafe (1982, 1994)** distinguishes between speaking and writing by highlighting that spoken language is spontaneous, interactive, and produced under real-time constraints, whereas written language allows for planning and revision. These characteristics render speaking cognitively demanding, as learners must simultaneously manage language creation, audience interaction, and time constraints. This can be attributed as another significant reason why individuals acquiring a second language experience anxiety when speaking.

The classroom environment significantly influences outcomes. The teacher feedback, peer attitudes, and the nature of given speaking activities can markedly affect learners' anxiety levels. Research indicates that speaking anxiety is significantly correlated with learners' willingness to communicate in the target language (**Liu & Jackson, 2008**). Students with elevated anxiety levels may refrain from engaging in speaking activities while having adequate language proficiency.

2.4 Impact of Anxiety & Willingness to Communicate

A key concept related to speaking anxiety is the willingness to communicate (WTC), which describes a learner's readiness to engage in conversations in a second language. This idea was developed by **Peter D. MacIntyre and his colleagues (1998)**. They define WTC as an essential component of learners' willingness to communicate in both academic and non academic setting.

Studies have consistently demonstrated that anxiety adversely impacts the propensity to communicate. **Minghe Liu and Jackson (2008)** found that students with high anxiety levels are less likely to participate in classroom speaking activities. Similarly, **Peng and Woodrow (2010)** reinforces this idea that worry is a significant factor in reduced communication in second language learning environments. These findings suggest that speaking anxiety negatively impacts not only academic performance but also restricts learners' opportunities for language practice.

2.5 Anxiety in Classrooms

The classroom setting significantly influences learners' speaking anxiety. **Tsui (1996)** noted that hesitant learners frequently encounter anxiety stemming from fear of negative assessment from their peers and a deficiency in self-assurance. Teacher-related factors, including error correction methods and questioning approaches, can either elevate or diminish anxiety levels. The nature of the task is a crucial factor affecting learners' classroom anxiety. **Ellis (2003)** posits that various speaking activities present learners with diverse cognitive demands. Presentations and oral exams, generally induce higher levels of anxiety compared to low-pressure activities, such as pair work or group discussions. Furthermore, **Kitano (2001)** found that learners' self-perceptions of their abilities, relative to their peers, is another contributing factor affecting language anxiety.

2.6 Speaking Anxiety in Vocational Education

Although speaking anxiety in SLA has been widely studied, relatively little research focuses on impact of second language acquisition in vocational education contexts. Even fewer studies are done on the interplay of linguistic, psychological, social, and instructional factors in exacerbating English speaking anxiety among vocational learners. This mismatch between the curriculum or industry demands and students' communicative readiness in English is the root cause of language anxiety.

Vocational programs frequently necessitate students' engagement in spontaneous, real-world simulation tasks, do technical presentations, interviews, and role-playing exercises. Although these activities are beneficial for cultivating communicative competence, they can also exacerbate anxiety in learners who possess limited confidence in their speaking capabilities. Furthermore, vocational classrooms frequently comprise students with diverse levels of English proficiency, potentially fostering peer comparison and feelings of inadequacy. Consequently, comprehending the socio-educational contexts that shape these factors' influence on speaking anxiety is crucial for enhancing vocational language instruction.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a **quantitative survey design** to investigate factors contributing to English speaking anxiety among vocational college students.

The reliability and validity of the study instrument were rigorously verified to ensure the integrity of the data collected. The questionnaire items were adapted from previously validated instruments designed to measure foreign language anxiety, with particular emphasis on elements related to Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA).

A preliminary investigation was conducted involving a group of twenty vocational students, distinct from the main study participants. The purpose of this pilot testing was to assess the comprehensibility of the questionnaire items, the appropriateness of the response scale, and the instrument's overall structure. Feedback obtained from the pilot cohort prompted further refinements to selected components, thereby improving their clarity.

Cronbach's alpha coefficient was used to assess how consistent the questionnaire was internally. The instrument's overall reliability was $\alpha = 0.87$, indicating a good level of internal consistency. This suggests that the questionnaire items were dependable in measuring the concept of speaking anxiety.

3.2 Participants

A total of 152 vocational college students, all females (18-23 years) participated in the study. Participation in the study was voluntary, informed consent was taken from students and objectives of the study was clearly informed. Student responses were treated with strictest level of confidentiality and individual participants are not identified in this study.

The participants were enrolled in English communication courses across several vocational programs in KSA including:

- Business administration
- Quality control
- Health and safety
- Chemical Lab Technician
- Electronics

3.3 Instrument

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire consisting of 18 Likert-scale items measuring various sources of speaking anxiety.

