FRESHMAN EFL LEARNERS' ANXIETY IN SPEAKING CLASSES AND COPING STRATEGIES

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Abstract:

This study aims to investigate what speaking anxiety freshman EFL learners encountered in their classes and what strategies they used to reduce their anxiety. A mixed methods approach was employed to collect the data, including a questionnaire following the quantitative method and individual semi-structured interviews following the qualitative method. The participants were 185 freshman EFL learners at several universities in the Mekong Delta. The combination of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale developed by Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope (1986) and the theories about three kinds of anxiety proposed by Ellis (1994) was adapted to measure freshman EFL learners' kinds of speaking anxiety in classes. Additionally, the five categories of coping strategies in Kondo and Ling (2004) were adapted to measure the participants' coping strategies for reducing their speaking anxiety. The results of the study showed that the participants encountered all three kinds of speaking anxiety including trait anxiety, specific-situation anxiety, and state anxiety in classes. Furthermore, the study also indicated five kinds of strategies utilized by the participants to reduce their anxiety in speaking class namely preparation strategies, relaxation strategies, positive thinking strategies, peer-seeking strategies, and resignation strategies. From the results, it was also indicated that preparation strategies were used more frequently than the other strategies by the participants in speaking classes.

Keywords: speaking anxiety, coping strategies, EFL learners, Mekong Delta

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1. Introduction

According to Kondo (2009), language learning anxiety may pose potential problems for language learners. Among the four skills of language including listening, speaking, reading, and writing, speaking might be considered as the most difficult one for many learners. Basic (2011) asserted that speaking anxiety has impacts on second language learning. Specifically, learners feel afraid and anxious to interact in learning activities and participate as a whole (Bastida & Yapo, 2019). Rafada & Madini (2017) state that three main causes of speaking anxiety are related to the EFL teachers, the classroom atmosphere, and the test. Kondo and Ling (2004) claim that preparation, relaxation, positive thinking, peer seeking, and resignation are strategies that allow learners to overcome their speaking anxiety.

Young (1992) claimed that speaking is the most anxiety-provoking skill in comparison to listening, reading, and writing. Therefore, EFL learners could not avoid being anxious in English-speaking classes. Even university students were found to have problems with foreign language speaking (Abdullah and Abdul Rahman, 2010). They considered speaking as their "*most anxiety-producing experience*" (Young 1990, p. 539), and "*difficulty in speaking in class*" as their most common worry (Horwitz et al., 1986, p. 126). Based on the result of observation, there were still lots of freshman EFL learners who encountered speaking anxiety in classes in the Mekong Delta. However, what kinds of anxiety they faced and what they frequently did to reduce their anxiety have not been discovered yet. The findings of this study indicated the kinds of speaking anxiety and coping strategies of freshman EFL learners in speaking classes at universities in the Mekong Delta.

2. Literature review

2.1 Speaking

According to Nunan (2000), speaking is considered as the bottom line of learning a second or foreign language. It is considered as the ability to share meaning and express one's thoughts or opinions by using the target language including grammatical rules, cohesive devices, lexical items, and phonological rules (Mart, 2012; Hammad & Ghali (2015). Moreover, interlocutors are required to respond to each other in appropriate language (Shabani, 2013). In other words, speakers should master both linguistic and sociolinguistic competence so as to communicate effectively and appropriately.

2.2 Speaking anxiety

Anxiety is considered to be "*an unpleasant emotion experienced as dread, scare, alarm, fright, trepidation, horror or panic*" (Lewis, 1970, p. 63). According to Horwitz et al. (1986), speaking is supposed to be the most affected by language anxiety in comparison to listening, reading, and writing skills. Speaking anxiety is a feeling of fear when speaking and it is described to have a great impact on a speaker's self-confidence since it often makes one experience failure when not being able to speak out (Lanerfeldt, 1992). Na

(2007) also stated that anxiety can make learners become discouraged, lose confidence in speaking, and avoid taking part in class activities. Consequently, speaking anxiety may prevent learners from producing the target language (Hashemi & Abbasi, 2013) and negatively affect their speaking ability (Mark, 2011).

2.3 Kinds of anxiety

Several kinds of anxiety have been identified and investigated by many researchers. Some of them are related to the psychology domain. According to Ellis (1994), there are three kinds of speaking anxiety including trait anxiety, state anxiety, and specific-situation anxiety.

