Foreign language speaking anxiety of Thai EFL students in virtual Classrooms-Pathumwan Institute for Technology students

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Abstract

Virtual classrooms for English language instruction became a necessity globally during the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, online study cannot be blamed for speaking anxiety of EFL students; foreign language speaking anxiety has long been a detrimental issue that has obstructed Thai EFL learners from speaking English. This study aims to investigate the major concerns that cause undergraduate students at Pathumwan Institute of Technology to experience foreign language speaking anxiety in virtual English classrooms; identify a relationship between Thai cultural obstacles and foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA) that hinders them from speaking English in a virtual environment, and identify pedagogical implications in an effort to ameliorate FLSA of Thai EFL students in virtual classrooms. Opened-ended questions and semi-structured interviews were employed for data collection. The results of the open-ended questions uncovered six concerns among Pathumwan students that led to speaking anxiety: limited vocabulary, fear of wrong pronunciation, inability to process thoughts into words, unpleasant psycho-physiological symptoms, fear of negative evaluation, and fear of miscommunication. The interview results revealed that loss of face, a key Thai cultural issue, was linked to the fear of negative evaluation of Thai EFL students while speaking in public. Thence, it is recommended that mistakes be addressed as acceptable in language learning, and that individual-specific measures be taken according to each learner's English language proficiency level.

Keywords: virtual classrooms, foreign language speaking anxiety, Thai EFL, cultural obstacle

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Introduction

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in December 2019 altered teaching styles worldwide. A shift from on-site to online language learning, where virtual classrooms played a prominent role in English language teaching, became intrinsically essential. E-learning inevitably became a major educational necessity that helped to bridge the physical gap between language instructors and language learners. Kaisar & Chowdhury (2020) attested that e-learning in the virtual world had widened the horizon and opened up opportunities for new learning styles.

In Thailand, English is used as a foreign language and there has been an ongoing and increasing demand for foreign language learners (EFL learners) to use English as their main communication tool in both academic and professional settings. Experience as an English instructor at Pathumwan Institute of Technology, a Thai public university,
has made it clear that the most apparent fear of most Thai students is speaking English in front of others in English language classes (Hadi et al. (2020); Kalra & Siribud (2020). All participating students in this study are EFL learners, who are affected by what is known as "foreign language anxiety" (FLA). FLA was described by MacIntyre et al. (1998) as the fear and negative emotions experienced by second language learners (L2 learners) that is triggered when using or learning the target language. Correspondingly, the fact that EFL learners tend to become more anxious when speaking in public must be taken into consideration. As Batholomay & Houlihan (2016) made clear, "public speaking anxiety" is regarded as an ongoing anxiety disorder among EFL students. This factor had a crucial impact on the speaking anxiety levels of Pathumwan students who had to deliver English presentations in online classrooms.

As scholars have identified, most or all EFL learners do possess some form of foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA) (Kalra, 2020; Siribud, 2013). To illustrate, Thais seem shy or remain silent when asked to speak English in public. This is a cultural obstacle that hinders them from delivering the target language, thus, causing them to become anxious while speaking (Hayaramae, 2016). Others feel nervous about speaking because they fear being adversely evaluated by their educators and peers. This is what is known as "fear of negative evaluation" (FNE), an FLA construct that comprises the distress, fear of expectations, and apprehensions that develop in each language learner while speaking the target language in the classroom setting (Tallon, 2009; Kondo, 2010). FNE is a critical issue in the Thai educational context, where learners are shy or feel embarrassed to speak English because they are concerned about the negativities that their peers or teachers

might express. It is connected to the 'face-saving culture' of the Thais (Komin, 1990; Gosaiyakanon, 2021). A loss of face occurs when people feel shamed in public due to an embarrassment caused by others, such as a classmate laughing at a student when he or she mispronounces certain English words while conducting English live presentations. It occurs frequently during virtual class discussions and online English presentations of Pathumwan students.

This study will explore the hindrances that obstruct Pathumwan students from speaking English in virtual classrooms by analysing the concerns each student has about himself or herself, and discussing how FLSA and the Thai loss of face culture have impeded the students from speaking English in online classrooms.

Research Objectives

1. To investigate the main concerns that create or exacerbate Pathumwan Institute of Technology undergraduate students' fear of speaking English in virtual classrooms.

2. To find a relationship between Thai cultural obstacles and speaking anxiety that hinders these EFL learners from speaking the target language.

3. To provide versatile pedagogical implications that help alleviate the speaking anxiety of Thai EFL learners in virtual classrooms.

Research Questions

After careful consideration, three research questions are evolved out of this research

1. What are the major concerns that discourage Pathumwan Institute of Technology students from speaking English in virtual classrooms?

2. Do cultural obstacles impact the students' speaking anxieties?

3. What approaches could be employed to lessen the FLSA of Pathumwan Institute of Technology students in virtual classrooms?

