

AN EXPLORATION OF SPEAKING ANXIETY OF ENGLISH MAJOR FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS AT A PUBLIC UNIVERSITY IN HANOI

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Abstract. The study investigates the speaking anxiety experienced by first-year English majors. 152 first-year English majors at a public university in Hanoi participated in the questionnaire. The results show that participants had a medium level of English-speaking anxiety. Factors contributing to this anxiety include students' negative self-assessment of ability, self-comparison to others, fear of negative evaluation, fear of being in public, and shyness. Additionally, the nature of teachers' questions, lack of preparedness, and beliefs about native speakers or instructors also contribute to speaking anxiety. The study highlights that students experienced higher anxiety during presentations compared to group discussions or paired interviews. Besides, the majority of first-year students believed that instructors' behavior and characteristics would play a significant role in reducing their speaking anxiety in class. The study offers valuable insights into students' speaking anxiety for English lecturers to support students in managing speaking anxiety effectively.

Keywords: speaking anxiety, foreign language speaking anxiety, English-major first-year students.

1. Introduction

Speaking anxiety is a prevalent issue among language learners, particularly among students (Altun, 2023) [1]. This anxiety can significantly hinder their academic performance and overall language acquisition. Despite their foundational knowledge of English, many students struggle with the confidence to articulate their thoughts in a foreign language. Previous research has highlighted several factors contributing to speaking anxiety, such as fear of negative evaluation, communication apprehension, and test anxiety (Altun, 2003; Syahfutra, 2021 [2]; Tran, 2022 [3]). Studies have shown that these anxieties are often exacerbated by the classroom environment and teaching methods that do not adequately address the emotional needs of students. However, research on speaking anxiety experienced by students majoring in English, especially in the Vietnamese context, to contribute to the broader discourse on language education in Vietnam is still limited. This study has been conducted to fill this gap. It delves into these factors among first-year students, examining psychological and contextual influences. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following questions:

1. *What level of Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety (FLSA) do first-year English majors at HNUE experience in the English-speaking classroom?*

2. *What are the perceived sources of English-speaking anxiety for Vietnamese EFL first-year undergraduate students?*

3. *Which speaking activities make students particularly uncomfortable?*

4. *Which behaviors and characteristics of instructors are perceived by students to reduce speaking anxiety?*

2. Content

2.1. Literature Review

2.1.1. Speaking anxiety and foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA)

Bashori et al. (2020) [4] proposed that "among the four language skills, speaking is the most anxiety-inducing skill." The term "speaking anxiety" was mentioned by Horwitz et al. (1986) [5] as "a type of shyness characterized by fear of or anxiety about communicating with people." However, this study follows a prevalent definition that describes it as an unfavorable emotional state marked by sensations of tension and apprehension (Spielberger, 1983; as referenced in Ozturk & Gurbuz, 2014 [6]). Recognizing the significance of anxiety as a factor that affects oral communication proficiency, subsequent researchers have also explored the impact of anxiety on speaking abilities, such as Woodrow (2006) [7], Öztürk & Gürbüz (2014). What the researchers have discovered is that a significant number of learners in various learning settings experience varying degrees of oral anxiety, which can range from low to high. However, the consistent finding is that anxiety plays a crucial role in shaping learners' oral performance.

In today's foreign language classrooms, students are frequently required to engage in oral presentations or participate in group discussions. These challenging speaking activities can adversely affect learners, leading to nervousness when communicating in the target language (Tanveer, 2007) [8].

2.1.2. Previous research on speaking anxiety level and factors causing speaking anxiety

Numerous studies on speaking anxiety have shown that communication apprehension among language learners has generated uncontrollable anxiety. According to Campbell and Ortiz (1991) [9], approximately half of language learners encounter a significant degree of anxiety. Horwitz et al. (1986) [10] outlined three primary components of foreign language anxiety: communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. Young (1990) [11] has identified six categories of foreign language classroom anxiety: personal and interpersonal anxieties, learner perspectives on language learning, instructor perspectives on language learning, interactions between instructors and learners, classroom routines, and examination-related anxieties. In a study conducted by Stalnaker and Fabiana (2023) [12] among 52 Brazilian EFL adult students at a private English language school, most participants shared a prevailing perception that speaking anxiety stemmed from the fear of being criticized and judged by others. Recognizing that anxiety during the language learning process is not limited to students in non-English language programs but also extends to students majoring in English, in 2018, Gürsoy and Korkmaz [13] conducted a study aimed at assessing the speaking anxiety levels of 117 Turkish students pursuing English Language Teaching, who were either in their freshman or senior years at a state university in Bursa, Turkey. The study results indicated that prospective ELT teachers exhibited a moderate level of speaking anxiety, with freshmen experiencing higher levels of anxiety. Furthermore, the study identified various causes of speaking anxiety, including issues related to the education system, concerns about negative perceptions, fear of making mistakes, lack of confidence, and insufficient practice.

