

Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety among Thai Undergraduates with Low English Proficiency: Perspectives on Levels and Contributing Factors

ความวิตกกังวลในการพูดภาษาต่างประเทศของนักศึกษาไทย ที่มีความเชี่ยวชาญภาษาอังกฤษในระดับต่ำ: มุมมองเกี่ยวกับระดับและปัจจัยของความวิตกกังวล

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Abstract

Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety (FLSA) is a major psychological barrier that can hinder language learners from achieving proficiency and success in speaking a foreign language. Given its negative impact, this study examines FLSA among Thai non-English major undergraduates with low English proficiency, aiming to explore student-reported anxiety levels and contributing factors. Data were collected from 1,266 students using questionnaires administered online and semi-structured interviews. The findings revealed a high level of FLSA among students, with test anxiety identified as the most prominent type and public speaking as the most anxiety-inducing activity. Analysis of contributing factors showed that students' FLSA was shaped by both internal and external influences, with linguistic factors emerging as key internal contributors. To reduce anxiety, the study suggests gradually increasing speaking task difficulty and providing psychological support, complemented by institutional measures. These insights offer practical guidance for improving speaking instruction and supporting low-proficiency learners in Thai EFL contexts.

Keywords: Foreign language speaking anxiety, Low English proficiency, Contributing factors, Thai non-English major undergraduates

บทคัดย่อ

ความวิตกกังวลในการพูดภาษาต่างประเทศเป็นอุปสรรคทางจิตใจที่สำคัญที่อาจขัดขวางผู้เรียนภาษาจากการบรรลุความเชี่ยวชาญและความสำเร็จในการพูดภาษาต่างประเทศ เนื่องด้วยผลกระทบด้านลบนี้ งานวิจัยนี้จึงศึกษาความวิตกกังวลในการพูดภาษาต่างประเทศในกลุ่มนักศึกษาไทยระดับปริญญาตรีที่ไม่ได้เรียนวิชาเอก

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ภาษาอังกฤษและมีความเชี่ยวชาญภาษาอังกฤษในระดับต่ำ โดยมีเป้าหมายเพื่อสำรวจระดับความวิตกกังวลในผู้เรียนและปัจจัยที่มีส่วนทำให้เกิดความวิตกกังวลดังกล่าว งานวิจัยนี้ใช้แบบสอบถามออนไลน์และการสัมภาษณ์กึ่งโครงสร้างเก็บข้อมูลจากนักศึกษาจำนวน 1,266 คน ผลการวิจัยพบว่าผู้เรียนมีความวิตกกังวลในการพูดภาษาต่างประเทศอยู่ในระดับสูง โดยความวิตกกังวลเกี่ยวกับการสอบเป็นความวิตกกังวลที่เด่นชัดที่สุด กิจกรรมที่สร้างความวิตกกังวลมากที่สุดคือการพูดหน้าชั้นเรียน การวิเคราะห์ปัจจัยที่ส่งผลต่อความวิตกกังวลเผยให้เห็นว่าความวิตกกังวลในการพูดภาษาต่างประเทศของผู้เรียนได้รับอิทธิพลจากทั้งปัจจัยภายในและภายนอก โดยมีปัจจัยทางภาษาเป็นปัจจัยภายในที่สำคัญที่ส่งผลต่อความวิตกกังวล เพื่อลดความวิตกกังวล งานวิจัยนี้เสนอให้เพิ่มระดับความยากของกิจกรรมการพูดอย่างค่อยเป็นค่อยไปและให้การสนับสนุนทางด้านจิตใจแก่ผู้เรียน และมีมาตรการสนับสนุนในระดับสถาบัน ข้อมูลเชิงลึกเหล่านี้เป็นแนวทางปฏิบัติที่เป็นประโยชน์สำหรับการปรับปรุงการสอนการพูดและการสนับสนุนผู้เรียนที่มีความเชี่ยวชาญภาษาระดับต่ำในบริบทการเรียนการสอนภาษาอังกฤษในฐานะภาษาต่างประเทศของไทย

คำสำคัญ: ความวิตกกังวลในการพูดภาษาต่างประเทศ, ความเชี่ยวชาญภาษาอังกฤษในระดับต่ำ, ปัจจัยของความวิตกกังวล, นักศึกษาไทยระดับปริญญาตรีที่ไม่ได้เรียนวิชาเอกภาษาอังกฤษ

Introduction

Being proficient in multiple languages, particularly English, provides many benefits, including access to diverse knowledge sources, enhanced job opportunities, a broader selection of entertainment options, and expanded global social connections. Given the importance of English, it is a compulsory foreign subject for Thai students from primary school onwards. Nevertheless, despite years of instruction, many Thai students continue to face challenges in achieving satisfactory English proficiency, especially in speaking skills (Inkaew, 2020).