Literature Review

Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety (FLSA)

Speaking anxiety is regarded as a construct of situational-trait-specific anxiety, and is prominent among L2 learners during the foreign language learning process (Horwitz et al. 1986) Mohamad & Wahid (2008) undertook to study the lack of self-confidence among Malaysian university students with respect to comprehending the spoken form of the target language of their

interlocutors due to limited linguistic knowledge. This is advocated by MacIntyre et al. (1998), who identified speaking as an activity that caused embarrassment and mental discomfort among EFL learners.

Negative perceptions or evaluations that others may have had of them comprised one of the major causes of FLSA experienced by Malaysian L2 learners in Mohamad & Wahid's (2008) study. This concurs with Kojima's findings that EFL pupils possess insufficient linguistic knowledge of lexis, syntax, and pronunciation. It also coincides with Kalra & Siribud's (2020) report which found that the lack of linguistic competence causes an escalation in the speaking anxiety level of EFL learners. The speaking process requires students to produce spoken words simultaneous with their lexicon inputs (Harmer, 2007). Speaking is widely acknowledged to be the most anxiety-provoking component of language pedagogy. As an instructor to Thai EFL learners, the author has noticed a trend in which speaking English is the major fear of most pupils, and one which impedes them from producing verbal forms of the target language.

The negativities caused by language anxieties, including disappointments, introspective reactions, and hostile self-perceptions, result in less effective language acquisition, retention, and production by the students (McIntyre & Gardner, 1991). EFL learners often feel a sense of frustration and pressure when they are unable to produce the target language correctly. Regardless of differing language proficiency levels, everyone can experience FLA (Horwitz, 2001).

Garcia-Leal et al. (2014) suggested that speaking in public takes place in the context of judgement and evaluation by others. This in turn unconsciously causes fear among language pupils, especially when they have to speak the target language in front of their peers. Likewise, the pressure and self-expectations of the learner with respect to producing spoken words or expressions can dramatically intensify their anxiety levels (Kalra & Siribud, 2020). In addition, Kayaoğlu & Sağlamel (2013) pinpointed pronunciation as one of the leading factors that cause an increase in language anxiety among non-native pupils. The results of their study illustrate how the participants failed to correctly pronounce certain words in the target language due to language incompetence. This is associated with the limited lexical knowledge EFL learners are experiencing. Hence, their lack of vocabulary in the target language inevitably leads to language anxiety.

Horwitz et. al (1986) developed the *Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS)* to measure specific anxiety sources among pupils within the pedagogical contexts by amalgamating potential sources of anxiety with the three major FLA constructs:

1. communication apprehension - shyness, nervousness, and inability to express thoughts into words experienced by EFL learners when using the target language (Horwitz et al., 1986)

2. fear of negative evaluation - distress, apprehension, and expectations that learners negatively feel about themselves (Kondo, 2010; Tallon, 2009)

3. test anxiety - the fear of failing academic tests, causing avoidance in using the target language in academic settings (Horwitz et al., 1986)

Online Language Teaching

During the pandemic era, educational institutions across the world turned to virtual classrooms as an alternative to face-to-face learning. Grant et al. (2013) averred that virtual worlds might offer novel teaching and learning approaches to both instructors and pupils globally. Remote language learning was seen as less detrimentally affected compared to traditional learning (Cuoto, 2010). It was supposed that the anonymity of the virtual worlds might cause a reduction in embarrassment and negative evaluations of the EFL learners. This is supported by Horwitz et al.'s (1986) claim that virtual world learning environments are less threatening. Consequently, the anxiety level is expected to be far lower because EFL learners can immerse themselves in a non-threatening atmosphere. They are able to expose themselves to new learning styles and personality traits by meeting others while rebuilding their self-confidence. Language learning in virtual worlds, in particular, creates new opportunities for innovative thinking for language pupils- a trait that traditional in-person learning lacks (Grant et al. 2013). This is a subjective issue since autonomous learning depends on various factors, including the facilitator's teaching style(s) and the personality of each student.

In 2013, Grant et al.'s study on Chinese students in virtual classrooms indicated that the students found foreign language learning in virtual classrooms less threatening in every linguistic repertoire, unlike in face-to-face classroom settings. They reported a reduction in anxiety levels from the virtual environment in one student. Nevertheless, the level of anxiety which occurs in virtual classrooms is context-dependent because the anxiety level may fluctuate from one context to the next, and based on the proficiency level of each language learner (Bohlin & Hunt, 1995). This is attested to by Sepulveda-Escobar & Morrison's (2020) study on remote lessons in Chile during the COVID-19 pandemic, in which they inquired into the challenges of e-learning that might provoke increased anxiety levels among EFL learners. Yet, some EFL learners do prefer online to on-site teaching due to FNE emanating from their peers.

Moreover, other studies on virtual language teaching have been conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic which have exhibited diverse results. First, study on Saudi undergraduate students who manifested self-confidence during online learning indicates a more positive experience than in traditional settings due to the lofty engagement level between the instructor and the learners, usage of their native language in online settings, and explicit instructions from teachers to learners, which ameliorate the speaking anxiety and increase the students' motivations.

