

# **ANXIETY AND SPEAKING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE AMONG MALE AND FEMALE MBA STUDENTS**

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## **Abstract**

This research tries to explore the learning anxiety of speaking English and the causes of the learning anxiety. It also examined the reactions reported by 87 students studying for Master of Business Administration (MBA) at the University of Mandalay. To be able to compare the causes and learning anxiety which affect male students and female students, data were collected from almost the same number of male students (44) and female students (43). Since the MBA students are not the learners at the beginning stage of foreign language learning, they are believed to be at higher levels of English proficiency. The experienced researchers have proved that anxiety about speaking a foreign language is mainly apparent at lower levels of language competence. Consequently, this research also tries to find out whether anxiety is also relevant at higher levels of English proficiency. The questionnaire used for the data collection consists of 26 anxiety statements. It is divided into two parts. The first part (No. 1 to No.5) is used to find out the frequency of speaking English within one year. The second part is used to find out their anxiety concerning speaking. The findings indicate that lack of speaking practice is the major cause of anxiety and communication anxiety is the most frequent one that influences the MBA students. In addition, the female students are more emotional than male students while speaking English.

## **Introduction**

Learning a foreign language can be a frightful experience. The fear and pressure on students to perform well in foreign language causes them anxiety. There are different types of anxiety such as communication anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, etc.

The aim of this research is to explore the relationship between learning anxiety and speaking English as a foreign language among the MBA students at the University of Mandalay. Consequently, the objectives of this research are:

- (i) to discover the dominant cause of anxiety,
- (ii) to detect if anxiety is also relevant at higher levels of English proficiency, and
- (iii) to find out if the causes of anxiety are influenced by gender.

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In order to provide with handy guide to this research, the following technical terms and related researches are reviewed. The terms connected with this research are (i) Three Stages of Language Learning, (ii) Recursive relations between anxiety, cognition and behavior, (iii) Anxiety in Speaking, (iv) Causes of Anxiety, (v) Communication Anxiety, (vi) Fear of Negative Evaluation, (vii) State-trait anxiety, and (viii) Effects of Foreign Language Anxiety. Without knowing the following terms it would be hard to understand this research.

### (i) Three Stages of Language Learning

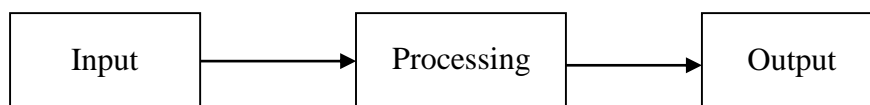


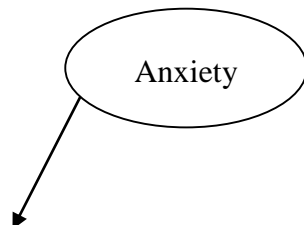
Figure (1): Three Stages of Language Learning (Source: Chomsky, 2006)

Input is the first stage of language learning. It activates “Language Acquisition Device” (LAD) - an innate language-specific module in the brain (Chomsky cited in Lightbown & Spada, 2006), which carried out the further process of language learning. Anxiety at the input stage (input anxiety) refers to the anxiety experienced by the learners when they encounter a new word or phrase in the target language.

Anxiety at the processing stage, called *processing anxiety*, refers to the “apprehension students experience when performing cognitive operations on new information” (Lightbown’ 2006). Cognitivists like Segalowitz (2003: cited in Lightbown, 2006) working on the ‘Information Processing Model’ have tried to explore how these cognitive operations are performed in human brain and have explained the learners’ inability to spontaneously use everything they know about a language at a given time.

Anxiety while communicating in the target language is more likely to appear at the *output* stage, which entirely depends upon the successful completion of the previous stages: *input*, and *processing*. Anxiety at the *output* stage refers to learners’ nervousness or fear experienced when required to demonstrate their ability to use previously learned material. According to Tobias *output anxiety* involves interference, which is manifested after the completion of the processing stage but before its effective reproduction as output.