This persistent difficulty has drawn considerable attention from educators and policymakers, prompting a range of studies to explore the obstacles Thai learners encounter in developing oral English communication. A key factor repeatedly identified in the literature is Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), particularly Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety (FLSA), which refers to the apprehension experienced when speaking in a non-native language—in this context, English. FLSA has been widely recognized as a significant affective barrier that can negatively impact learners' performance and language acquisition. In the Thai context, previous research has investigated English-related FLSA across various groups, such as high school students, university learners, teachers, and administrative staff, focusing on its prevalence, relationship to achievement,



underlying causes, and coping strategies (e.g., Akkakoson, 2016; Bhattarachaiyakorn & Phettakua, 2023; Guzman, 2022; Parauwat, 2011).

However, despite these contributions, notable research gaps remain. While many studies have examined English majors and non-English majors in general, limited attention has been given to non-English major undergraduates with low English proficiency. This represents an important gap, as this group constitutes a substantial portion of university students in Thailand.

Although these students are enrolled in fields unrelated to English, they are still required to complete English-speaking tasks in compulsory general education courses such as English for Everyday Life. Despite their limited language skills, they are expected to meet institutional requirements that may not fully account for their diverse language backgrounds and specific learning needs.

In comparison to English majors, they often have less motivation, fewer coping strategies, and limited exposure to English outside the classroom. Without targeted support, they are at risk of heightened speaking anxiety, which can lead to decreased participation, lower academic performance, and diminished confidence in using English. Therefore, it is crucial to understand their unique experiences in order to develop teaching methods that effectively support all learners, ensuring that no one is left behind, especially those who struggle the most.

To address this research gap, this study investigates FLSA among non-English major undergraduates with low English proficiency at a public university in Thailand. As part of a broader project exploring FLSA, this paper focuses on students' perceived anxiety levels in English for Everyday Life classrooms and examines the factors they believe contribute to it. The study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. To what extent do non-English major undergraduates with low English proficiency perceive the level of FLSA in English for Everyday Life classrooms?
2. What factors do these students perceive as contributing to FLSA in English for Everyday Life classrooms?

By addressing these questions, the study aims to enrich the existing body of literature on FLSA and provide practical insights into EFL material design and classroom instruction. Ultimately, the findings are intended to help students become more aware of and better cope with speaking anxiety, while encouraging teachers to design gradually scaffolded, low-anxiety speaking activities



that support students' progress from basic to more advanced levels at a comfortable pace. It is hoped that this approach will foster an anxiety-free environment, promote positive attitudes toward English speaking, and enhance effective language development among low-proficiency learners in the Thai context.

Literature Review

Understanding Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety

Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) is widely recognized as a critical effective factor influencing second language acquisition. Defined as “the worry and negative emotional reaction aroused when learning and using a second language” (MacIntyre, 1999, p. 27), FLA entails feelings of unease related to performance in both academic and social contexts (Horwitz et al., 1986). This anxiety is characterized by “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process” (Horwitz et al., 1986, p. 128). It is considered one of the key affective variables that influence second language acquisition (Krashen, 1982), with numerous studies demonstrating its adverse effects on student performance and achievement.

Within this broader construct, Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety (FLSA) refers to the fear or nervousness experienced when required to speak in a foreign language, especially in front of others. As speaking is often considered the most immediate and face-threatening skill, FLSA can be more intense than anxiety related to other language skills. This type of anxiety can severely impede learners' ability to communicate effectively, limiting their participation and confidence in language classrooms.

Horwitz et al. (1986) identified three core components of FLA: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. To assess these components, Horwitz and colleagues developed the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), which is a self-report questionnaire with a 5-point Likert scale. The questionnaire contains 33 items which assess issues related to communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Since its introduction, the FLCAS has been employed and adapted in various contexts to measure FLA among diverse learner groups. (e.g., Apple, 2013; Liu, 2006a; Liu & Jackson, 2008; Veenstra & Weaver, 2022).



Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety Level Assessment

Considerable research has been done to explore FLA in classrooms, especially anxiety related to speaking skills. The FLCAS has been used to examine FLA in various contexts and populations, often in relation to different variables.

Among these, proficiency level is one of the most widely discussed variables in FLSA literature. For instance, Liu (2006a) conducted a mixed-methods study with 547 Chinese undergraduate non-English majors and found that a large number of students experienced anxiety when speaking English in class, with higher proficiency correlating with lower anxiety levels. This suggests a strong inverse relationship between proficiency and FLSA. However, this correlation is not entirely conclusive.

Su (2022) investigated both anxiety and enjoyment levels among 231 Chinese EFL undergraduates with intermediate and low English proficiency, revealing moderate levels of anxiety and enjoyment across learners and pointing to conflicting results, as students with differing proficiency sometimes exhibited similar anxiety levels. This indicates that while language proficiency is a significant variable, it does not fully account for the complexity of FLSA, suggesting the influence of additional psychological and contextual variables.

Gender is another variable that has been frequently examined in FLSA studies, but the findings are mixed and sometimes contradictory. Su (2022) found that female students reported significantly higher speaking anxiety than their male counterparts. In contrast, Gopang et al. (2015), studying EFL students at Lasbela University in Pakistan, reported no significant gender differences, despite participants generally experiencing high anxiety.

Taken together, these findings highlight that FLSA is a prevalent issue across diverse sociocultural and educational contexts. Its intensity varies among student groups and is shaped by multiple factors. Therefore, assessing FLSA is crucial for informing teaching practices and designing classroom activities that effectively support diverse learner populations.

Factors Contributing to FLSA

Since FLSA is associated with a variety of contexts and factors, scholars have not only assessed anxiety levels but also specifically investigated the elements contributing to it. Studies have identified multiple contributing factors, which, like anxiety levels, differ depending on learners,



courses, and settings. FLSA does not stem from a single cause but rather emerges from a complex interplay of factors, which can generally be categorized into two groups: internal and external.

Internal factors originate within the learners themselves and primarily involve their psychological state and language proficiency. Learners' attitudes toward English learning (Mak, 2011) play a vital role in shaping their susceptibility to FLSA, often manifesting as perfectionism and a strong fear of making mistakes. Self-perception (Mak, 2011; Young, 1991) is also a significant barrier leading to anxiety, especially when it results in negative self-evaluation of language abilities (Liu & Jackson, 2008; Okyar, 2023; Tsang, 2022), unrealistic expectations, and feelings of self-inferiority. Insufficient preparation and practice, a lack of confidence, and speech anxiety add to these challenges, highlighting the importance of psychological readiness for successful language production. Equally important is the influence of language proficiency. Research findings indicate that insufficient vocabulary knowledge is frequently identified as a key contributor to FLSA (Bhattachaiyakorn & Phettakua, 2023; Liu, 2006b; Poolperm & Boonmoh, 2024; Suratin & Sribayak, 2025). Other language proficiency factors include grammar, pronunciation, and fluency. Together with psychological factors, these linguistic elements underscore the importance of both mental and language readiness in shaping learners' anxiety levels.

With respect to external factors, they are primarily shaped by pedagogical conditions and the social environment. Pedagogical conditions include the activities and teaching practices used in the classroom. Activities designed for language testing often induce feelings of stress and fear of failing the class. Beyond the evaluative nature of these activities, the manner in which they and the class are conducted also has a significant impact. For example, requiring students to speak in front of the class without preparation, providing inadequate wait-time for responses, prohibiting the use of the first language in a second or foreign language class, and correcting students when they speak have all been reported as contributing factors (Mak, 2011).

Within the social environment, both teachers and peers influence students' anxiety levels. Teachers' beliefs about language teaching and their interactions with students can significantly influence students' feelings (Young, 1991). Teachers who are strict and focus heavily on accuracy can create an unfriendly classroom atmosphere, increasing students' worry about language use and heightening their fear of making mistakes and being negatively evaluated. Similarly, peer pressure also plays a significant role in shaping students' experiences of anxiety (Su, 2022). While



supportive peers can boost confidence and motivation, those perceived as more competent may unintentionally amplify the pressure on other learners. This dynamic often reinforces comparison and competition, which can heighten anxiety by making students more self-conscious about their performance and fearful of negative judgment.