Despite the positive impacts online classrooms were found to have had upon Saudi EFL learners, Al-Qahtani mentioned that some students experience FNE and lack the self-confidence to speak English in virtual settings. Correspondingly, Yaniafari & Rihardini's (2022) research found a reduction in speaking anxiety among EFL students in online speaking classes compared to face-to-face settings because learners felt less anxious about their instructors in a virtual environment. Likewise, the comparative study of Punar & Uzun (2019) between online and offline language classes revealed a decrease in speaking anxiety of EFL students (CEFR B1-B2 levels) in Skype conference call classrooms. The pupils claimed that in online environments they were 'less anxious' compared to traditional classes. Nugroho et al.'s (2021) study on Indonesian students reported the lack of vocabulary repertoire as the most common cause of speaking anxiety in online English classrooms. Pupils were afraid of miscommunication with their interlocutors, and became concerned about their inexpert English pronunciation and grammar which amplified their communication apprehension.

Past Research on Speaking Anxiety

According to scholars, perceived sources of anxiety vary among different EFL pupils. In Akkakoson's (2016) study, the anxiety level of Thai university students mainly derived from an insufficient lexical repertoire, which concurs with Hadi et al.'s (2020) study on Thai EFL students, where limited vocabulary knowledge was a contributing factor to speaking anxiety, resulting in poor performance during English oral presentations. Likewise, Kitano's (2001) study on Japanese students concluded that perceived sources of FLA derive from the negative affective factors of poor self-perception, lack of self-confidence, and the inability to use the target language effectively.

Similarly, Öztürk, & Gürbüz's (2014) study on Turkish EFL students deduced that the perceived source of FLA was the fear of making mistakes because pupils possessed perfectionist attitudes. This view is quite different from the Thai cultural context where students

are shy and fearful to speak a foreign language in public settings. Nevertheless, Ansari's (2015) study on Indian students illustrated comparable results to the habits of Thai EFL students; these pupils tried to avoid language errors and speak slowly due to low self-confidence. They reported that their anxiousness sprang from negative evaluations of their peers, which corresponds to Dörnyei's (2005) findings that speaking anxiety originated from fear of making mistakes and fear of social comparisons.

Subsequently, Plangkham & Porkaew's (2012) and Kurakan's (2021) studies demonstrated that Thai university students were anxious and were subject to a high level of speaking anxiety while performing English oral presentations in classrooms. Kurakan (2021) further elaborated on the nature of Thai students, who are not accustomed to using English as their primary language, saying that it leads to a lack of confidence and nervousness while speaking English. Furthermore, Melouah's (2013) study on Algerian students reported that they remained silent and unable to speak in English language classrooms because they failed to understand their teachers' instructions and they lacked the linguistic knowledge to respond to the questions properly. She further stated that speaking anxiety arose when teachers spotted the language errors of their EFL students. This is common in the author's English language classroom, where EFL learners tend to become shy and remain silent when they are asked to speak English during class discussions.

This section focuses on case studies of FNE among EFL learners. Horwitz et.al. (1986) adduced teachers and peers as core sources that caused FNE among EFL learners, which undermines the self-perception of those EFL learners. These pupils were found to be reluctant to participate in language activities, and to remain silent. Their findings reaffirmed Chinpakdee's (2015) study on FNE of Thai university students, where anxious learners felt a sense of intimidation after being negatively judged by others on their self-perceived sense of inadequate linguistic competence. Correspondingly, Tsiplakides & Keramida's (2009) study on Greek students illustrated how FNE had caused these pupils to view themselves as having insufficient linguistic knowledge to articulate spoken words in the target language. In other words, they perceived that their English-speak abilities underperformed that of their peers in English language classrooms. This concurs with Basilio & Wongrak's (2017) study on 274 Thai university students where more than 60% of the participants felt that other students outperformed their own English-speaking abilities due to FNE during in-class speaking activities.

Thai Cultural Obstacles and FLA

According to Komin (1990), the face-saving culture of Thais is connected to the FNE among Thai EFL students. The concept of *"losing face"* is used to refer to a cultural situation in which an individual feels shamed in public due to embarrassment caused by others; it found in various Asian cultures. Silence is a type of defense mechanism that Thais employ when they feel uncomfortable speaking the target language to others, such as their classmates or their teachers (Komin, 1990).

Wichiajarote (1986) reinforced the claim that Thais expressed reserved attitudes toward authoritative figures or those with higher social rankings in an effort to lessen the potential for sabotaging their social relationships. Thai students are docile in conforming to their teachers' instructions, and reluctant to express their thoughts or concerns.

In 2009, Asmar conducted a study on FLSA among Arab EFL students, and found a loss of face resulting from the FNE of these pupils while speaking English in public. Similarly, Hayarame (2016) asserted that Thai cultural differences exacerbate the FLSA among Thai EFL learners in English language classrooms. Anxiousness arises among pupils whose first language is not English. Recently, Gosaiyakanon (2021) affirmed that Thai EFL learners felt a loss of face while speaking to their local and foreign counterparts due to low English proficiency levels, which caused a dramatic intensification of their FLSA.