In Vietnam, a number of studies about speaking anxiety among adult EFL have been carried out. According to Tran and Le (2020) [14], non-English major Vietnamese EFL students generally experience moderate levels of speaking anxiety after finishing one year of intensive English at university. The study concluded that fear of making mistakes, fear of being laughed at, lack of

self-confidence, fear of negative evaluation, and fear of being the focus of attention are the main factors that create speaking anxiety among students. In a prior investigation conducted by Tran (2019) [15], an examination of anxiety sources within a foreign language class at Hanoi National University of Education was undertaken. The study involved 39 first-year non-English majors who were part of one of the English classes at HNUE. The findings revealed that a significant proportion of participants encountered high levels of anxiety in foreign language classrooms. Moreover, the results indicated the presence of anxiety in these classrooms, with students expressing the highest levels of anxiety concerning tests, speaking exercises, the speed of teachers' speech, and feelings of inadequacy relative to their peers.

Despite a growing body of research on speaking anxiety, there is a notable gap concerning large-scale studies focusing on English majors in the Vietnamese context. Previous research has primarily centered on general student populations or smaller sample sizes, often overlooking the unique challenges faced by English majors in Vietnam. This lack of comprehensive data limits our understanding of the specific factors contributing to speaking anxiety in this group and impedes the development of targeted interventions. Therefore, large-scale studies are essential to accurately assess the prevalence and causes of speaking anxiety among English majors in Vietnam, facilitating more effective educational strategies. Therefore, this study has been conducted to fill the gaps.

2.2. Research methodology

The current study adopts a descriptive research design to examine how anxious English majors are. Descriptive statistics, such as mean and standard deviation, were utilized to determine the level of speaking anxiety among Vietnamese freshmen majoring in English, as well as their perceptions of this anxiety.

2.2.1. Participants of the study

Convenience sampling was chosen for this study due to its practicality and efficiency in gathering data within a limited timeframe. This method allows for the selection of participants who are readily available and willing to participate, thereby facilitating a swift and cost-effective data collection process. Given the constraints of the study, such as limited resources and the need for timely completion, convenience sampling ensures that a sufficient number of participants can be recruited without the complexities and delays associated with more randomized sampling methods. Moreover, this approach is suitable for exploratory research where the primary goal is to gain initial insights rather than to generalize findings to a larger population.

The participants in this study include 152 first-year students of the Faculty of English at a public university in Hanoi. They are English majors. The participants have studied English as a compulsory subject in elementary and secondary school for ten years. Their English proficiency is level 3 according to the Vietnamese version of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR-VN).

2.2.2. Data collection and data analysis instruments

A questionnaire which consists of 18 questions adopted from the Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz et al. (1986) and 36 questions from a questionnaire developed by Young (1990) was used as a tool for data collection. While the FLCAS serves as a tool for determining the level of anxiety in foreign language speaking, this study also incorporated Young's questionnaire to identify the factors contributing to anxiety related to speaking in a foreign language. SPSS (version 25) was employed for the analysis of the quantitative data.

To ensure the reliability and validity of the data, the questionnaire was piloted with a small, representative sample of participants prior to the main study. This pilot testing phase involved administering the questionnaire to 10 individuals who closely matched the characteristics of the

target population. Feedback from the pilot participants was collected to identify any ambiguous or confusing questions, and necessary revisions were made to enhance clarity and comprehensibility. Additionally, statistical analysis, such as Cronbach's alpha, was conducted on the pilot data to assess the internal consistency of the questionnaire. Items that showed low reliability were either reworded or removed. This rigorous piloting process helped refine the questionnaire, ensuring that it accurately measured the intended constructs and that the data collected would be reliable and robust for subsequent analysis in the main study.