FLSA in the Thai Context

In Thailand, FLSA has been the subject of numerous studies, focusing primarily on undergraduate students. Guzman (2022) and Parauwat (2011) studied non-English majors, and both reported moderate levels of anxiety, though the underlying causes differed. Guzman's study of second-year education students identified fear of negative evaluation as the predominant factor, whereas Parauwat's study of first-year students revealed communication apprehension, perceived incompetence relative to peers, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation as salient contributors. In contrast, Chinpakdee (2015) reported elevated anxiety levels among non-English majors in their second to fourth years, with academic evaluation pressures, fear of negative evaluations, comprehension difficulties, and teacher-related factors playing significant roles.

Investigations of non-English majors have expanded to explore the impact of instructional modes. Poolperm & Boonmoh (2024) demonstrated that FLSA existed in both onsite and online instruction, but students tend to feel more anxious speaking English in onsite classes, where nervousness, limited vocabulary, and vocabulary memorization challenges were more pronounced. Pruksaseat (2022) also considered the virtual classroom setting and identified limited vocabulary and fear of incorrect pronunciation as primary concerns for engineering students.

Findings from these studies consistently indicate that non-English majors struggle with FLSA to varying degrees, influenced by a range of internal and external factors. Nevertheless, English majors are not immune to this issue. Bhattarachaiyakorn & Phettakua (2023) demonstrated that first-year English majors experienced high levels of anxiety, primarily due to difficulties with grammar, limited vocabulary, and oral proficiency. This suggests that foundational language skills remain a significant barrier despite their specialized studies. Supporting this, Qin & Poopatwiboon (2023), who also studied first-year English majors, found moderate speaking anxiety, with low self-confidence identified as the key factor driving this anxiety. Their findings emphasize that speaking anxiety is influenced not only by linguistic competence but also by affective factors such as learner confidence.



While these studies provide valuable insights, much of the existing research has concentrated on broader student groups, often overlooking a key subgroup: non-English major undergraduates with low English proficiency. This group, despite facing some of the most significant challenges in speaking English, remains underrepresented in the literature.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed methods design, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of English language speaking anxiety among non-English major undergraduates with low English proficiency.

Participants

To collect data, non-English major students enrolled in English for Everyday Life at a public university in Bangkok, Thailand, during the first semester of 2023 were recruited. Students' low English proficiency in this study was determined by their scores on the institutional English placement test, which assesses listening skills, structure and writing ability, and reading comprehension. Students scoring above 50 out of 100 were categorized as intermediate or advanced and placed into higher-level English courses. Conversely, the participants in this study, who scored between 10 and 50, were classified as beginners and required to enroll in English for Everyday Life. Of the target population, 1,226 students returned the questionnaire. In addition, volunteer students from different classes were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews, ensuring that participation was voluntary and confidential. A total of 22 students took part in these interviews.

Instruments

Questionnaires and interviews were used to collect data from the students regarding speaking anxiety levels, contributing factors, and coping strategies in the English language classroom. While these instruments were designed to gather data on all three areas, this paper focuses specifically on speaking anxiety levels and contributing factors. Coping strategies, though explored in the data collection, are beyond the scope of this paper.

1. Questionnaire

The questionnaire was used to gather data on anxiety levels and their contributing factors. Written in Thai to help participants understand the questions quickly and accurately, it consisted of



four sections: demographic data, speaking anxiety assessment, factors contributing to anxiety, and coping strategies.

The speaking anxiety assessment section was developed using items adapted from well-established instruments, including the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (Horwitz et al., 1986), the Foreign Language Classroom Speaking Anxiety Scale (Apple, 2013), and the Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety Questionnaire (Veenstra & Weaver, 2022). The section comprised 20 items reflecting the three domains of FLSA (i.e., communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation) —as well as specific classroom speaking contexts relevant to the English for Everyday Life course, such as individual speaking tasks, pair work, and speaking with instructors. The section on factors contributing to anxiety included 20 items developed based on previous studies, with 13 factors selected from Liu (2006b). Both the anxiety assessment and contributing factors sections employed a 4-point Likert-type scale, where 1 indicated 'strongly disagree' and 4 indicated 'strongly agree.' A 4-point scale was chosen to encourage more decisive responses, consistent with the recommendation of Mak (2011).

