



## Exploring Aspects Of Efl Speaking Anxiety From The Prespectives Of Iraqi Medical Undergraduates

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### Abstract:

The purpose of this study is to investigate speaking anxiety in EFL from the viewpoints of Iraqi undergraduate medical students. This includes examining the factors that lead to the anxiety and the consequences that the anxiety has on the participants. It also lists the methods these students used to lessen their speaking fear. Teachers' and students' semi-structured interviews were the two methods used to gather data. Fifteen students and five teachers from the Technical Institute for Medicine-AlMansoor participated. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. The results showed that the classroom setting, lack of time management, unfamiliar topics, fear of making mistakes, concern of receiving a poor grade, and language ignorance were the main causes of speaking anxiety among Iraqi medical undergraduate students. Based on the students' comments, three main consequences were identified: academic, social, and personal. The results also showed that four strategies—cognitive, meta-cognitive, emotional, and memory—were employed by EFL Iraqi medical undergraduate students to get over their speaking fear. The study has demonstrated that a variety of circumstances, negatively affecting the students' academic, social, and personal lives, contributed to the speaking anxiety experienced by Iraqi medical undergraduate students. In order to improve the teaching of English in Iraq, the Ministry of Education, course developers, and teachers must address a number of difficulties regarding the origins of speaking anxiety as reported by the students.

**Keywords:** Speaking anxiety, Causes of speaking anxiety, Effects of speaking anxiety, Strategies to reduce speaking anxiety, Iraq EFL learners

### Introduction

In human life, languages are a medium of communication. It was possible for speakers to communicate with one another through language. English is currently the most used language, despite the fact that many languages are spoken throughout the world (Rao, 2019).



In addition, students must learn and develop the four (4) fundamental language skills—listening, reading, speaking, and writing—in order to communicate successfully in English. Salima and Zahira (2015) state that these four abilities fall into two groups: 1) It's crucial to have receptive skills like reading and listening. 2) Effective speaking and writing talents.

Constructive speaking is an essential component of language learning because it allows the learner to convey ideas, feelings, and opinions via the use of appropriate words and phrases. Conversely, speaking is seen as a challenge for learners due to the various perspectives held by academics, as speaking requires multiple processes (Buarqoub, 2019).

Speaking in English has long been seen as a challenging task for EFL students compared to other languages because real conversation demands the speaker to produce sentences quickly and naturally while utilising a wide range of words and phrases. Additionally, the speaker must be proficient in many crucial areas, including vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, comprehension, and fluency (Brown, 1997). Similarly, Leong and Ahmadi (2017) assert that mastering a foreign language effectively presents a significant challenge. Grammar instruction has received more attention in Iraq than other subjects, often at the expense of other subjects. Thus, it deviates from the main goal of learning English, which is to communicate (Saeed, 2015).

Oral communication difficulties can also be caused by a wide range of factors, such as anxiety, attitude, motivation, and preconceptions about learning a foreign language. Conversely, the most important element is anxiety. (McDonough & Shaw 1993; Imane, 2016; Horwitz, 2001).

Studies on second and foreign languages are beginning to shed light on some of the difficulties that may come up during the learning process. One of the main challenges to learning a new language is anxiety. According to Bollinger (2017), there are two categories of anxiety related to language acquisition. The first is facilitation, which is a commonly held belief in the field of education where it acts as a tool for learning. Furthermore, fostering anxiety is crucial because it is closely related to competitiveness. The term "a negative impact on students' motivation and his/her preparation before or during exams" describes the second type of anxiety, which is crippling. As a result, it's frustrating how frequently one encounters things that are either perplexing or disappointing (Bollinger, 2017). Because they are always worried about making mistakes, which causes anxiety, anxious students may

find it difficult to keep their attention on the task at hand (MacIntyre, 1995, Zheng & Cheng, 2018).

### **Problem Statement**

Globally, anxiety is a big problem for EFL students. According to most scholars (Ewald, 2007; Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994), language anxiety is defined as "severe anxiety which can be debilitating and significantly hinders learner's performance." Indeed, crippling anxiety has a negative effect on students' motivation and exam preparation. Furthermore, severe anxiety is harmful since it is associated with low motivation, skewed worldviews, and language difficulties. Cheng and colleagues, 2014).