The first one is trait anxiety which causes learners to be anxious in any situation (Spielberger, 1983). In other words, learners feel incapable of expressing their emotion, idea, and thought in a foreign language since they cannot control their nervousness. This type of anxiety belongs to one's stable personality trait (Scovel, 1978).

The second type is state anxiety which is caused due to external factors and may make learners anxious when they are exposed to a particularly stressful classroom environment. Spielberger (1983) stated that it belongs to a temporary condition that frequently occurred at a certain time. It may arise in a specific situation so it is not permanent in comparison to trait anxiety.

The last type is specific-situation anxiety caused by participating in a specific event or situation such as tests, oral presentations, public speaking, or class participation (Ellis, 1994). Therefore, specific-situation anxiety can be defined as learners' anxiety that occurs at a particular time and situation (Spielberger, 1983).

2.4 Coping strategies

According to Kondo and Ling (2004), there are five kinds of coping strategies that learners can use to reduce their speaking anxiety in the classroom, namely preparation, relaxation, positive thinking, peer seeking, and resignation.

In regards to preparation, it allows learners to have time to think about the teacher's mentioned issues and list out what they would like to present. As a result, those who have prepared carefully for the lecture usually feel less anxiety when participating in speaking activities or talking in front of the class. The use of this kind of coping strategy also encourages learners to be more confident in speaking.

Relaxation is another kind of strategy that helps learners reduce their anxiety in the language classroom. Learners could make their body and their minds relaxed by doing something such as taking a deep breath or trying to calm down. Additionally, nervous energy can be turned into positive energy through a calming release of breath. The more learners feel relaxed, the more anxiety will be reduced.

The next strategy is positive thinking. By thinking positively, stressful situations can be diverted to pleasant ones. With this kind of strategy, learners could imagine themselves giving a great performance or speaking better than the others in their classroom. Thanks to that, learners will be allowed to release their anxiety in speaking English.

In terms of peer-seeking strategy, anxious learners tend to look for other students who seem to have trouble understanding the class and/or controlling their anxiety. Peer seeking can be telling ourselves that difficult problems for us are also difficult for others, or even the others must be more anxious. By thinking that others also face the same difficulties, learners will feel less stressed.

The final one is resignation which is considered as learners' unwillingness to do anything to reduce their language anxiety. In other words, learners tend to avoid stress and fear by refusing to face the problems or stopping paying attention to the teacher and everyone around and the like.

2.5 Related studies

Several research studies related to learners' foreign language speaking anxiety have been investigated. Balemir (2009) figured out that Turkish EFL learners experience a moderate level of language-speaking anxiety in their classes. Ozturk & Gurbuz (2014) reveal a low level of speaking anxiety among Turkish EFL learners at a state university. Additionally, Fitriah & Muna (2019) investigated levels of speaking anxiety among students at Iain Lhokseumawe and Al Muslim University. They found that learners feel anxious when speaking a foreign language. However, learners of Iain Lhokseumawe suffer higher levels of speaking anxiety in comparison to learners of Al Muslim University. According to Abu-Rabia (2004), high levels of anxiety can affect learners' learning process physically and emotionally. Most learners do feel anxious when speaking a foreign language and that is one of the reasons that makes them feel not enjoyable in their lesson (Gregersen, 2005).

EFL learners' speaking anxiety can be caused by thousands of factors and plenty of strategies have been employed to reduce their anxiety in the classroom. Several studies were conducted in different countries to investigate EFL learners' strategies for speaking anxiety in the classroom and different results were revealed. Sari (2016) pointed out that Indonesian EFL learners used various strategies to reduce their language-speaking anxiety. Some learners are found to keep silent and make negotiations, share and ask for a friend's help, or think positively and ignore friends. Importantly, avoiding eye contact with the teacher and classmates, and doing physical expressive reactions such as shaking the body, nail and lip biting, or tidying their uniform were the most utilized strategies in the classroom.

Genc, Kulusakli, and Aydin (2016) figured out that Turkish EFL learners utilized different strategies to cope with their anxiety namely resignation, preparation, peer seeking, relaxation, and positive thinking. However, most learners chose resignation as their frequent strategy used to reduce their speaking anxiety. On the contrary, Hidayoza, Amri, and Wahyuni (2019) reported that EFL learners at an Indonesian university used resignation strategies the least. Instead, peer seeking was found as the dominant strategy used by learners to cope with their language-speaking anxiety in the classroom. Their study result was similar to Ardi's (2007) which also figured out that peer-seeking strategies were used more frequently than the other categories of the five coping strategies by Malaysian EFL learners.