### (ii) Recursive Relations between Anxiety, Cognition and Behaviour



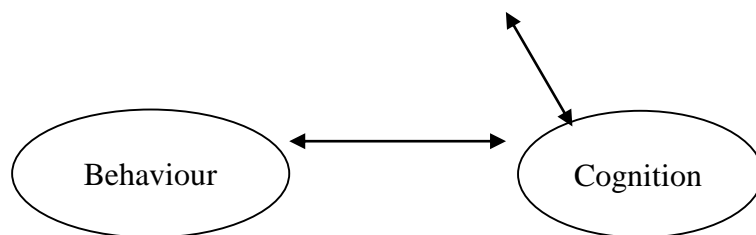


Figure (2): Mutual Relation between Anxiety, Behaviour and Cognition  
(Source: MacIntyre, 1995)

MacIntyre (1995) explains that anxiety, behaviour and cognition are mutually related as in Figure 2. For example, a demand to answer a question in a second language class may cause a student to become anxious; anxiety leads to worry and rumination. Cognition performance is diminished because of the divided attention and therefore performance suffers, leading to negative self-evaluations and more self deprecating cognition which further impairs performance, and so on.

### **(iii) Anxiety in Speaking**

Speaking anxiety is very common among university students while speaking at the conference or seminar. It is a feeling of panic associated with physical sensations that are all too painfully familiar to those affected. The symptoms are increased heart beat rates, increased over-rapid reactions, and muscle tension in the shoulder and neck area.

According to Lightbown (2006), “it is clear that fear of speaking in public is different from anxiety about social contact”. True communication apprehension means that the sufferers see more value in keeping quiet in all circumstances (even in conversation) than they do from talking.

### **(iv) Causes of Anxiety**

There are various causes of anxiety. There are ten top causes for anxiety in public speaking: (i) lack of preparation, (ii) the feeling that the students have either too many points to cover in the allotted time period, (iii) worrying that the audience will be overly critical, (iv) Fear about not entertaining or arousing the interest, (v) students’ intend to emulate other speakers rather than being themselves, (vi) the fear of potential negative outcomes, (vii) stuttering or difficulty to finding

words, (viii) over-preparing instead of developing confidence and trust in their own natural ability to succeed, (ix) dislike in being the centre of attention, and (x) low self-confidence.

#### **(v) Communication Anxiety**

Communication apprehension or Communication anxiety is one type of situational anxiety which may occur when people interact verbally (Lightbown, 2006). Communication apprehension (*communication anxiety*) comes in part from a lack of confidence in our general linguistic knowledge but if only this factor were involved, all skills would be affected equally. What distinguishes speaking is the public nature of the skill, the embarrassment suffered from exposing our language imperfections in front of others (Horwitz, 1986). Learners' personality traits such as shyness, quietness, and reticence are considered to frequently precipitate Communication Anxiety. These feelings of shyness vary greatly from individual to individual, and from situation to situation (Horwitz, 1986).

#### **(vi) Fear of Negative Evaluation**

Fear of negative evaluation may be present when people worry about what others think of them. Fear of negative evaluation is an extension of the second component (test anxiety) of second / foreign language anxiety. According to Horwitz et al. (1986), fear of negative evaluation is triggered by the teacher as a fluent speaker and the classmates.

#### **(vii) State -Trait Anxiety**

State anxiety and trait anxiety are analogous or similar in certain respects to kinetic and potential energy. State Anxiety, like kinetic energy, refers to a palpable reaction or process taking place at a given time and level of intensity. Trait Anxiety, like potential energy, refers to individual differences in reactions. Trait anxiety is viewed as an aspect of personality. State Anxiety is an apprehension experienced at a particular moment in times as a response to a definite situation (Horwitz, 1986). Trait anxiety is the tendency of a person to be nervous or feel tension regardless of the particular circumstances (Horwitz, 1986).

#### **(viii) Effects of Foreign Language Anxiety**

Foreign language learning anxiety has been associated with a large number of negative outcomes that can be classified as physical, psychological, or social. Physical symptoms can

include, for example, rapid heartbeat, muscle tension, dry mouth, and excessive perspiration. Psychological symptoms can include embarrassment, feelings of helplessness, fear, nervousness, going blank, and poor memory recall and retention among others. Social symptoms cover inappropriate silence, unwillingness to participate, absenteeism, etc.