Based on my personal observations and experience teaching EFL skills, particularly speaking, for over five years, I have found that most students at the Technical Institute for Medicine-Al-Mansour, Middle Technical University, Iraq, exhibit anxiety in both their participation and exam results. When students spoke to their teachers, especially the native English speakers, or participated in speaking lessons, it was evident that they were anxious. Studies on speaking difficulties or anxiety related to foreign languages have been conducted in Iraq; examples are Saeed (2015) and Yaseen (2017). It was discovered that Iraqi students experience anxiety when learning a new language. Only a small number of research, particularly on Iraqi undergraduate medical students, have addressed speaking anxiety in that country. Studies by Saeed (2015), Yaseen (2016), Oda, and Mahmoud (2016), and others have revealed that a significant amount of classroom language anxiety is experienced by Iraqi EFL students. Thus, research on Iraqi medical undergraduate students is required in order to investigate the causes and effects of speaking anxiety in the classroom.

### **Research Objectives**

The objectives of this study are:

1. To explore the causes of EFL speaking anxiety from Iraqi medical undergraduate students' perspectives.
2. To explain the effects of speaking anxiety on the Iraqi medical undergraduate students.
3. To identify strategies that the Iraqi medical undergraduate students used to reduce speaking anxiety.



### **Research Questions**

Three aspects of the phenomena of speaking anxiety are examined: causes, effects, and strategies. The following research questions are addressed in this study:

1. What are the causes of EFL speaking anxiety from the Iraqi medical undergraduate students' perspectives?
2. How does speaking anxiety affect the Iraqi medical undergraduate students?
3. What are the strategies that the Iraqi medical undergraduate students used to reduce speaking anxiety?

### **Literature review**

#### **Speaking Skill**

Speaking is an essential ability for learning a foreign language. Through speaking, language learners convey their ideas to other language speakers, work towards certain goals, express their opinions to other language speakers, and improve language acquisition (Leong & Ahmadi, 2017). An essential component of speaking EFL is speaking acquisition. Numerous studies have emphasised the value of learning to speak a foreign language and how it helps with the development of other abilities. According to Koran (2015), speaking refers to the ability to convey ideas and phrases to other speakers in addition to using language elements. Speaking comfortably is defined as having these two qualities. Speaking proficiency is the capacity to express oneself intelligibly in English depending on the situation in which one must express feelings, ideas, and thoughts. Speaking fluency refers to the ability to use the appropriate English speech style for the given circumstance (Kurniati, 2017).

#### **Speaking Difficulties**

Sayuri (2016) investigated the difficulties EFL students faced speaking English at Mulawarman University in Indonesia by administering surveys and speaking examinations. The results showed that those students remained puzzled about holding discussions, making claims, and expressing ideas in English, even though they were communicating in the language during each speaking course. Furthermore, the researcher found that people struggled with vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, and self-confidence in addition to these problems. Focusing on speaking proficiency in a foreign language is inherently problematic, according to Alonso (2018), as it relates to one of the hardest skills to gather data on in second language acquisition. When



compared to receptive skills and writing output, this skill may be the most difficult to teach, test, and investigate in terms of assessment and exploration.

### **1.1.1 The Notion of Anxiety**

In an attempt to clarify and expand the concept of anxiety, the definition of anxiety is covered in this portion of the literature study. First of all, the word anxiety dates back to the 1520s and is derived from the Latin word *anxietatem* (nominative *anxietas*), which literally translates as "to choke" (Crocq, 2017). Being anxious is a natural aspect of being human. The general definition of anxiety is "a fear or nervousness about what might happen." Nonetheless, the effect variable of anxiety is one of the groups to which "constantly fluctuating states" belong (Crocq, 2017).

Research has been done on anxiety as a useful variable and language acquisition. The study found that learners' ability to speak a foreign language is significantly hampered by anxiety. When nervous students engage in discussions and debates, they worry that their peers will make fun of them. Many scholars, educators, and language learners think that the most important and powerful factor influencing the development of foreign language proficiency is anxiety related to learning a foreign language. Furthermore, it may be argued that anxiety related to learning a foreign language is one of the factors influencing students' performance in the language. Anxiety related to learning a foreign language may also negatively affect language acquisition.

### **Aspects of Anxiety**

Anxiety can take several forms, including situational anxiety, state anxiety, and trait anxiety (McIntyre & Gardner 1991; Imane, 2016). "Trait anxiety is a permanent and difficult part of an individual's character." In addition, individuals with high trait anxiety tend to be uneasy and lack emotional intelligence. Conversely, those who have low trait anxiety tend to be more laid back and emotionally stable. (Imane, 2016).