The instrument underwent expert validation using the Index of Item Objective Congruence (IOC), and was pilot tested. Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated to assess the internal consistency and reliability of the questionnaire. These analyses revealed strong internal consistency reliability for the speaking anxiety assessment ($\alpha = 0.95$) and factors contributing to anxiety ($\alpha = 0.95$) sections.

2. Student Semi-Structured Interviews

Interview questions aimed to obtain in-depth information regarding the students' views on FLSA in the classroom. For example, participants were asked to describe their anxiety levels when engaging in English speaking activities, how they physically and emotionally responded to anxiety, what triggered their anxiety, and the methods they used to manage it. Students participated voluntarily and provided consent for audio recordings. Interviews were conducted in Thai to allow the participants to express their ideas more comfortably.

Data Collection Procedure

To collect student data, course teachers were asked at the end of the semester to share a QR-coded Google Form containing the student questionnaire, consent information, and clear



instructions with their students through class online platforms. Initially, the study followed the practice of treating questionnaire completion as implied consent. Participants were provided with detailed information about the research, including its purpose, methodology, duration, potential risks, benefits, and their right to refuse or withdraw at any time without penalty, before completing the questionnaire. To obtain richer insights, 22 volunteer students were invited to participate in a semi-structured interview. Each interview, conducted individually by the researcher, lasted approximately 10 to 15 minutes. Prior to the interview, participants were informed that the conversation would be audio-recorded for research purposes. They were assured of confidentiality and anonymity and were explicitly asked for their consent to proceed with both the interview and the recording.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data from the 4-point Likert scale, means and standard deviations were calculated. The computed means were interpreted using the following scale: very low level (1.00-1.74), low level (1.75-2.49), high level (2.50-3.24), and very high level (3.25-4.00). The cut-off point of 2.50 for a “high” level aligns with common practice in educational and psychological research, where the scale is evenly divided into four equal intervals of 0.75. Frequencies were calculated for demographic and close-ended responses to identify general trends across the participant group. Furthermore, the interview transcripts were subjected to thematic analysis to examine the qualitative data. Emerging patterns were carefully coded, grouped, and reviewed to ensure accuracy and consistency of interpretation. All data were treated confidentially and reported anonymously to protect participant identity and uphold ethical standards throughout the research process.

Ethical Approval

The research protocol was reviewed and approved by the Kasetsart University Research Ethics Committee (COA No. COA66/049), ensuring compliance with ethical standards for research involving human participants.

Findings

This section presents the results of the study based on data collected from the student questionnaires and interviews. The findings are organized according to the research questions.

1. Perceived Level of Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety in Classrooms

The first research question sought to investigate the level of FLSA as perceived by the students. Data were collected using a 20-item questionnaire adapted from validated FLSA scales. Table 1 presents the mean scores and standard deviations for each item, along with the interpretations of their anxiety levels.

Table 1 Foreign language speaking anxiety assessment

No.	Item	Mean	S.D.	Interpretation
1	I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my English class.	2.67	0.83	High level
2	It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in English.	2.60	0.85	High level
3	I get nervous and confused when I am speaking English in my English class.	2.58	0.84	High level
4	I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules I have to learn to speak English.	2.26	0.88	Low level
5	Even if I am well prepared, I feel anxious about speaking English.	2.80	0.86	High level
6	I worry about the consequences of failing my English class.	2.67	0.94	High level
7	I am afraid my English score will be lower than what I expect.	2.81	0.86	High level
8	In my English class, I get so nervous I forget things I know.	2.43	0.90	Low level
9	I can feel my heart pounding when it's my turn to speak English.	2.89	0.87	High level
10	I am worried that other people would negatively evaluate my English speaking performance.	2.58	0.94	High level
11	I always feel that the other students in class speak English better than I do.	2.68	0.89	High level
12	I am afraid that other students in class would laugh at my English speaking performance.	2.19	0.93	Low level
13	I am worried about making mistakes when I speak English in front of the entire class.	2.68	0.90	High level
14	I feel nervous when I have to speak English in front of the entire class.	2.84	0.84	High level
15	I am afraid my partner will laugh when I speak English with a classmate in a pair.	1.94	0.91	Low level