Alleviating Speaking Anxiety

The issue of FLA is detrimental to language learners. Since speaking anxiety is unavoidable in language classrooms, language instructors are encouraged to promote a less-threatening classroom environment (Matsuda & Gobel, 2004) in an effort to mitigate language anxiety among learners. Language educators should adopt a more informal practice for their students to alleviate their language fear and speaking anxiety; thence, making the pupils feel more relaxed (Koçak, 2010). Additionally, teachers should act amicably with their students and alter the pupils' mindset by emphasising that making mistakes is not an embarrassment, but a natural language phenomenon that will help students to eventually be more successful (Hashemi 2011; Kralova & Petrova, 2017). Albeit, Pornthanomwong et al. (2019) proposed that these language pupils be allowed to use their first language in English classrooms to decrease their anxiety levels and make them feel more relaxed. Recently, Ansari (2015) suggested various strategies to ameliorate the speaking anxiety of EFL students in English classrooms, including regarding mistakes as a natural learning mechanism, and avoiding error correction in front of the students during speaking

activities, as well as selecting speaking activities appropriate to students' English language proficiency levels. Other suggestions included allowing students to avoid making eye contacts with their classmates and teachers when conducting English presentations, and taking individual-specific measures to address the EFL learners' special needs and concerns, both in-class and outside class times, to assuage their speaking anxiety. Last, Akramy (2020) advocated language pedagogues to encourage their pupils to become risk-takers and to be open to making mistakes when speaking since errors are a natural part of the language learning process.

Methodology

Research Approach and Design

This research utilised two sources of data collection: open-ended questions and semi-structured interviews. As Denzin & Lincoln (2005) stated, qualitative research allows researchers to gain access to abundant detailed information and understand concepts that are difficult to explain. The open-ended questions were used to pilot the study. The use of open-ended questions allowed participants to provide long answers which provided researchers with comprehensive information about the subjects under discussion. The open-ended questions comprised two types: specific open questions and short-answer questions. Specific open questions enabled researchers to draw out concrete information from the participants' responses, while short answer questions provided succinct details related to the concepts being explored (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2010).

The researcher asked the students to provide detailed answers to three open-ended questions asked virtually via Microsoft Forms:

1. *What factor(s) cause you to feel anxious when being asked to make English presentations and answer questions in English when studying virtually?*

2. *What are the major problems you encounter when speaking English in virtual classrooms?*

3. *Do you feel anxious when being called to speak English in virtual classrooms? Do you have any physical symptoms related to your nervousness?*

Semi-structured interviews allow researchers to collect essential evidence from the participants due to the flexibility of the information-gathering process (Alamri, 2019). This type of qualitative approach was used as a supplement to gain in-depth data from the selected participants.

Semi-structured interview questions are based on the aforementioned open-ended questions:

1. What is the main factor that makes you feel anxious when speaking English in virtual classrooms?

2. You mentioned your fear of wrong pronunciation; do your peers have a negative influence on that? For instance, are you scared of speaking English because you fear that your friends will laugh at you and make you feel embarrassed?

3. Does shyness affect your ability to speak English in virtual classrooms?

4. Do English teachers help to reduce students' anxiety levels in virtual classrooms?

5. Do English virtual classes help reduce overall language anxiety compared to traditional classroom settings?

Participant Selection

A total of 50 Pathumwan Institute of Technology undergraduate engineering students responded to the open-ended questions in this study. They were enrolled in the researcher's English for Presentation Module Academic Year 3/2020. All participants were first-year undergraduate engineering students. Their English proficiency levels varied from beginner to lower intermediate (CEFR: A1-A2). These pupils were enrolled in the weekend program, and some used English regularly in their workplaces. English Presentation module is the second English course they had taken as part of the engineering curriculum at the Institute; it is compulsory for every Pathumwan Institute of Technology student. The course focuses on individual and group English oral presentation skills. The grading criteria require the completion of four different English tasks: two individual presentations and two group presentations. The students can choose their presentation topics based on their interests for two of the four presentation tasks. The first English module, "English in Daily Life" focuses on the grammar aspects and circumstances in which students might encounter English daily. Speaking anxiety is evident in the virtual classrooms of the English for Presentation module.

Data Collection

The pilot study comprising the open-ended questions was administered at the end of the Summer Semester, Academic Year 2020 via Microsoft Forms platform. All data collection for this research project was voluntary. The pupils were asked to provide detailed answers to the three open-ended questions.

After administrating the online questionnaires, nine students were selected to participate in the semi-structured interviews. These students provided long, detailed answers with relevant examples about the situations in which their speaking fear was evident in virtual classrooms. Others who were not selected for the interview provided a one-word answer which were limited to reason out their problems. The English proficiency levels of the nine students varied from beginner to lower intermediate. Nevertheless, all of them were attentive in English discussions due to familiarity with their peers. The sizeable sample from the semi-structured interviews enabled qualitative researchers to "iron out idiosyncratic individual differences" in the results (Dörnyei, 2007). This allowed the researcher to reason out the justifications given by the participants in responding to each interview question based on their experiences regarding speaking anxiety in remote learning environments despite the different problems each pupil may have encountered when their fears emerged in the English Presentation online classrooms.