### **Foreign Language Anxiety**

Every student is eager to learn new languages in order to improve their productivity at work and in the classroom as well as to avoid problems when creating and utilising them. However, this could cause anxiety in people learning the target language. Anxiety and learning a foreign language have been linked, according to earlier studies. In order to address the problem of anxiety among Indonesian EFL learners when learning a foreign language, Rahman (2017) performed research. It has been determined that there are



three distinct types of anxiety associated with learning a foreign language: speaking anxiety, exam anxiety, and anxiety following a poor evaluation.

It has also been suggested by other studies that students' anxiety levels over learning a foreign language have an impact on their language development. Additionally, Wat (2016) investigates how Saudi English majors at Taif University's level of foreign language anxiety is influenced by their gender and academic standing. It also examined the connection between language ability and anxiety in Saudi Arabia. A modified FLCAS and the IFLAF (205 men and 168 women) were given to 373 English major students (Horwitz et al. 1986). Anxiety related to learning a foreign language and language proficiency were found to be negatively correlated in the grammar, speaking, writing, and reading examinations. In this study, participants' anxiety levels related to learning a foreign language were not significantly influenced by their gender.

#### Past Studies on Speaking Anxiety

Anxiety and foreign language proficiency have been the focus of numerous studies (Wilson, 2000; Krashen, 2003; Schütz, 2007; and Zafar, 2009), which have been the topic of numerous scholarly inquiries in recent years. Speakeasy students do poorly orally, and this is just one of the numerous emotional aspects that impact learning a foreign language. (Hanifa, 2018). Anxiety related to speaking a foreign language is one of the four fears that require further investigation. Speaking anxiety is still a significant issue for study, despite the fact that it has been the subject of numerous studies due to its significance and the necessity of examining the anxiety of medical students (Tuan & Mai, 2015).

In order to assess the factors influencing the anxiety that a sample of thirty-one English students at Universiti Utara Malaysia felt while enrolled in an ESP speaking programme, Kartini (2017) used a questionnaire. The results showed that a number of factors, including difficulty speaking English and fear of making mistakes when speaking in front of the class, classroom procedures, the instructor's accent, students' perceptions that their classmates are smarter than them, and students' perceptions of their classmates' intelligence as a cause of their own lack of ability and confidence, were all linked to the anxiety that the students felt when learning English through the ESP speaking programme.



### Causes of Speaking Anxiety

To enhance the study of foreign languages, it is critical to determine the reasons for speaking nervousness. According to Melouah (2015), anxiety over speaking a foreign language is one of several factors that could negatively affect students taking English classes in order to acquire this second language. Numerous research have been conducted to determine the factors that may contribute to an increase in speaking anxiety in both native and non-native speakers (Abukhattala, 2013; Gulzar et al., 2014; Raju & Joshith, 2018; Lai & Wei, 2019). Numerous factors have been linked to learners' speaking anxiety in these research. The studies pertaining to speaking anxiety are covered by the literature review in this study. Different academics have different definitions of anxiety. Their research indicates that different factors contribute to the learners' anxiety of speaking. It varies depending on the student. In essence, the students' public speaking phobia is often caused by their excessive concern about making mistakes. Speaking anxiety affects students' social, emotional, and intellectual lives. Students thus find it challenging to get over their fear (Mahmud, 2017). The research on speaking anxiety has both strengths and shortcomings, which are illustrated by the following connected studies:

Tuan and Mai (2015) looked into the effects that students' speaking performance is subjected to during speaking activities, including motivation, confidence, anxiety, time, planning, amount of support, standard performance, listening ability, and feedback. To have a good discussion, students need to be adept listeners in order to understand what is being said to them. Every speaker in Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is supposed to be both a listener and a speaker by freely exchanging ideas and speaking (Tuan and Mai, 2015).

In their 2014 study, Fariadian et al. investigated the relationship between anxiety and EFL competency. In order to do this, an assessment of the foreign language speaking anxiety of eighty EFL students from the province of Ilam was conducted using FLCAS. Anxiety leads to psychological and physical problems, diminishes motivation, concentration, and achievement, increases learning errors, impedes the transfer of real performance and study efficiency, and lowers enthusiasm in learning a language. Anxiety may hinder students' ability to participate in class or study at home, as well as impair their confidence and zeal for learning English. The learning of foreign languages is still impacted by anxiety. One of the most challenging EFL