Moreover, in terms of the effectiveness of coping strategies, Japanese EFL learners were indicated to gain significant effectiveness in reducing their speaking anxiety in classes by employing preparation strategies and positive thinking strategies (Yasuda and Nabei, 2018).

In fact, though various studies related to speaking anxiety have been conducted, there has been little research about freshman EFL learners' kinds of speaking anxiety in English-speaking classrooms in the context of Vietnam, especially in the Mekong Delta. Therefore, the present study "Freshman EFL Learners' Anxiety in speaking classes and coping strategies" will be conducted to explore the kinds of anxiety faced by freshman EFL learners and the coping strategies used to reduce their anxiety in speaking classes.

3. Research methodology

3.1 Research questions

The research aims to investigate what kinds of anxiety freshman EFL learners encounter in their speaking classes and the coping strategies employed by freshman EFL learners to reduce their speaking anxiety. To achieve these purposes, the current study will focus on the questions:

1) What kinds of anxiety do freshman EFL learners encounter in their speaking classes?
2) What are the coping strategies employed by freshman EFL learners in reducing their speaking anxiety in classes?

3.2 Participants

For questionnaire data collection, 185 freshman learners from several universities in the Mekong Delta were recruited as the participants of the study. All of them share the same native language, culture, and English language levels, which is pre-intermediate. Importantly, they have been suffering from speaking anxiety in their speaking classes. This will minimize differences between variables when collecting data and promote the validity of the research.

For interview data collection, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 freshman EFL learners who were randomly chosen from the participants. The interviews aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of student's perceptions of the types of speaking anxiety and their coping strategies in EFL speaking classes. For ethnic reasons, the participants' names were not revealed.

3.3 Instruments

The first instrument used to collect the data was a questionnaire which included 36 questions. The first part had 19 questions insisting on the kinds of English-speaking anxiety that freshman EFL learners encounter in their speaking classes. This part of the questionnaire was adapted from Ellis (1994). The second part contained 17 questions that investigated what coping strategies freshman EFL learners utilized to reduce their anxiety in their English-speaking classes. This section of the questionnaire was adapted

from Kondo and Yang (2004). The questionnaire was designed on a Five-point Likert Scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly disagree).

The second instrument used in the study is semi-structured interviews aiming to seek more details, so it allows the researcher to gain rich and comprehensive data. According to Gray (2009), an interview is a useful tool that helps to elicit "*rich data on people's views, attitudes, and the meanings that underpin their lives and behaviors*" (p. 370). The semi-structured interviews will provide the researcher a chance to cross-check the participants' responses in the questionnaires. The semi-structured interview included 5 open-ended questions to gain insight into the freshman EFL learners' kinds of speaking anxiety and their coping strategies. There were 12 freshman EFL learners randomly chosen from the participants that were conducted.

3.4 Data analysis

The results from the questionnaires were computed by using the Statistics Package for the Social Science (SPSS) version 20.0 to analyze. The interviews were transcribed and themed by using a content analysis approach.

4. Findings and discussions

4.1 Findings from the questionnaire

To investigate freshman EFL learners' anxiety in speaking classes and coping strategies, a thirty-six 5-scale Likert item questionnaire was utilized in the current study (see appendix 1 to see the full form of the questionnaire), in which 185 participants were required to choose the answer by ticking a scale of an individual item, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". The items represent freshman EFL learners' anxiety in speaking classes and the coping strategies they use to reduce their speaking anxiety. The participants' answers were then collected for data analysis.

The data obtained from the questionnaire were subjected to the Statistics Package for the Social Science (SPSS) version 20.0 for data analysis. The questionnaire was checked and proved to have internal consistency and reliability. Cronbach's alpha for the scale tests showed that the questionnaire was highly reliable (α=.932).

To interpret the mean scores of the results from the questionnaire, the mean score interpretation of Moidunny (2009) presented in Table 1 below was used.