Subsequently, each of the nine semi-structured interview lasted approximately ten minutes. The interviews were conducted in the Thai language to provide saturated data on complex issues since Pathumwan pupils are unable to express their thoughts and ideas in English (a foreign language). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews were virtual and were recorded via Microsoft Teams programme for further English transcription.

Coding Process

Both open-ended questions and semi-structured interview coding processes were done manually. All data were transferred to a Microsoft Excel Spreadsheet for coding. The grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), which opts for a three-level system of coding, was used as a framework for data collection. First, 'in vivo' (initial coding) took the data gathered from open-ended questions, broke them up into chunks, and categorised them based on the main themes. The relevant words were highlighted for further categorizations, e.g., "limited vocabulary, wrong pronunciation".

The second-level coding allowed the researcher to identify the codes found from the relationship of each theme. This was done by selecting words related to the themes by highlighting each of them. For instance, "friends will laugh at me" and "embarrassed" are words related to fear of negative evaluations, and so can be grouped together. Last, the themes and words related to the themes were summarised into results, providing explanations for the relationship of the data for the selective coding.

In the same vein, semi-structured interview results were coded in alignment with the aforementioned research questions and open-ended questions. The researcher grouped the responses collectively to synthesise the qualitative data based on the related case studies on FNE and Thai cultural obstacles. Some students provided 'vignettes', short narratives about their experiences relating to the interview questions in which they described situations that triggered their speaking fears.

Results

The results are divided into two sections—open-ended questions and semi-structured interviews. The analysis is based on the three research questions: factors obstructing Pathumwan students from speaking English in virtual classrooms; cultural obstacles impacting the FNE of the participants; and approaches to reducing FLA of Pathumwan students.

1. Results Related to RQ1

The data collected from the open-ended questions indicated six major concerns which obstruct Pathumwan students from speaking the target language. The students are allowed to respond to more than one answer.

Table 1: Results from the online open-ended questionnaire

Concerns	Causes of FLSA	Total Responses
1	Limited vocabulary	27
2	Fear of wrong pronunciation	24
3	Unable to process thoughts into words	17
4	Unpleasant psycho-physiological symptoms	17
5	Fear of negative evaluation	15
6	Fear of miscommunication	16

Limited Vocabulary

The primary reason was the students' failure to understand the meanings of words. In fact, 27 out of 50 participants found this issue to make use of the target language arduous, especially while making English presentations. They added that, as EFL learners, they were incapable of comprehending proper English words used to start an English conversation. One

student pointed out that he was confused with the term "stool" because it has several meanings (either a type of chair or ordure). Others responded that they found it difficult to differentiate homonyms when words are pronounced swiftly, such as 'bored/board, plane/plain, affect/effect, or whether/weather'.

Here are some excerpts from the students' responses to the open-ended questions:
"I have limited vocabulary for accurate translation causing low self-confidence, and fear of speaking English. "
"My vocabulary is limited because I barely use English in real life. "
"I have limited vocabulary and grammar knowledge when speaking English. "
"I'm shy about communicating in English because my vocabulary is limited. "

Fear of Wrong Pronunciation

24 out of 50 students encountered unfamiliar words when they were asked to conduct English presentations. Before assigning presentation tasks, the instructor created presentation mock-ups and guidelines by outlining the exact directions the pupils ought to follow. The instructor's presentation mock-up videos provided an example of how the students were supposed to deliver their presentations on different topics of interest. In this way, the pupils were given the opportunity to mimic the presentation styles in a number of ways, including greeting the audience, tone of voice, the formality of the presentation, and body language that could be adopted for their presentations.

Even though these pupils prepared the presentations by practising scripts and acting them out beforehand, they were unaccustomed to the words. The instructor demonstrated pronunciation techniques, including the availability for self-practice using an online dictionary with audio features (www.longdo.com) and YouTube pronunciation practice videos; however, the pupils found it difficult to understand proper word pronunciations due to unfamiliarity with the accent(s).

Students rehearsed their presentations in groups or in front of a mirror. Some recorded their voices in videos of themselves and sent the videos to their peers for feedback. The instructor emphasised fluency in the language rather than accuracy of the English pronunciation. Before the presentation date, students were required to submit a presentation outline to the instructor in order to ensure that their project met the task achievement criteria.

The activities that triggered speaking fear among the participants were English conversations between classmates and teachers, and English presentations. Students were expected to discuss and comment the topics on covered in English, and were encouraged to ask or answer questions in English. Also, they were assigned to make English presentations. The instructor reassures that code-switching to Thai because English is not their native language and it is normal to pause and think about certain English words.