No.	Item	Mean	S.D.	Interpretation
16	I am worried about making mistakes when I speak English with a partner in class.	2.45	0.91	Low level
17	I feel tense when I have to speak English with a classmate in a pair.	2.33	0.88	Low level
18	I am afraid that the teacher would laugh at my English speaking performance.	1.86	0.93	Low level
19	I am worried about making mistakes when I speak English with the teacher.	2.49	0.95	Low level
20	I feel nervous when I have to speak English with the teacher.	2.59	0.93	High level
Overall		2.52	0.89	High level

The overall results indicated that the students in the study experienced FLSA at a high level, as evidenced by a mean score of 2.52. Several items were particularly notable for their elevated mean scores, reflecting specific anxiety triggers. For example, students reported strong physiological responses, such as a pounding heart when it was their turn to speak ($M = 2.89$), and high anxiety when speaking in front of the entire class ($M = 2.84$). These findings align with prior research emphasizing the prominence of performance-based anxiety in language classrooms (Horwitz et al., 1986; Liu & Jackson, 2008). Furthermore, academic-related pressures were significant contributors to FLSA. Students expressed concern about underperforming on tests ($M = 2.81$) and experiencing anxiety despite adequate preparation ($M = 2.80$), indicating that confidence in speaking English is not necessarily linked to academic readiness but may be influenced by internalized fear of negative evaluation and self-doubt.

Conversely, interactions in smaller, more personal settings, such as speaking with a partner or the teacher, elicited lower levels of anxiety. For instance, the items related to speaking with a classmate in a pair or with the teacher generally yielded low mean scores. This suggests that students felt relatively more at ease in less public speaking scenarios.

To gain further insight, the items were categorized into three domains of FLSA: test anxiety, communication apprehension, and fear of negative evaluation (Horwitz et al., 1986), as illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2 Foreign language speaking anxiety in different domains

No.	Domains of anxiety	Mean	S.D.	Interpretation
1	Test anxiety (items 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9)	2.72	0.89	High level
2	Communication apprehension (items 1, 2, 3, 4, 14, 17, and 20)	2.55	0.86	High level
3	Fear of negative evaluation (items 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 18, and 19)	2.36	0.92	Low level

As shown in Table 2, test anxiety emerged as the most prominent domain, with the highest mean score of 2.72 (S.D. = 0.89), indicating a high level of anxiety. This finding suggests that students experienced considerable stress related to classroom assessments and performance outcomes. Specific concerns included anxiety about grades, worry about forgetting prepared content during tests, and physiological reactions such as a pounding heart during the performance of tasks.

The second domain, communication apprehension, also indicated a high level of anxiety, with a mean score of 2.55 (S.D. = 0.86). Students reported discomfort and nervousness when speaking English in front of others, especially in whole-class contexts. This aligns with prior research showing that speaking anxiety often intensifies in public or large-group settings where students fear exposure and embarrassment.

In contrast, fear of negative evaluation showed the lowest mean score ($M = 2.36$, $S.D. = 0.92$), implying that although the students were concerned about making mistakes, their anxiety was more strongly tied to performance pressure and classroom assessments than to being judged by others.

In addition to exploring the overall level and domains of FLSA, the study further examined students' anxiety in relation to specific classroom speaking activities. This analysis aimed to reveal how students responded to different types of interactions, thereby providing more targeted insights into students' learning experiences. The results are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3 Foreign language speaking anxiety in different class activities

No.	Item	Mean	S.D.	Interpretation
1	Speaking English individually in front of the entire class (items 12, 13, and 14)	2.57	0.89	High level
2	Speaking English with teachers (items 18, 19, and 20)	2.31	0.94	Low level
3	Speaking English with partners (items 15, 16, and 17)	2.24	0.90	Low level



The results revealed that the students experienced a high level of anxiety when speaking individually in front of the entire class or public speaking (mean = 2.57). However, they exhibited a low level of anxiety when interacting with teachers and partners, with partner interactions yielding the lowest mean of 2.24. This indicates that a large audience is particularly anxiety-provoking for students, likely due to increased exposure and scrutiny. Meanwhile, the lower anxiety levels observed during interactions with teachers and partners suggest that supportive relationships and smaller group settings help alleviate speaking apprehension.