The questionnaire examined several potential causes of anxiety:

- fear of making grammatical mistakes
- limited vocabulary
- pronunciation difficulties
- peer evaluation
- teacher-related pressure
- performance during presentations

- speaking tests

Responses were recorded on a four-point Likert scale.

3.4 Sampling Limitations

The study's use of a convenience sampling method limited how broadly the findings could be applied. Because all participants were from vocational colleges in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, the results might not fully represent vocational learners in other areas or educational settings.

Additionally, the sample only included female students, which could impact how applicable the findings are to other gender groups. Therefore, future research should include a more diverse sample to improve the generalizability of the results.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using statistical techniques commonly used in SPSS-based research. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the data, including means and standard deviations. Correlation analysis was employed to examine relationships between key variables. Furthermore, multiple regression analysis was performed to determine the extent to which independent variables predict speaking anxiety among vocational students.

4. Results

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

Table 1

Major Factors Contributing to Speaking Anxiety

Factor	Mean	SD
Oral presentations	3.47	0.62
Fear of grammatical mistakes	3.41	0.65
Lack of vocabulary	3.36	0.70
Speaking without preparation	3.29	0.72
Fear of peer evaluation	3.21	0.74
Pronunciation difficulties	3.18	0.71

The results show that **oral presentations** produced the highest level of anxiety among participants.

4.2 Correlation Analysis

Table 2

Correlation between Anxiety Factors and Willingness to Communicate

Variable	Correlation
Fear of mistakes	-0.52
Lack of vocabulary	-0.49
Peer evaluation	-0.46
Pronunciation difficulty	-0.41

The negative correlations indicate that higher anxiety levels are associated with lower willingness to communicate.

Regression Analysis

Table 3

Regression Predicting Willingness to Communicate

Predictor	Beta	p
Fear of mistakes	-0.36	<0.01
Lack of vocabulary	-0.29	<0.01
Peer evaluation	-0.25	<0.05

The regression model explained **42% of variance** in willingness to communicate.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that English-speaking anxiety among vocational college students is influenced by both language-related and social factors. The findings of the current study is consistent with findings of **Liu & Jackson (2008)** on foreign language anxiety. Consistent with previous study, it was found language anxiety is one of the most common psychological barriers to speaking. Likewise, fear of making mistakes and getting negative evaluation from peers and teachers significantly raise the anxiety level of students. Linguistic anxiety in speaking situations is exhibited by various cognitive, behavioural, and physiological symptoms, such as freezing, avoidance, heightened self-monitoring, speech disfluencies, and mental blockage. Students may demonstrate avoidance tactics like code-switching, and increased mental anxiety all of which can considerably impede oral language production.

Fear of making grammatical mistakes emerged as one of the strongest predictors of speaking anxiety. This suggests that learners may associate oral communication with linguistic accuracy rather than communicative effectiveness. It was found during the survey that many students associate grammatical accuracy with target language mastery. This perfectionist mindset creates unrealistic expectations and negatively impacts students' willingness to communicate especially in classroom setting. This fear may be byproduct of traditional educational system which prioritizes accuracy over meaning. This also points to knowledge gap between explicit and implicit knowledge, where students know the grammar rule but are often at a loss on how to apply it.

Vocabulary limitations also play a significant role in contributing to learners' anxiety. While lexical gap hinders message construction, searching for words while trying to speak in target language creates high cognitive load, hence many students are found to avoid speaking activities in class. In such cases, students resort to increased usage of avoidance strategies or solely rely on memorized language chunks while trying to communicate.

Furthermore, social elements, including peer assessment and the competitive nature of the classroom, were observed to affect anxiety levels. Students might experience self-consciousness when addressing their peers, especially if they believe their classmates possess superior fluency. This intrinsic tendency toward social comparison, coupled with the fear of negative evaluation from peers, is identified as a significant contributor to anxiety in students.

During the course of survey, around 6% of learners also discussed the previous negative experiences which they encountered while trying to speak in target language also being a contributing factor to their language anxiety. Increased affective filter resulting from loss of communicative confidence, past error correction trauma were a few contributing factors which students pointed out during the course of the survey.

Performance-based tasks such as presentations which require simultaneous demand on multiple skills such as content delivery, vocabulary retrieval, pronunciation accuracy were identified as the most anxiety-provoking classroom activity. These tasks may require additional scaffolding to help students develop confidence. Besides limited experience with public speaking was also identified as a contributing factor to language anxiety.