Both individual and group oral presentations lasted from 3-10 minutes. The topics covered were general topics such as friends, future dreams, the importance of learning English, etc. The teacher put all topics on an online website (https://wheelofnames.com/) which assigned the topics randomly. Each student received different topics from the wheel. They were then required to pick their own 'specific' topic from the available choices and write a short summary of the presentation in the form of an outline. Once the outline was approved, the students were able to start rehearsing their presentations. They were graded for their fluency, content, use of visual aids, grammar and vocabulary.

For the final presentation, students were asked to select their topics of interest from a general pool of given topics. For instance, if Student A were to draw the word "music", his presentation topic could be "The Beatles". Long presentation scripts made it difficult for these pupils to articulate words that they had never encountered before, and participating Pathumwan students experienced problems with getting tongue-tied while conducting long English presentations. They reported difficulty in pronouncing unfamiliar vocabulary.

"My speech is not fluent and my English accent is poor."

"I cannot pronounce unfamiliar English words properly when making English presentations."

"I tend to forget English speeches and fear pronouncing the words incorrectly."

Unable to Process Thoughts into Words

17 out of 50 students addressed the issue of putting thoughts into words. Since English is not their mother tongue, it takes time for them to translate the lexis and syntax into the target language.

"I am shy and fearful to speak English, so sometimes I cannot process the English words in time."

"I cannot process thoughts into words when making long English speeches."

"I often sweat and have unpleasant physical reactions when I have to translate big words from Thai to English."

Unpleasant Psycho-Physiological Symptoms

17 out of 50 students experienced unpleasant psycho-physiological symptoms while making English presentations in virtual classrooms. Their symptoms derived from the nervousness and fear they encountered when asked to conduct presentations in a non-native language. These include elevated heart rate, shaking, cold hands, trembling, and sweating. Some excerpts from the open-ended questionnaires are mentioned below.

"I feel stressed and trembled."

"The excitement causes sweating and heart pounding."

"I experienced a shaky voice and cold hands while making presentations."

"I feel very fearful and keep looking up at the ceiling."

Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE)

Shyness and embarrassment resulting from FNE was reported by 15 out of 50 participating students who were asked to speak English virtually to their classmates in the main meeting room. The instructor asked the students to give comments about presentation videos and brainstorm ideas about the aspects of successful presentations with their classmates. The pupils made negative comparisons of their English-speaking ability to their peers.

"I feel embarrassed when I forget English scripts when making English presentations in public."

"The peer pressure caused me to fear speaking English."

"I feel embarrassed when friends laugh at me when I speak English wrongly. "

Fear of Miscommunication

16 out of 50 students mentioned the fear of miscommunication while using the target language with their teachers and peers. They were afraid of speaking English because they worried that their interlocutors would misinterpret their messages. This stemmed from their low English listening comprehension skills and fear of giving the wrong answers. Sometimes, the interlocutors spoke at a fast speed with unfamiliar accents, so it was difficult for the students to comprehend the message. Some did not know how to explain their answers in English due to shyness or a lack of confidence.

"I am afraid of not being able to answer the teachers' questions, so I fear miscommunication."

"I always feel stressed when speaking English and scared that others will not understand my message. "

2. Results Related to RQ2

Relationship between Cultural Obstacles and Speaking Anxiety

The semi-structured interviews provided diverse responses related to the impact that cultural hindrances have upon the FNE of the participating pupils. The 9 participants were carefully selected for the interview based on the detailed answers and examples provided in response to the open-ended questionnaires. Each of them provided interesting vignettes of themselves and of speaking fear they had experienced in online English classrooms. Their English proficiency levels were between beginner and lower intermediate. They were part-time undergraduate students who had never conducted proper English presentations before attending the instructor's English for Presentation module. 5 out of 9 students did not feel a loss of face when speaking English incorrectly to their peers in virtual classrooms. Their responses include:

"Nope, it's normal. It is a part of the learning process. Everyone makes mistakes when they speak, even when we speak Thai, our mother tongue, you know. Plus, I didn't study in the English programme; I study English to improve my overall communication, not for my accuracy."

"Nope, it's just because I've never done this before and it's new to me."

"Nope, I don't feel shy or embarrassed. I think it is mainly on myself. I don't care what others think of me."

"Not really. I need time to prepare my presentation. I can't do it immediately."

"So-so; sometimes, I mispronounce my mother tongue. English is my second language, so it's normal."

These students view language learning as a natural process where making mistakes is normal. Thus, they do not feel a sense of pressure to produce an accurate spoken form of the target language in comparison to the English major students.

One pupil, however, highlighted the issues of FNE, shyness, embarrassment, and loss of face as the triggers of his foreign language speaking anxiety.

"I tend to get very embarrassed when they laugh at me or stare at me if I say something wrong or mispronounce a word. This causes me to feel stressed and paranoid."

He added that he had felt loss of face in both online and onsite learning experiences. This dilemma had been an ongoing problem since his childhood when his English teacher displayed a stern attitude toward him in front of his classmates.

Nonetheless, one student exemplified the role of Thai teachers as authoritative figures in language classrooms as the rationale for Thai students becoming terrified to speak English.