2. Factors Contributing to Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety

The second research question explored the factors perceived by students to contribute to FLSA in the classroom context. The findings will be presented in two parts.

2.1 Questionnaire Results

Table 4 summarizes students' responses regarding the degree to which various factors contribute to their FLSA. The data indicate that out of 20 identified factors, 13 were rated as high contributors, while the remaining seven were interpreted as having a low impact.

Table 4 Perceived factors contributing to foreign language speaking anxiety

No.	Item	Mean	S.D.	Interpretation
1	Limited vocabulary	3.23	0.83	High level
2	Inadequate grammatical knowledge	3.02	0.85	High level
3	Lack of speaking fluency	2.89	0.89	High level
4	My own expectations	2.84	0.96	High level
5	Fear of performance in test situations	2.84	0.94	High level
6	Lack of preparation	2.82	0.94	High level
7	Fear of making mistakes	2.78	0.91	High level
8	Lack of confidence	2.73	0.99	High level
9	Poor/bad pronunciation	2.58	0.91	High level
10	Lack of familiarity with topics/questions	2.58	0.93	High level
11	My own personality	2.56	0.97	High level
12	Comparison with other learners	2.52	0.99	High level
13	Fear of being the focus of attention	2.51	1.03	High level
14	Poor memory	2.49	0.98	Low level
15	Fear of being negatively evaluated	2.49	1.03	Low level



No.	Item	Mean	S.D.	Interpretation
16	Partner's expectations	2.36	0.95	Low level
17	Teachers' personalities and interactions	2.31	0.99	Low level
18	Lack of familiarity with partners/classmates	2.30	0.96	Low level
19	Rigid learning environment	2.29	0.98	Low level
20	Fear of being laughed at	2.24	1.06	Low level

The highest-ranked factors, which are limited vocabulary ($M = 3.23$) and inadequate grammatical knowledge ($M = 3.02$), highlight linguistic competence as a key internal contributor to students' anxiety. This suggests that a lack of foundational language skills significantly contributes to learners' discomfort when speaking English. Other highly rated factors, which included speaking fluency, self-expectations, preparation, fear of making mistakes, low confidence, pronunciation, personality traits, and peer comparison, were also internal.

In contrast, external social factors, such as fear of being laughed at ($M = 2.24$), partner expectations ($M = 2.36$), and teachers' personalities ($M = 2.31$), were rated as less influential. These findings suggest that, for this group of students, FLSA is more closely linked to personal competence and internal pressures than to fear of negative social judgment or interpersonal dynamics.

2.2 Interview Results

The analysis of the interview responses identified three main contributing factors to FLSA that complement the questionnaire findings and also offer valuable insights. In Table 5, internal factors comprising linguistic and self-perception are listed first, followed by external factors, which include situational influences.

Table 5 Results from student interview responses

Categories	Subcategories	Frequency
Linguistic factors	Grammar	11
	Vocabulary	8
	Pronunciation	6
	Accent	3
Self-perception factors	Self-confidence	4
	Self-expectations	2



Categories	Subcategories	Frequency
	Comparison with others	2
Situational factors	Audience attention	9
	Audience size	3
	Evaluation of activities	2
	Speaking topics	2

The first category of factors centered on language challenges, with grammar emerging as the students' primary linguistic concern. Students were cautious about accuracy during speaking tasks and expressed worry over the grammatical correctness of their language. This grammatical apprehension is illustrated in the following excerpts from S4 and S22.

"I'm worried about grammar. I'm afraid I might get it wrong." (S4)

"Uh, it's just that I'm feeling nervous. I'm also thinking about whether I'm speaking correctly. I'm worrying about grammar." (S22)

Vocabulary posed another significant challenge, leading to anxiety. Insufficient vocabulary knowledge made it difficult for the students to express themselves clearly. They struggled to find the right words to convey their intended meaning and worried whether the words they chose were appropriate and effective. Students' struggles with vocabulary can be seen in the response extracts from S2 and S17.