6. Pedagogical Implications

The findings suggest several practical strategies for reducing speaking anxiety in vocational English classrooms.

6.1 Pedagogical implications For Teachers

Teachers should provide structured preparation time for students before speaking activities. Not only does this help to reduce the cognitive overload by giving students more time to plan their ideas, it helps to reduce anxiety and build confidence. This improves the task engagement and facilitates peer collaboration.

Pair and small-group discussions can help students practice in a less threatening environment before speaking in front of the whole class. Peer support provides integral scaffolding and helps to lower the effective filter. It helps to foster interactive communication skills and brings down the fear of negative evaluation. Inclusive participation for diverse learners will also aid in providing differentiation, thereby reducing the anxiety levels.

Teachers should also promote a supportive classroom atmosphere where mistakes are treated as part of the learning process. This normalization of the concept error making will go a long way in increasing the willingness of learners to participate in the learning process. This is key shift from emphasizing competitiveness over perfection will help students feel more confident about sharing their ideas. Teachers must take care to provide positive and constructive feedback. All this will go a long way in developing learner autonomy and lowering learner anxiety.

Finally, speaking tasks should be gradually scaffolded to help students build confidence before performing high-stakes tasks such as presentations. This allowed the learners to move from supported to autonomous tasks. This gradual transition will go a long way in reducing anxiety.

6.2 Pedagogical implications For curriculum Designers

While designing English curriculum for vocational training colleges, curriculum designers are advised to incorporate speaking tasks with gradual progression of difficulty from more structured activities (like guided roleplays and speaking activities with linguistic scaffolding) to more complex high stakes activities which promote independent thinking such as debates and presentations. This approach will help to build confidence incrementally and play a great role in reducing performance anxiety. It is highly recommended to strike a healthy balance between fluency and accuracy for speaking tasks and reduce the overemphasis on grammatical accuracy. Meaningful communication must be the goal. It is recommended to include more collaborative speaking tasks which helps to reduce language anxiety of the learners. A well-designed curriculum that incorporates scaffolded, progressive, and contextually relevant speaking activities can play a crucial role in reducing speaking anxiety and enhancing learners' communicative competence.

6.3 Pedagogical implications for Vocational Colleges

Vocational training colleges which offer English language programs for the learners are recommended to provide in house language support centers. Organizing presentation training workshops or mock interviews in English will help to prepare the students well and help in reducing language anxiety when speaking. Ensuring smaller classrooms (with not more than 15-20 students in a language class) and incorporating technology enhanced learning platforms will provide flexibility to learners to continue language learning without the social pressure of being in classroom. Gathering regular feedback from students and administering needs analysis survey among the learners will help the vocational institutes to be in sync with the learners' needs and provide a safe, supportive learning environment for all learners.

7.0 Limitation of Study

One limitation of study is that data is collected only from Technical training colleges in Eastern Province in KSA. This means the results may not fully represent vocational learners in other geographical places in MiddleEast. The participants of study are only females between 18-23 years, hence impact of gender differences in speaking anxiety did not come under the purview of the present study. The study is based on self reported questionnaire data which does not reflect learners' actual speaking ability. Qualitative data such as data from one to one interviews, case studies or classroom observation is not included in the current study. This may limit understanding of the concept of language anxiety at deeper level among the learners. Individual personality differences were also not taken into account. These limitations suggest that future research could benefit from more diverse samples, incorporation of a combination of research methods, inclusion of male participants to gain a more complete understanding of speaking anxiety.

8. Conclusion

This study looked at the main factors that contribute to English speaking anxiety among female vocational college students in KSA. The findings suggest that there is no single contributing factor to language anxiety instead a combination of socio linguistic factors, including limited vocabulary, uncertainty about grammar, pronunciation difficulties, and concern about how

peers may react all contribute to language anxiety. The results also show that when students feel anxious about speaking, they are less likely to participate in speaking activities in target language, which negatively impacts target language mastery.

These observations highlight the importance of teaching strategies that develop students' language skills while also creating a supportive and secure learning environment in vocational colleges. Vocational colleges are responsible for providing opportunities for meaningful speaking practice with gradual progression from structured to more autonomous activities in a safe and welcoming classroom. This approach could potentially boost students' self-confidence and encourage them to participate more actively in presentations, interviews, discussions in target language in a professional setting.

Future investigations in this domain could examine the efficacy of diverse instructional strategies and interventions in mitigating speaking anxiety, especially within vocational contexts where communication skills are intrinsically connected to students' prospective professional achievements. Furthermore, the influence of gender disparities on language anxiety within the classroom warrants additional scholarly attention.

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