"I was taught to be submissive to my teachers and respect them by being silent in classrooms. Students should ask questions but simply agree to what the teachers say."

In traditional Thai classrooms, the teachers are seen as 'authoritative figures' who are above the students. Students typically act submissively to them due to fear of their authoritative powers.

3. Results Related to RQ3

The semi-structured interview results provided three approaches to reducing speaking anxiety in virtual classrooms of Pathumwan students. First, language pedagogues should allow bilingual responses from the students in speaking tasks and English presentations.

As one student said,

"My anxiety was lower because I can speak Thai whenever I don't know a particular English word."

This enhances classroom autonomy and promotes students' participation and use of the target language instead of Spelling on grammatical accuracy.

Second, teachers should not interrupt students when they make mistakes while delivering English presentations.

Another student stated it clearly,

"They should wait until I finish and correct me after."

She added,

"You have reduced my stress level because you don't stop the students in the middle of their presentations like other teachers; instead, you provide feedback at the end of the class."

This mitigates speaking anxiety and allows language instructors to adjust their language evaluations to meet students' language proficiency and promotes a relaxing learning atmosphere. The quoted student added that the distance (online) learning environment allows her to alleviate her fear of speaking, especially in speaking activities where students were not required to turn on their webcams. In addition, with the assistance of the chat box functions in the Microsoft Teams platform, students whose internet connectivity is limited were able to ask questions in writing. In this way, the instructor was able to respond to the questions in real time as they evolved out of the lessons.

Finally, teachers should adjust the speaking tasks to be aligned with each student's English language proficiency.

As one student mentioned,

“Yes, they helped to lessen the fear to some extent. The tasks won’t be too hard for the students.”

This approach reduces speaking anxiety and allows language instructors to adjust their language evaluations to meet the student’s objectives, and promotes a more relaxed schooling environment. The English instructor assigned productive skill-based speaking tasks to the students, and asked them to fill out the presentation outline before their live presentations. This method helped allay the students’ speaking anxieties while promoting the EFL learners’ self-esteem and self-confidence by allowing them to practise their English presentations or speeches beforehand. Notably, flexibility is the key to virtual classroom practises.

Discussion

1. What are the major concerns that discourage Pathumwan Institute of Technology students from speaking English in virtual classrooms?

Insufficient lexical knowledge of the target language was reported as the major obstruction that hindered Pathumwan students from speaking English in virtual classrooms. The major finding that FLSA arises from the scant vocabulary repertoire of participating Pathumwan students is akin to the studies of Kojima (2007); Hadi et al. (2020); Kalra & Siribud (2020), and Nugroho et al. (2021) where limited lexical knowledge caused apprehension among EFL learners in English language classrooms. It has been repeatedly found that incorrect or limited usage of English vocabulary escalates fear of speaking the target language among these pupils. Therefore, language instructors should pay careful attention to students’ English proficiency levels, and adjust their teaching materials accordingly. The pupils should be allowed to use their mother tongue in English classes to reduce miscommunication when speaking.

The open-ended questionnaire results identify fear of incorrect pronunciation from some students, which accords with Kayaoğlu & Sağlamel’s (2013) and Nugroho et al.’s (2021) findings, where pronunciation was noted as the major factor that deteriorated the non-native pupils' speaking abilities. Since English is not their L1, learners should beware that mistakes are a part of the learning process in every language.

17 students reported unpleasant psycho-physiological symptoms as a result of their FLSA. These results concur with Tóth's (2011) and Listyaningrum Arifin's (2017) studies on the presence of undesirable physical symptoms that are evident among anxious EFL learners due to stress in English-speaking classrooms. These pupils should learn to detach their stresses and relax because

the unpleasant psycho-physiological symptoms could deteriorate their oral speaking performance in language classrooms.

Students who identified FNE as the primary source of their FLSA reaffirmed the assertions of Dörnyei (2005); Tsiplakides & Keramida (2009); Ansari (2015); Chinpakdee (2015), and Al-Qahtani (2019) where social comparisons and lack of self-confidence were the principal reasons for FNE of EFL learners who harboured negative images of themselves. To mitigate this effect, EFL students should focus on their progress and try not to compare themselves with their peers because each individual will experience different learning progress.

Almost one-third of the participating students reported fear of miscommunication as a source of their FLSA. The results concur with Melouah's (2013) study on Algerian EFL students in which the pupils were silent when they did not understand their teachers' instructions. Learners need constant practice and immersion in the target language to become familiar with the sounds and speech.

2. Do cultural obstacles impact the students' speaking anxieties?

The semi-structured interviews provided a variety of results from the respondents. One Pathumwan student addressed the fear of making mistakes as common for a language learning process, which contradicts the study of Öztürk, & Gürbüz's (2014) on Turkish EFL students, where fear of making mistakes became a dominant cause of FLSA. This might be because the Pathumwan student was an engineering major who uses English as a tool for communication, not for academic purposes like English-major students.