skills is speaking. The majority of studies found that speaking English around other people makes one feel uneasy and anxious. Some EFL students believe that their poor English speaking makes them "dumb." Language anxiety among EFL students develops with every circumstance or occurrence that raises the likelihood of speaking in front of a crowd. This might be giving a quick speech in front of the public or in a classroom with other pupils. Finding ways to provide EFL students time to speak in class should be acknowledged, nevertheless, as appropriate peer and adult support strategies. The methods recommended to lessen or get over speaking anxiety were found in the analysed studies. For their 2017 study, Rafada and Madini conducted 10 semi-structured interviews. The following coping mechanisms were shown to be used to treat speaking anxiety, according to their study: In order to reduce speaking anxiety, language development strategies include watching English-language films, using English-language websites, travelling abroad and conversing with locals, making more presentations, reading English-language books, and enrolling in summer language programmes. The instructor's role in helping pupils feel less anxious when speaking a language is the second. Thirdly, they need to pick a few themes that are appropriate for their ability level and intriguing. Fourth, to increase students' likelihood of following instructions, encourage teachers to use body language. Fifth, one hour might be set aside in the lab for speaking practice rather than spending long hours in the English classroom. By using this method, students will be able to practise their English more and spend less time learning it in boring lectures. Sixth, students will be motivated and inspired to study if specific tactics are implemented that allow them to be at the centre of the learning process.

Rayani et al. (2016) conducted a study to determine the strategies used by students to reduce their speaking anxiety in English as well as the factors that affect these strategies. This study employed the qualitative method of interviewing as its methodology. Thirty pupils from one of Dalu's Junior Dalu High Schools participated in this study. Both an interview and a questionnaire were used to collect the data. Based on the research, the students used preparation, relaxation, peer seeking, positive thinking, and surrender as strategies to help them feel less nervous when speaking English. Moreover, their anxiety when speaking English was influenced by a variety of factors, including their worry of speaking poorly, their fear of receiving a poor grade, and their lack of speech skill.





## Methodology

In order to investigate speaking anxiety as experienced and reported by the participants when speaking English in their English classes, a qualitative research approach was selected for this study. Given the intricate nature of speaking anxiety and its detrimental impact on students' oral performance (Hanifa, 2018), a qualitative study approach is a fitting approach to demonstrate its intricacy. "A range of data collection and analysis techniques that use semi-structured, open-ended interviews and purposive sampling" is the definition of a qualitative approach (Gopaldas, 2016). The researcher wanted to provide a thorough understanding of the speaking anxiety phenomenon, with a focus on the causes of speaking anxiety, how this problem affected the participants' performance in class, and the strategies that the participants used to reduce their speaking anxiety. For this study, a qualitative research methodology was appropriate given the research questions. Fifteen Iraqi medical undergraduate students who were enrolled in English language classes at Al-Mansoor Technical Institute of Medicine were interviewed by the researcher. The students' attendance at the English language lesson was required in order to improve their language skills. The four skills—speaking, writing, listening, and reading—were all addressed throughout the course. Speaking is one of the more challenging abilities to acquire, though. As part of studying the language, the pupils had to do numerous exercises to improve their English during the lecture.

*semi-structured interviews provide a deeper knowledge of the research issues and methods used in this study, they are appropriate for it. It is "one of the most powerful ways in which we try to understand our fellow human beings (Fontana and Frey, 2000).*

## Research Findings and Discussions

### Causes of Speaking Anxiety

The results demonstrated that out of the four language abilities, speaking was considered the most difficult by the majority of pupils, with just a small number finding it somewhat difficult. The students suffered from public speaking anxiety as they worked to master this challenging language ability. Seven reasons for the students' speaking nervousness were uncovered through the interview responses. One research question asked, "what are the causes of EFL speaking anxiety from the perspectives of Iraqi medical undergraduate students?" The interview replies to this topic revealed seven overarching themes. The students' fears were related to the following: 1. the fear of being