### **Materials and Method**

Before data were collected, sample subjects were selected, a questionnaire was set and procedure for collecting data was constructed.

The data were collected from 87 MBA (Master of Business Administration) students, 43 females and 44 males where the number of male students and the number of female students are almost the same. They are graduate students studying at the University of Mandalay. To some extent all of the participants studied English when they were at high school. However, they do not have to take English as one subject while they are doing their Master's degree. And yet they have to make presentation concerning business.

A questionnaire was constructed, utilizing simple language and an easy-to-answer format, so that it could be filled in quickly by students of advanced English-language ability. Questions 1 to 5 were constructed to know the frequency of English use within one year. Question 6 to 26 statements were collected through the self-administered questionnaire.

As most educated people have experienced language anxiety when they study English as a second language or foreign language, among the activities related to four language skills, speaking activities make the learners anxious most.

First of all, the focus was put on the causes of anxiety. Twenty one questions were constructed based on six causes: (1) low proficiency, (2) lack of speaking practice, (3) fear of others' perception, (4) stage fright, (5) lack of confidence, and (6) nervousness. Collected data were analysed to find out which cause is dominant among six causes.

Secondly, the six causes were categorized into three groups that are relevant to three types of anxiety defined by experienced researchers. After that, data were analysed to explore which type of anxiety most MBA students have. Finally, comparisons between female and male were made.

### **Data Collection and Data Analysis**

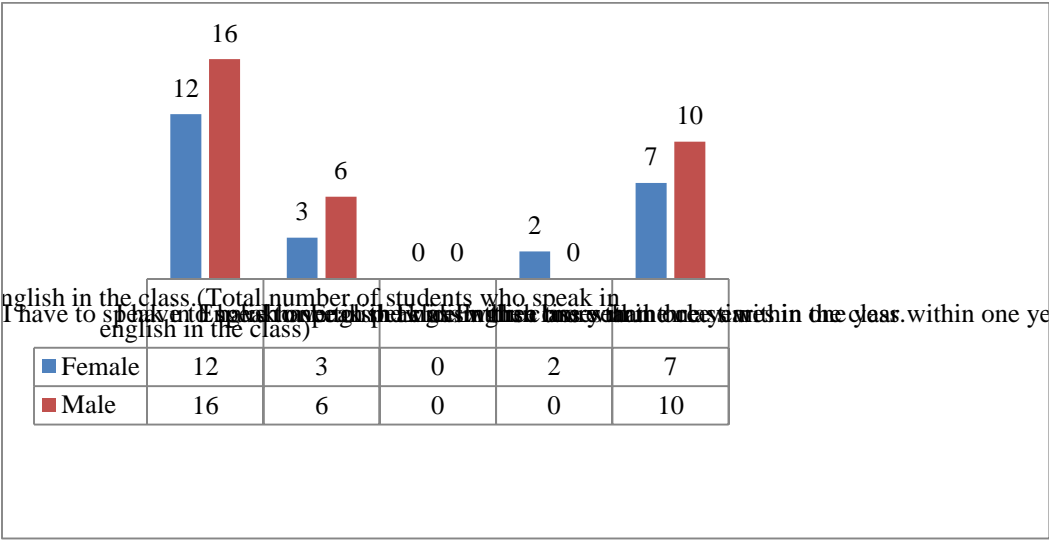
In order to find the results, collected data are systematically analysed. There are six steps to analyse the data: sort out male and female students; sort out the students who agree with the statements and the students who disagree with the statements; tabulate the results in tally-form; calculate the percentages for each statement for agreement and disagreement; calculate the average percentages, draw analysis tables; draw bar charts and pie charts; make comparison between females and males on six causes; make comparison between females and males on three types of anxiety.

### Data Interpretation

After analysing the data, in order to present the findings properly, figures are interpreted.

### Frequency of Speaking English within One Year

According to the analysis of question 1 to 5, Figure (1) is the graphical presentation which shows the clear description of students’ chances to speak English.