Other respondents do not perceive English as a cultural obstacle leading to FLSA, and do not feel embarrassed or intimidated. Their claims negate the views of Hayarame (2016) and Kurakan (2021), who observed a lack of confidence and anxiousness among Thai EFL learners in English language classrooms because they were unaccustomed to the target language.

Nevertheless, one respondent manifested FNE and social comparison as his cultural obstacle to FLSA. His answers resemble the claims of Kitano (2001); Tsiplakides & Keramida (2009); Chinpakdee (2015); and Basilio & Wongrak (2017), where negative feedback from teachers and peers had caused an increase in speaking anxiety among non-native pupils. The loss of face this respondent is experiencing is typical in Thai society, as Komin (1990) has explained, when the speaker feels uncomfortable with and inferior to their acquaintances or superiors.

Finally, the exemplification of the last respondent of Thai teachers as authoritative figures echoes Wichiajarote's (1986) assertion that the reserved attitudes of Thais are evident among the submissive rankings (the students) towards their authoritative figures (the teachers). This norm has persisted from the past until the present, resulting in a situation where Thai students typically remain silent in both online and onsite academic settings unless they are called on by their instructors to answer in-class questions.

3. What approaches could be employed to lessen the FLSA of Pathumwan Institute of Technology students in virtual classrooms?

As the participants suggested, the mother tongue (in this case, Thai) should be allowed in English classes to mitigate the FLSA of the pupils. This approach coincides with Pornthanomwong et al.'s (2019) advocating the utilisation of the Thai language in English language classrooms to lessen the speaking anxiety levels of EFL learners. In this way, students are enabled to produce certain words in the Thai language while speaking English, thus promoting fluency in language usage rather than emphasising the accuracy of the target language. Next, as one respondent pointed out, teachers should not intervene with the students' English presentations; rather, the teacher should provide feedback after the students have finished making English presentations. This strategy is congruent with Ansari's (2015) statement that language instructors ought to avoid error corrections in front of the pupils in oral presentations. Finally, one participant voiced the idea that teachers should adjust the speaking tasks in accordance with the English language proficiency of the students. This parallels Ansari's (2015) recommendation that instructors should select a proper teacher and learning materials and take specific measures according to the pupils' language performance.

Overall, the study revealed a reduction of FLSA in virtual English classrooms in more than half of the participating learners. This accords with Punar & Uzun's (2019) discovery that online language learning produces lower hostility among EFL students when compared to on-site learning environments. Their distance learning experiences illustrate a positive atmosphere in comparison with speaking English in typical classrooms. Nonetheless, the loss of face is seen as a Thai cultural obstacle among some respondents. Since the participants are not exposed to using the target language in their daily lives, feeling loss face could provoke FLSA, exacerbate their virtual learning experiences, and affect their speaking performances when speaking to their interlocutors.

However, one participant acknowledged that making mistakes is a natural learning mechanism, so loss of face could be a subjective issue for Thai EFL learners.

Conclusion

In summary, six major obstructions are found to have hindered Pathumwan students from speaking English in virtual classrooms. Therefore, the adoption of the mother tongue in both speaking activities and remote classroom discussions will eventually assuage the students` anxieties about conducting English presentations virtually. The adoption of codeswitching to the Thai language during English presentations is encouraged for Thai EFL learners who possess lower English-speaking abilities. This will help promote language fluency rather than emphasise the accuracy of the target language. Teachers should promote an environment where making mistakes in a language classroom is not an embarrassment, but is seen as a sign of progress in language learning. This practise will support those Thai EFL learners who are struggling with the Thai cultural obstacle of losing face. FLSA will gradually decrease as teachers project themselves as facilitators in online language classrooms rather than authoritative figures who believe that students should be submissive and compliant. Also, language instructors should not intervene with correction of students' language errors during their English presentations; instead, they should provide further assistance to nervous pupils outside lecture times, and based on the student's individual English language proficiency. These pupils will become more at ease and have more confidence to use the target language in English classes. Teachers should make the best use of online learning tools such as chat box functions for in-class discussions and breakout rooms before in-class speaking discussions to enhance the group-speaking activities of EFL pupils.

Likewise, flexibility is the key to online language teaching. Teachers should be aware of inevitable technical issues presented in virtual language classrooms. In ineluctable circumstances where students have unsatisfactory internet connectivity and are unable to turn on their webcams during online presentations, language instructors should be flexible with their pupils. This helps minimise the pupil`s overall FLA levels because they are able to deliver their presentation in a relaxed manner.

Even so, there are some limitations present in this research. The niche and small sampling size of the participants might be too narrow to be representative of a broader view of the FLSA of Thai EFL students. Second, virtual language learning in Thai tertiary education is still under

experimentation in the quest to bridge the communication gap between teachers and students and allow for any technical difficulties that might hamper students to use the spoken target language in a stress-free manner. With this in mind, FLSA could be alleviated in distance learning environments if language pedagogues undertake to resolve issues and concerns of their students through cautious consideration, and provide constructive feedback while expressing compassion when those students make speaking mistakes.

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