2.2.3. Research procedure

The research has been carried out as follows: Firstly, the questionnaire prepared by the researcher was sent to the participants. One hundred fifty-two responses were returned. Secondly, the questionnaires were analyzed to determine the participants' levels of speaking anxiety. This analysis focused on the first 18 items to address the first research question. The mean score of these 18 items was calculated to answer this question. Thirdly, each item in the questionnaire was analyzed to answer the remaining research questions of the study.

2.3. Research findings and discussion

2.3.1. The speaking anxiety level of first-year English majors

As for the average mean score of the 152 students, the mean score was found to be 2.67.

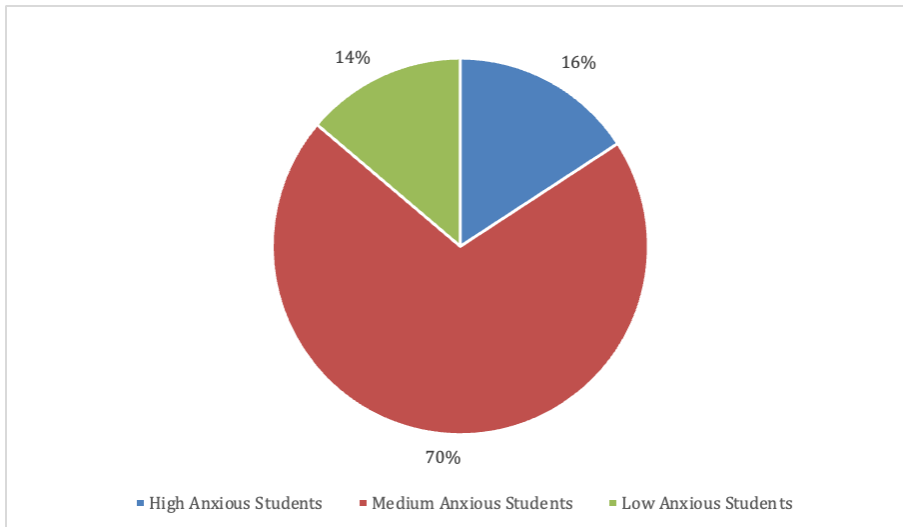


Figure 1. Distribution of the subjects according to their anxiety levels

As indicated in Figure 1, 15.8% of the students are highly anxious, while 70.4% experience medium anxiety. It can be concluded that in overall terms, 86.2% of the students reported that they suffer from speaking anxiety. In other words, the majority of the students experience a certain level of EFL speaking anxiety.

2.3.2. Potential causes of speaking anxiety

Regarding the second question, the 27 first items were analyzed. As a result, there are seven main reasons underlying the speaking anxiety among these learners.

***All the mean scores are out of 5.00.**

As shown in Table 1, by calculating the average mean score of each category, Unpreparedness or Not Getting Enough Speaking Practice and Self-comparison to Others received the lowest mean score, being 2.04 and 2.06, respectively, indicating that these two categories are the most significant factors contribute to speaking anxiety among first-year English majors .

Table 1. The average mean scores of potential causes of speaking anxiety

Category	Item	Mean Score*
Negative Self-assessment of Ability	1, 4, 8, 9, 15, 16, 19, 20, 21	2.7
Self-comparison to Others	12	2.06
Fear of Negative Evaluation	10, 17	3.16
Fear of Being in Public and Shyness	3, 11, 13, 14, 16, 24, 26	2.54
Nature of Teachers' Questions	25, 27	2.18
Unpreparedness or Not Getting Enough Speaking Practice	5, 18, 23	2.04
Learners' Beliefs About Native Speakers or Teachers	7, 22	2.63

* *Negative self-assessment of ability*

Table 2. Mean scores of items relating to Negative self-assessment of ability

Item	Mean Score*	Std. Deviation
21. As I do not have an adequate vocabulary, I don't feel confident while I am speaking English.	2.37	1.040
20. Although I have the linguistic backup, I can't speak English since I have nothing to say about the topics discussed.	2.53	1.085
9. I don't feel confident when I speak English in class.	2.61	1.191
4. It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in English.	2.63	1.121
1. I am never quite sure of myself when speaking in English class.	2.66	1.185
8. I get upset when I don't understand what the teacher is correcting.	2.74	1.159
15. I get nervous when I don't understand every word the English teacher says.	2.78	1.099
19. As I am poor at English sentence structures, I don't feel confident while I am speaking English.	2.92	1.188
16. I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules I have to learn to speak English.	3.10	1.114