negatively evaluated; 2. the fear of making mistakes; 3. unfamiliar subjects; 4. poor time management skills; 5. lack of self-confidence; and 7. the classroom setting. The first reason is that they were afraid their teacher would think badly of them. This could have taken the form of labelling them as stupid or unable or even just disliking them because of their clumsy or awkward delivery of class discussions. Students' anxiety about making a fool of themselves in front of an audience stems from two sources: their lack of confidence in their own pronunciation and word choice, and their confusion about the nature of the speaking assignment. As for the third reason, pupils' limited vocabulary made it hard for them to comprehend assignments, choose appropriate words, and express themselves. Consequently, the instructor had to define the terms and provide an Arabic translation. A fourth source of nervousness for pupils is their unfamiliarity with speaking subjects. Since they were forced to deliver a speech about a subject they were completely unfamiliar with, the pupils were understandably distressed by this situation. Consequently, they were unable to speak more than a few words, if any at all. Also, a rising issue, according to participant replies, was students' lack of preparedness for public speaking. According to Moore (2011), who concurs with the participants, the majority of presenters aim to say too much and thereby run out of time. Fear of coming up with boring or uninteresting points is a major deterrent for many people when it comes to public speaking. They are anxious about appearing awkward in front of the crowd if they end too soon. Also affecting the pupils' mental health is the limited opportunity to interact in English. As a result, they start to doubt themselves. For a speech to be a success, the speaker must possess the capacity to captivate both the audience and themselves. Rozakis (1999) claims that a great deal of nervousness is experienced by public speakers. Finally, the Iraqi medical undergraduates' public speaking nervousness was likely enhanced by the classroom environment. Research by Huda (2018), Rachada and Madini (2017), and Akkakoson (2016) has reached similar conclusions.

### Effects of Speaking Anxiety

The results showed that Iraqi medical undergraduates' personal, social, and academic lives were negatively impacted by their fear of public speaking. Their fear over speaking English has personal consequences, such as melancholy, difficulty concentrating, and excessive thinking. As for the societal impacts, some Iraqi undergraduates studying medicine had a severe phobia of speaking English, which caused them to withdraw socially from

their classmates, instructors, and even family. Students in Mahmud's (2017) study on the effects and problems of speaking anxiety in Bangladeshi Benggali medium classrooms had similar problems: they were too nervous to participate in class discussions or participate in speaking activities that their teachers had started. In terms of academics, students' performance and marks were affected by their dread of speaking activities. They were unwilling to answer questions or complete the speaking exercise because their minds were consumed by fear.

### **Strategies to reduce Speaking Anxiety**

*Students' strategies for overcoming their fear of public speaking were explored in the following study topic. Results from this question reveal that first, cognitive strategies; second, metacognitive strategies; third, affective strategies; and fourth, memory strategies were the four most common approaches that Iraqi medical undergraduates took to alleviate or at least partially overcome their fear of public speaking. Each of the four strategies—the cognitive strategy, which includes techniques like positive thinking, repetition, and translation; the metacognitive strategy, which involves preparation; the affective strategy, which involves relaxation; and the memory strategy, which involves the use of keywords—helps to take a fresh look at things and approach problems or questions in a way that is easier to understand and implement.*

*Zed and Kassida (2018), for example, discovered that English as a foreign language (EFL) learners mostly used five strategies: 1) resignation, 2) preparation, 3) peer seeking, and 5) relaxation. These findings are similar to those of the present study. Strategies for overcoming public speaking anxiety have been the subject of other research (Pratama, 2018; Mahmud and Suryan, 2015). Therefore, there is no universal strategy that can be applied to meet the needs of every student on the planet.*

### **Conclusion**

Throughout the main and sub themes, it is emphasised that speaking anxiety can be caused by a variety of factors. These include fears of being negatively evaluated, fears of making mistakes, unfamiliar topics, limited vocabulary, poor time management skills, low self-confidence, and an unfriendly classroom environment. Some students feel they will never be good enough public speakers because of the stress and worry caused by these issues. In light of this reality, improvements in Iraqi English language instruction are required to allay students' fears of failing in an English-language course and



prepare them for the challenges they would inevitably face when studying a foreign language.

Finding out how public speaking anxiety manifests was the focus of the second study question. Personal affects, which included three subthemes—feeling down, losing focus, and overthinking—emerged as three primary consequences from students' responses. Part of the social repercussions was withdrawing from other people. A single subtheme emerged from the academic effects: poor performance and attainment. As a result, Iraqi medical undergraduates have a serious problem with public speaking fear. Students suffered from psychological issues such as dread of public speaking seminars and exercises, which led to depression and an unhealthy fixation on past failures. They started isolating themselves and becoming antisocial. They struggled academically due to severe anxiety, which affected their performance and speech.

Thirdly, how do Iraqi medical undergraduates overcome their fear of public speaking? That was the subject of the research topic. This study's results show that first-year medical students in Iraq employed a cognitive strategy—which includes positive thinking, repetition, and translation—to overcome their fear of public speaking. The second one was something called a metacognitive approach, and it involved being prepared. Relaxation was a part of the third tactic, which was affective strategy. The usage of keywords constituted the memory strategy, the fourth one. But the fact that the Iraqi medical students who were anxious about public speaking had taken the initiative to lessen their fear by using these four tactics shows that they are cognizant of their situation.



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