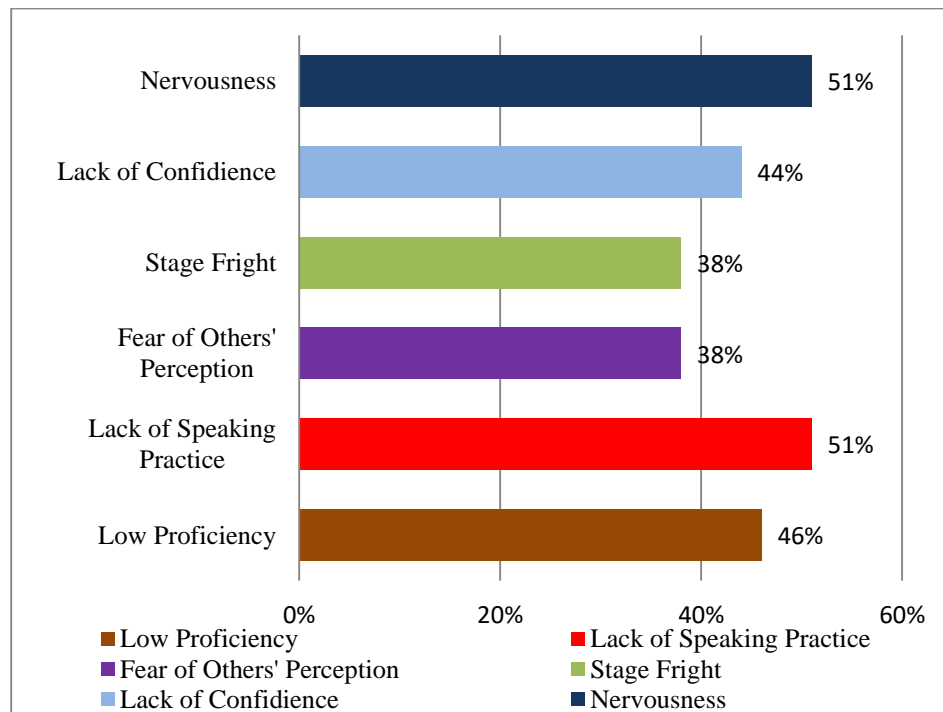


**Figure (1): Frequency of Speaking English within One Year**

According to Figure (1), 32% of total students had chances to speak English in the class and 68% did not have to speak in the class. Another point noticed is more male students speak in the class. It can be concluded that the majority of students argued all the five statements. It can be easily seen that the largest part of the group who agree statement No.1 supported the point “I have to speak in English more than three times in the class within one year.

## Causes of anxiety

Figure (2) is the bar chart which helps the readers to understand the analysis of six types of causes.

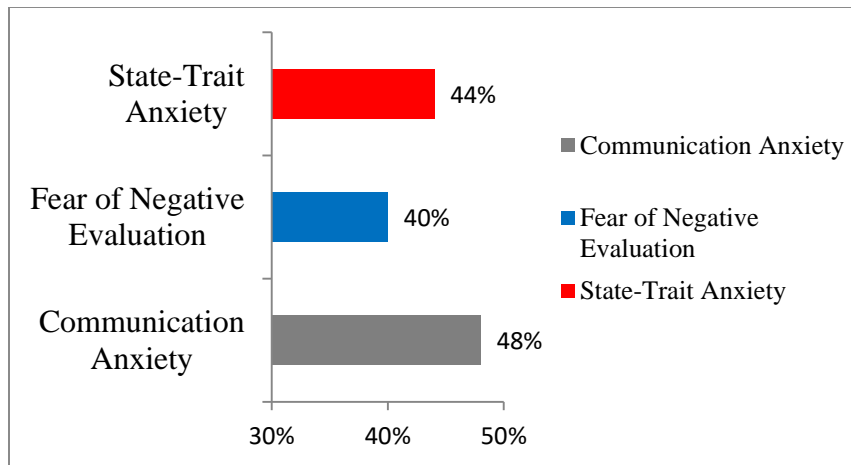


**Figure (2): Average Percentages for Causes of Anxiety**

As shown in Figure (2), number of students who support the point that nervousness in the cause of anxiety and the number of students who agree with the fact that lack of speaking practice in the cause of anxiety are the same. As a result, it can be concluded that the majority of students (51%) have anxiety due to lack of speaking practice when they speak in English and 51% of students have anxiety because of nervousness. The minority of students agree that fear of others' perception and stage fright are the source of anxiety.