Strongly Agree=1, Agree=2, Not sure=3, Disagree=4, Strongly Disagree=5, N=152

***All the mean scores are out of 5.00.**

The participants attributed their speaking anxiety to various factors associated with their actual English oral skills: poor pronunciation, difficulties organizing ideas, worrying about their speaking skills, and lack of vocabulary, all of which hindered their ability and confidence to effectively convey their thoughts. It appears that the first-year students in this study attribute their difficulty in communicating in English primarily to a lack of vocabulary knowledge rather than grammatical shortcomings, as they did not predominantly attribute their speaking anxiety to English grammar deficiencies. Many agreed that they could not think of anything when speaking despite having a good linguistic foundation.

*** *Self-comparison to others***

Under this subgroup, there is only one item, namely item 12 "I feel that the other students

speak English better than I do.” (M=2.06) This item was identified as one of the most significant causes of speaking anxiety. According to students, their speaking skills are not as good as those of their classmates, which might cause them more pressure when speaking. These results are consistent with other studies which concluded that comparison with other learners was a challenge that creates more anxiety for language learners (Aydın, 2001; Yan & Horwitz, 2008). This study discovered that an abundance of peer comparison can pose challenges for language learners, leading to demotivation as they concentrate on their shortcomings. This conclusion is supported by the findings of Takkaç Tulgar (2018), which suggested that learners' progress in language acquisition could suffer and their dedication to language learning could diminish when they engage in excessive comparisons with their peers. Similarly, according to Tran (2019), his research found that first-year non-English majors expressed higher levels of anxiety concerning feelings of inadequacy relative to their peers.

*** Fear of negative evaluation**

Table 3. Mean scores of items relating to Fear of negative evaluation

Item	Mean Score*	Std. Deviation
17. I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak English.	2.95	1.195
10. I am afraid that my English teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make.	3.37	1.156

Strongly Agree=1, Agree=2, Not sure=3, Disagree=4, Strongly Disagree=5, N=152

***All the mean scores are out of 5.00.**

Some students expressed concerns about losing face and facing judgment. Specifically, they indicated feeling embarrassed and fearing criticism for providing incorrect answers or when called upon to speak English in front of the class. In this study, it is quite interesting that students feel more stressful and uncomfortable to the possibility of being judged when they speak English by their peers more than being corrected by their teachers. Balemir (2009) and Öztürk and Gürbüz (2014) similarly proposed that language learners' speaking anxiety is heightened by negative responses, peer judgment, and evaluation. Fabiana (2023) also stated in her research that the judgment of others was identified as the primary cause of speaking anxiety among the group of EFL adult Brazilian learners.

*** Fear of being in public and shyness**

Table 4. Mean scores of items relating to Fear of being in public and shyness

Item	Mean Score*	Std. Deviation
26. I prefer to be allowed to volunteer an answer instead of being called on to give an answer.	2.14	.877
24. I am less anxious in class when I am not the only person answering a question.	2.16	.887
3. I tremble when I know that I'm going to be called on in my English class.	2.46	1.127
11. I can feel my heart pounding when I am to be called on in English class.	2.46	1.115

14. I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my English class.	2.68	1.130
13. I feel very self-conscious about speaking English in front of other students.	2.76	1.149
6. It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my English class.	3.14	1.122

Strongly Agree=1, Agree=2, Not sure=3, Disagree=4, Strongly Disagree=5, N=152

Some students expressed concerns about losing face and facing judgment. Specifically, they indicated feeling embarrassed and fearing criticism for providing incorrect answers or when called upon to speak English in front of the class. In this study, it is quite interesting that students feel more stressful and uncomfortable to the possibility of being judged when they speak English by their peers more than being corrected by their teachers. Balemir (2009) and Öztürk and Gürbüz (2014) similarly proposed that language learners' speaking anxiety is heightened by negative responses, peer judgment, and evaluation. Fabiana (2023) also stated in her research that the judgment of others was identified as the primary cause of speaking anxiety among the group of EFL adult Brazilian learners.

***All the mean scores are out of 5.00.**

English majors encountered a substantial level of anxiety when required to speak English in front of others. Participants concurred that feeling singled out to respond and being called upon to answer heightened their speaking anxiety.