Table 1: Mean score interpretation

Mean Score	Interpretation
1.00 – 1.80	Very low
1.81 – 2.60	Low
2.61 – 3.20	Medium
3.21 – 4.20	High
4.21 – 5.00	Very high

The first research question aimed to investigate kinds of speaking anxiety including trait anxiety, specific-situation anxiety, and state anxiety encountered by freshman EFL learners in their speaking classes. The results are shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Results of Descriptive Statistics Test of three kinds of speaking anxiety encountered by freshman EFL learners in their speaking classes

Kinds of speaking anxiety	Mean	SD
Trait anxiety	3.99	0.48
Specific-situation anxiety	4.04	0.58
State anxiety	4.03	0.56

As presented in Table 2, the mean score of trait anxiety (M=3.99); specific-situation anxiety (M=4.04); and state anxiety (M=4.03) was high according to the mean score interpretation in Table 1. As a result, it indicated that freshman EFL learners encountered all three kinds of anxiety namely trait anxiety, specific-situation anxiety, and state anxiety in their speaking classes.

The second research question aimed to explore what coping strategies are utilized by freshman EFL learners to reduce their speaking anxiety in classes. The results are shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Results of Descriptive Statistics Test of five kinds of coping strategies used by freshman EFL learners in their speaking classes

Coping strategies	Mean	SD
Preparation strategies	3.94	0.74
Relaxation strategies	3.87	0.76
Positive thinking strategies	3.75	0.69
Peer seeking strategies	3.89	0.59
Resignation strategies	3.80	0.81

As presented in Table 3, the mean score of preparation strategies (M=3.94); relaxation strategies (M=3.87); positive thinking strategies (M=3.75); peer-seeking strategies (M=3.89); and resignation strategies (M=3.80) was high according to the mean score interpretation from Moidunny (2009). As a result, it is indicated that freshman EFL learners have used all five kinds of coping strategies namely preparation strategies, relaxation strategies, positive thinking strategies, peer-seeking strategies, and resignation strategies to reduce their speaking anxiety in classes.

In conclusion, freshman EFL learners encountered all three kinds of anxiety including trait anxiety, specific-situation anxiety, and state anxiety in speaking classes. Additionally, they used all five kinds of coping strategies namely preparation strategies, relaxation strategies, positive thinking strategies, peer-seeking strategies, and resignation strategies to reduce their speaking anxiety.

4.2 Findings from the interview

The interview aimed to deeply investigate what kinds of speaking anxiety freshman EFL learners encountered as well as to gain more insights into coping strategies utilized by them for reducing their speaking anxiety in classes.

Interestingly, in terms of speaking anxiety, all the twelve participants said that they were afraid of being called up to speak English in front of the class, especially when answering the teacher's questions or giving a presentation. In addition, in terms of answering the teacher's questions, most learners felt fearful when being asked questions related to strange and difficult topics, or something beyond their background knowledge.

"I do not want to be called to stand up in front of the class, in front of everyone, and say something in English.", said participant S1.

"I am afraid of almost everything related to speaking in English.", said participant S2.

"I am afraid of speaking English in front of the class and discussing in English in groups. However, being called to speak English makes me feel more anxious.", said participant S5.

"I feel anxious when being called to answer questions immediately without preparation.", said participant S8.

"I am afraid of giving a presentation in front of many people.", said participant S10.

Regarding coping strategies, the participants had some ways in common for reducing their speaking anxiety in classes. However, they most frequently asked their friends for help when they encountered difficult questions or strange topics. Other strategies such as taking a deep breath; telling themselves that they could speak English like their friends; keeping silent; looking at things on the table or ignoring focusing on the teacher; or enduring until the end of the class were also utilized in speaking classes.

"I ask my friends around for help when I could not find the answer to the teacher's difficult questions.", said participant S2.

"I usually take a deep breath and then tell myself that I could also speak English like my friends.", said participant S5.

"If I cannot find the answer or idea for the teacher's questions, I keep silent and then the teacher will call another friend.", said participant S12.

To sum up, from the results of the interview, most of the participants said that being called up to speak English in front of the class made them most anxious. Moreover,

the preparation strategy was used most frequently for reducing their anxiety in speaking classes.

5. Discussions

In relation to speaking anxiety, while learners were conducted to experience different levels of anxiety in classes in the previous studies (Balemir, 2009; Fitriah & Muna, 2019; Ozturk & Gurbuz, 2014), the specific kinds of speaking anxiety including trait anxiety, specific-situation anxiety, and state anxiety were indicated to be encountered by the participants in their speaking classes in the present research. No kind of anxiety was proved to be faced the most or the least by the learners. Nevertheless, all the participants in the interview agreed that they felt more anxious when they were called up to speak in front of the class, especially when giving a presentation or answering the teacher's questions. Zhanibek (2001) claimed that public speaking, or talking in front of people were cases of specific-situation anxiety. Therefore, the result found from the interview could indicate that most learners encountered specific situation anxiety in their speaking classes.