## Three Types of Anxiety

Figure (3) shows average percentages for the students who have three types of anxiety based on total number of 87 students.

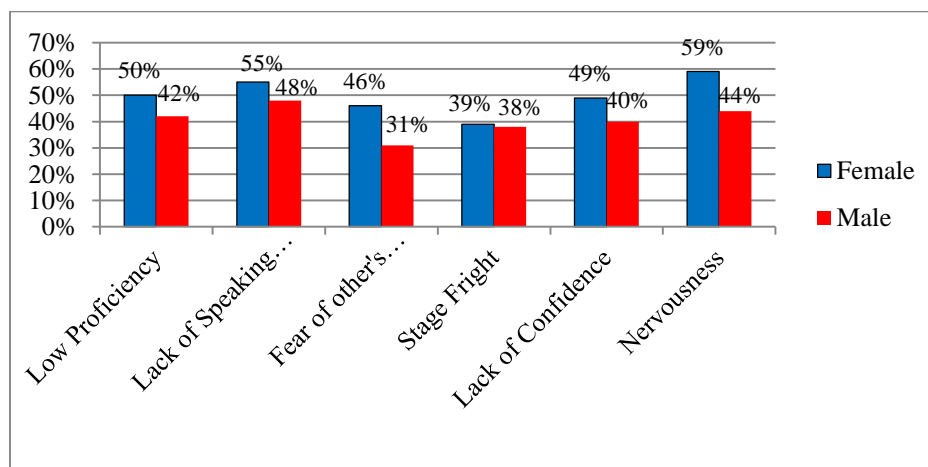


**Figure (3): Average Percentages for Three Types of Anxiety**

Although all percentages for three types of anxiety are lower than 50%, speaking of comparison between three types of anxiety, communication anxiety, with 48% responses out of 87 students is more favoured by the students. The figure shows that Myanmar students have less fear of negative evaluation than the other two types of anxiety.

### Comparison between Females and Males on Six Causes

As regards Figure (4), it is the graphic presentation of the comparison between the average female percentages and the average male percentages of six causes of anxiety.



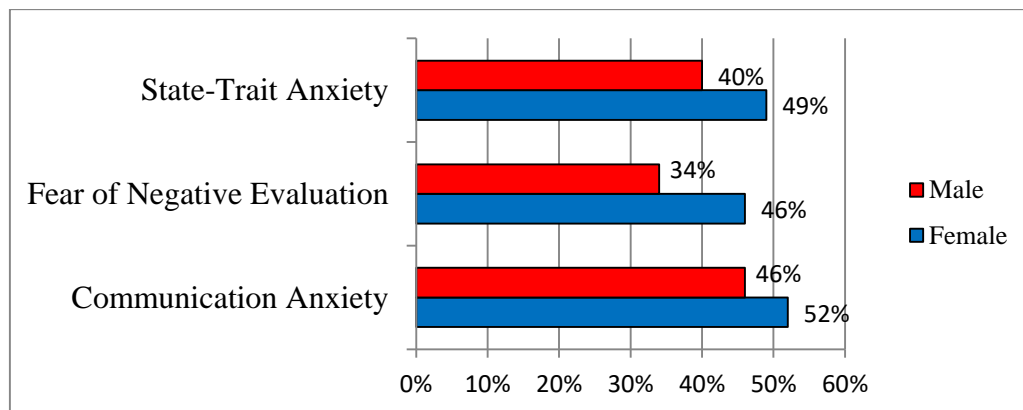
**Figure (4): Average Percentages of Comparison between Females and Males on Causes of Anxiety**



Concerning Figure (4), there are four major points that can be obtained from comparison between females and males in terms of causes of anxiety. The first point is females' causes of anxiety are stronger than males' causes of anxiety. The second point is that nervousness is the dominant cause among female students whereas lack of speaking practice is dominant among male students. The third point is that males students gives the least percentage of TRUE responses to the statements in the category of fear of other's perception but female students give the least percentage of responses to the statements to the category of stage fright. More than 50 % of females agree with the statements in the categories of low proficiency, lack of speaking practice and nervousness. And yet less than 50% of male students agree with the statements in all the six categories. It can be concluded that female students are more nervous than male students.