*** Nature of Teachers' Questions**

Table 5. Mean scores of items relating to Nature of teachers' questions

Item	Mean Score*	Std. Deviation
27. I am more willing to participate in class when the topics we discuss are interesting.	1.94	.799
25. I am more willing to speak in class when we discuss current events.	2.41	.856

Strongly Agree=1, Agree=2, Not sure=3, Disagree=4, Strongly Disagree=5, N=152

***All the mean scores are out of 5.00.**

Many first-year English majors indicated their agreement when allowed to discuss current or personally interesting topics. From this, it can be inferred that students may experience worry and anxiety when their teachers present difficult and unrelated questions. This was especially noticeable with questions relating to complex or unfamiliar subjects, as well as those that did not allow students sufficient time to prepare.

*** Unpreparedness or not getting enough speaking practice**

Table 6. Mean scores of items relating to Unpreparedness or not getting enough speaking practice

Item	Mean Score*	Std. Deviation
23. I would feel more confident about speaking in class if we practiced speaking more.	1.61	.737
5. I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in class.	2.20	1.159
18. I get nervous when the English teacher asks questions that I haven't prepared in advance.	2.32	1.027

Strongly Agree=1, Agree=2, Not sure=3, Disagree=4, Strongly Disagree=5, N=152

***All the mean scores are out of 5.00.**

Most students strongly agree that sufficient speaking practice can enhance their confidence and decrease their speaking anxiety. It can be inferred that the actual scenario is that they lack sufficient opportunities for oral practice. Even students majoring in English still experience significant anxiety when speaking without preparation.

*** Learners' beliefs about native speakers or teachers**

Table 7. Mean scores of Items relating to Native Speakers or Teachers

Item	Mean Score*	Std. Deviation
22. If we had a native English-speaking teacher, we would do more speaking practice and we would feel more confident about speaking English.	2.39	.956
7. I would probably feel anxious around native speakers of English.	2.86	1.191

Strongly Agree=1, Agree=2, Not sure=3, Disagree=4, Strongly Disagree=5, N=152

***All the mean scores are out of 5.00.**

Speaking with native speakers of the target language was also expressed as a source of speaking anxiety by the student subjects of the study. The results of this study may align with Takkaç Tulgar's (2018) discovery that conversing with native speakers poses a significant challenge for language learners due to the innate proficiency of the natives, leading to anxiety among learners who worry about facing criticism for any mistakes or inappropriate language use.

2.3.3. Activities arranged by anxiety level

Table 8. Mean scores of the items of the Subcategory types of activities

Item	Mean Score*	Std. Deviation
49. When we interview each other in pairs, I am ...	2.10	.954
46. When we work in groups of 3-4 and participate in a class discussion, I am ...	2.18	.907
48. When we have open discussions based on volunteer participation, I am ...	2.28	1.105
47. When we compete in class games by teams, I am ...	2.50	1.240
54. When we participate individually in a class discussion, I am ...	2.66	1.174
50. When we work in groups of 2-3 and prepare a skit or a dialog, I am ...	2.72	1.142
52. When we speak in front of the class for 1-2 minutes, I am ...	3.21	1.183
51. When we make an oral presentation or skit in front of the class, I am ...	3.30	1.245
53. When we role play a situation spontaneously in front of the class, I am ...	3.35	1.293

Very Relaxed=1, Moderately Relaxed=2, Neutral=3, Moderately Anxious=4, Very Anxious=5, N=152

***All the mean scores are out of 5.00.**

Spontaneous role-playing induces the highest level of anxiety among learners. Essentially, when students are required to engage in role-playing without prior preparation in front of the

class, the majority experience anxiety. Making oral presentations or skits in front of the class also makes most students feel anxious. Additionally, it reveals that activities conducted in pairs, groups of 3-4, or based on voluntary participation were not perceived as significant anxiety-inducing activities in the classroom.