Regarding coping strategies used by freshman EFL learners for reducing their speaking anxiety in classes, the results from the current study were discovered to be different from previous studies. While peer seeking strategies, relaxation strategies, and resignation strategies were pointed out to be utilized more frequently by Indonesian, Turkish, or Malaysian EFL learners (Ardi, 2007; Genc, Kulusakli, and Aydin, 2016; Hidayoza, Amri, and Wahyuni, 2019; Sari, 2016), preparation strategies were investigated to be employed most by the Mekong Delta freshman EFL learners in reducing their speaking anxiety in classes.

Specifically, in terms of preparation strategies, the participants often ask their friends' suggestions for difficult questions or ones related to strange topics before being called up to talk in front of the class. Six out of twelve participants from the interview said that they asked their friends for help when they could not find the answer. Since Vietnamese learners come from Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC) (Mai et al., 2005), the concept of "face" is important to them. Sullivan (1994) notices that "*Asian cultures like to pay more attention to face in the form of saving face or losing face*" (p. 87). This could be the reason that makes learners afraid of losing face in case they could not say anything. Therefore, preparation is a good choice for them before talking.

5.1 Implications and limitations
5.1.1 Implications for the teachers
Teachers play an important role in recognizing learners' anxiety in speaking classes. Teachers should show that they are willing to help anxious learners become more confident in speaking through their carefulness and friendliness. Instead of criticizing, or punishing, teachers could share with learners that making mistakes is one way to be better in learning a language. In addition, teachers could involve anxious learners in activities by letting them work in pairs, groups to find out the answers before talking in

front of the class. This way will help learners feel more relaxed and comfortable since according to the results from the questionnaire and interview, most of them get anxious when teachers ask difficult questions or ones related to strange topics. Moreover, a friendly and learning-supportive environment also encourages learners to feel safe and free to express themselves. In other words, learners' confidence would be built up when they are given more sympathy, encouragement, compliment, and positive reinforcement than criticism from the teacher (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2000).

5.1.2 Implications for learners

Freshman EFL learners should be aware of the normal of speaking anxiety in the classroom. They should think that their friends also feel the same when attending the class because most of them have not had many chances to practice speaking skills at school before. Although they feel anxious, they should think that nervousness can be controlled well if they believe in themselves. In addition, learners should share what they feel with their friends and try to figure out what are their strong points or weaknesses in order to build them up or improve them effectively. In other words, they should look at the positive aspects, not the negative ones. For instance, if they often feel anxious in class, but possess a beautiful voice when speaking, they could try to lessen their nervousness and think that they could speak English better than some of their friends. More importantly, learners should sympathize with one another. Instead of laughing at their friends when they make mistakes, they could be tolerant and help their classmates feel more confident (Tanner and Green, 1998).

5.2 Limitations of the study

Although the research aims have been gained, there are some limitations. Firstly, the study should be conducted with a larger number of participants and larger groups of participants besides freshman EFL learners at all universities in the Mekong Delta in order to gain more insights into learners' anxiety and coping strategies in speaking classes. Secondly, the current research just only determines freshman EFL learners' kinds of speaking anxiety and their coping strategies while there still exists a lot of reasons, that have not been investigated for their anxiety in classes. Thirdly, teachers' strategies for reducing learners' speaking anxiety have not been involved in the present study. Therefore, further research should investigate whether teachers at universities in the Mekong Delta use strategies to help their learners reduce anxiety in speaking classes and what are those coping strategies utilized by the teachers.

6. Conclusion

Freshman EFL learners' kinds of speaking anxiety and coping strategies were investigated in the present study. Generally, most of them felt anxious in speaking classes and used coping strategies to reduce the anxiety. The participants were proven to encounter all three kinds of speaking anxiety including trait anxiety, specific-situation anxiety, and state anxiety in speaking classes. Further, the participants have been

discovered to minimize their anxiety by employing all five coping strategy categories: preparation, relaxation, positive thinking, peer-seeking, and resignation. In addition, preparation strategies were used more frequently than the others by learners in classes. Last but not least, it could be suggested that teachers should pay more attention to freshman EFL learners, especially those who get high or very high levels of anxiety in classes, and try to find appropriate methods and strategies to encourage them to overcome their anxiety and become more confident in speaking English.

Conflict of Interest Statement
The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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