### Comparison between Females and Males on Three Types of Anxiety

Figure (5) shows comparison of average percentages between female students who have three types of anxiety based on total number of 43 female students and male students who have three types of anxiety based on total number of 44 male students.



**Figure (5): Comparison between Females and Males on Three Types of Anxiety**

With reference to Figure (5), communication anxiety is dominant both within the group of female learners and within the group of male learners. But percentages of female responses to statements are higher than those of male responses for all three types of learning anxiety.

One interesting point is that the percentages are less than 50% except female percentage as for communication anxiety. It shows that although the anxiety is relevant at higher levels of

English proficiency, the degree of anxiety is not as strong as the anxiety of the students at the lower levels of English proficiency.

In accordance with these two figures, male students have more communication anxiety and state-trait anxiety than female students. On the contrary, female students have more fear of negative evaluation than male students.

### **Findings**

The data on causes of anxiety and three types of anxiety have been analysed and discussed.

Due to the results of this research, it can be concluded as follow.

- (i) The cause of speaking anxiety is neither language proficiency nor fear of negative language evaluation. Since they do not have enough speaking practice they are not confident enough to speak in front of the audience. Lack of speaking practice and nervousness are dominant among six types of causes of anxiety.
- (ii) As more than 40% of students have speaking anxiety, it could be assumed that anxiety is also relevant at higher level of English proficiency but it may not be as strong as the lower level of English proficiency.
- (iii) The causes of anxiety are influenced by gender. Female participants have more percentages in all six causes of anxiety. “Nervousness” is the dominant cause among female students whereas “Lack of Speaking Practice” is dominant among male students.
- (iv) Some students may feel nervous not because of audience or language barriers either but because of longstanding personality feeling. Others may have temporary feeling toward a broader range of situations or objects.
- (v) Last but not least, although fear of negative evaluation is ranked at the bottom, the average percentage for this category is 40%. Many researchers have proved that fear of negative evaluation is the major cause of speaking anxiety.

In conclusion, among the female learners “Nervousness” is the major cause of anxiety and among male learners “Lack of Speaking Practice” is the major cause. Regarding three types of anxiety, the communication anxiety is dominant for both females and males. Female learners are more anxious in all the three types of anxiety.

### **Discussion**

It is doubtless to say that speaking before an audience is a tough task even in first language with various variables such as choice of vocabulary, main ideas, organization of the speech, etc.

Therefore, speaking in second language or foreign language is tougher than speaking in first language. As a consequence, this research was organized with the purpose of finding out the causes and anxiety of Myanmar learners of English as a foreign language. In this research, six types of causes and three types of anxiety defined by experienced researchers are highlighted. Secondly, comparisons of different types of anxiety were made.

According to the findings, 32% of the students have opportunities to speak English in the class. This point is relevant to the finding; lack of speaking practice is the major cause of speaking anxiety. Referring to three types of anxiety, students have more communication anxiety than fear of negative evaluation and state-trait anxiety. This point is again related to the point that students do not have enough speaking practice. As they do not have enough speaking practice, they have low self-confidence. Consequently, they fear to communicate with other person or persons. Although the experienced researchers have proved that anxiety about speaking a foreign language is mainly apparent at lower levels of language competence, this research shows that anxiety is also relevant to the students who are at higher levels of English proficiency. As regards comparison of anxiety between female and male students, more females have speaking anxiety than males regardless of types. Communication anxiety is dominant among all the “TRUE” responses.

In conclusion, lack of speaking practice is the major cause of anxiety and communication anxiety is the most frequent one that influences the MBA. In addition, female students are more anxious than male students while speaking English. According to these points, the MBA students should be given more chances to speak in English in class and encouraged to have more self-confidence. They should also be trained how to make preparation before speaking in front of their classmates and lecturers / professors, especially how to speak concisely within limited time.

## **References**

Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M. B., & Cope, Jo Ann. (1986). Foreign language classroom anxiety. *The Modern Language Journal*.

Lightbown, P. M., & Spada, N. (2006). *How Languages are Learned*. Third Edition, Oxford handbooks for language teachers, University of Oxford: Oxford University Press.