2.3.4. Instructor's characteristics and techniques related to anxiety reduction

Table 9. Mean scores of the items of Instructor behaviors related to anxiety reduction

Item	Mean Score*	Std. Deviation
30. The teacher does not make me feel stupid when I make a mistake.	1.51	.609
31. His/ Her manner of correction is not harsh.	1.61	.737
28. The teacher has an attitude that mistakes are no big deal.	1.64	.801
36. We get enough speaking practice.	1.69	.783
29. The teacher has an attitude that mistakes are made by everyone.	1.71	.881
34. The teacher asks us to work in groups or pairs.	1.80	.798
35. The teacher calls on us equally.	1.93	.803
33. I can volunteer answers and the teacher does not call on me to provide responses.	2.20	.887
32. The teacher does not put me "on the spot".	2.61	1.036

Strongly Agree=1, Agree=2, Not sure=3, Disagree=4, Strongly Disagree=5, N=152

***All the mean scores are out of 5.00.**

The majority of students strongly believe that teachers who adopt an attitude of forgiveness towards mistakes and provide gentle corrections play a significant role in alleviating students' anxiety when speaking. Additionally, as insufficient practice contributes to anxiety when speaking English, the students surveyed expressed a preference for adequate speaking practice in class. Furthermore, consistently calling on classmates in class and allowing students to volunteer to speak were also evaluated by students as effective methods to reduce speaking anxiety in the classroom.

Table 10. Mean scores of the items of Instructor characteristics related to anxiety reduction

Item	Mean Score*	Std. Deviation
45. He/ She smiles.	1.28	.463
38. He/ She is friendly and relaxed.	1.30	.489
43. He/ She compliments us.	1.32	.480
40. He/ She encourages us to speak.	1.34	.539
42. He/ She is helpful.	1.36	.532
39. He/ She is patient.	1.37	.523
37. He/ She has a good sense of humor.	1.41	.591
44. He/ She creates a casual atmosphere.	1.45	.629

Strongly Agree=1, Agree=2, Not sure=3, Disagree=4, Strongly Disagree=5, N=152

***All the mean scores are out of 5.00.**

Overwhelmingly, the majority of first-year English majors strongly agree that teachers' positive traits alleviate their speaking anxiety. Characteristics such as being cheerful, friendly, patient, and approachable, as well as offering praise and help, are effective ways to motivate students to participate more actively in speaking activities and to feel comfortable expressing their opinions without fear of judgment. This claim is supported by Ho and Truong (2022), who also stated in their study that “teachers play a pivotal role in creating a relaxed learning environment in which student-student and teacher-student rapport is established and enhanced.”

3. Conclusions

This study examined the level of speaking anxiety in relation to in-class activities and instructor's behaviors and characteristics and perceived causes of anxiety when speaking English among first-year English-majors. The results showed that the majority of Vietnamese English-majoring freshmen suffered from a medium level of anxiety when speaking in the target language. In addition, some causes underlying speaking anxiety among adult learners were found. Finally, teachers' behaviors and characters were proved to play a vital role in mitigating students' speaking anxiety.

This study offered some implications for educators in mitigating speaking anxiety in English. First, the findings highlight the significance of thoughtfully preparing materials and designing tasks. Tasks should be chosen to spark students' interest and relate to their areas of study, allowing them to speak confidently about familiar subjects. Teachers can also create activities that encourage student interaction, like working in pairs or discussing in groups, thereby enabling students to engage with greater confidence and efficacy, compared to calling on students spontaneously without giving them time to prepare. Furthermore, to mitigate apprehension among students, instructors should conscientiously consider students' proficiency levels when forming pairs or groups for collaborative tasks. Moreover, teachers should consider their actions and reactions toward students when they speak. It is advised that educators adopt a forgiving approach towards errors, offer praise, and encourage students to foster motivation and boost confidence in speaking. Additionally, teaching with a cheerful and relaxed manner is recommended to create a comfortable classroom atmosphere.

It is noteworthy that students exhibit a positive attitude towards speaking with foreigners. Therefore, it is recommended to increase the recruitment of foreign teachers to aid students in their learning journey. Given the great fear or judgment among students, it is imperative to adopt an approach that permits and acknowledges errors, viewing them as an inherent aspect of the learning process and treating them with compassion. Students ought to acknowledge that mistakes are normal and cultivate positive attitudes toward such occurrences. Accordingly, it is proposed that the grading rubric allocate a relatively minor weight to accuracy, recognizing its importance within a broader context of assessment criteria.

Within the scope of the study, there are several limitations due to the limited sample size, time constraints, and limited data collection instrument, all of which, to some extent, adversely affected the research findings. Therefore, there is a need for future studies to overcome the aforementioned limitations in order to yield more accurate results.

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