"Um, I guess it's vocabulary, because my vocabulary is limited. I need to learn more." (S2)

"It's about my own use of language. I'm worried whether I'm choosing words well enough or not, whether the words I use are appropriate for the topic or not, something like that." (S17)

Two additional linguistic factors contributing to students' speaking anxiety were pronunciation and accent. Since the students recognized that correct pronunciation was essential for effectively conveying their messages to the audience, so they aimed to pronounce words accurately. They also expressed worry about their perceived Thai accent, fearing it would be too strong, as shown in the response extract from S15.

"I think my accent isn't very good—it sounds like a Thai accent because I've never really spoken English in daily life, right? So, when I speak, my English has a noticeable Thai accent." (S15)

The second category of factors concerned students' self-perception, which included lack of confidence, self-expectations, and comparison with others. The students expressed low confidence in their speaking ability. For example, one student shared, *"It's me, because I'm not very confident and I don't have enough courage to speak English"* (S20). Another stated, *"I think I'm really weak in English, but I've been trying, like taking extra classes and stuff. Still, I feel stressed because I get questions from a lot of people. Sometimes it makes me feel like maybe I'm just not really good at it"* (S10). These responses illustrate how feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt can undermine students' confidence and increase their anxiety about speaking English.

In addition to self-confidence, self-expectations also impacted students' anxiety. The students set high standards for themselves, expressing a desire to perform beyond what they believed their current abilities allowed. For instance, one student remarked, *"I guess I just expect myself to do better than this"* (S3), reflecting a gap between their self-assessment and the level they believed they should reach—an internal mismatch that can intensify anxiety. Speaking anxiety was also influenced by comparisons with others. The students compared themselves with peers, who were perceived as more proficient, leading to feelings of pressure and inadequacy. This anxiety, driven by the presence of more fluent classmates, is evident in the comment from S10: *"Well, personally, I guess I worry because I put a lot of pressure on myself since my classmates are really good. Yeah, maybe I'm just pushing myself too hard"* (S10).

The third category of factors related to speaking situations. Audience attention played a role in speaking anxiety. The feeling of being watched or being the center of attention often caused nervousness, as illustrated in the response extract from S15. Despite the intimidating nature of the audience, their attention was still considered essential. For example, S1 explained that distractions from noise and inattentive audience members disrupted his thought process in selecting words and constructing sentences, which in turn triggered anxiety.



"For me, it's pretty much everything, but if I had to say what makes me the most anxious, it's when everyone in the room is looking at me. Like, it doesn't matter if it's my friends or the teacher—if they're all watching me, I get nervous." (S15)

"Some of my friends are talking and making noise, and it distracts me when I'm trying to think of vocabulary, grammar, and stuff like that." (S1)

In addition to audience attention, the size of the audience or class also impacted speaking anxiety. Larger classes generally increased anxiety compared to smaller groups. Another key situational factor was the evaluation of activities, particularly whether they were graded. Graded speaking activities tended to heighten anxiety, while ungraded ones tended to alleviate students' worries. As one student noted, *"It's the activity's score, but if it's just an assignment, especially one where I don't have to speak, I worry less. But if I have to talk, then I worry a lot more"* (S15).

The final situational factor was the speaking topic. Unfamiliar topics made students feel unconfident and increased their anxiety because they felt they lacked sufficient content to present. This unease is reflected in S17's comment: *"About the activities, I mostly worry about the topic I have to talk about in front of everyone because sometimes I don't feel confident about it, or I just don't have enough content to say."*

Discussion

This section discusses the key findings in relation to the research questions and existing literature on FLSA. By comparing the current results with previous studies, it offers insights into how anxiety manifests uniquely in this context and identifies the underlying factors that increase FLSA.

1. Perceived Level of Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety in Classrooms

The evidence overwhelmingly indicates that non-English major undergraduates with low English proficiency experience significantly high levels of speaking anxiety in classroom settings. This finding reinforces the pattern documented in earlier research, such as Chinpakdee (2015), who similarly reported high anxiety levels among students from various faculties, and Liu (2006a), who demonstrated a clear correlation between lower proficiency levels and heightened anxiety.

When investigating the three components of FLSA, test anxiety emerged as a leading component triggering a high level of anxiety. This result is consistent with previous studies by



Namsang (2011), and Bhattarachaiyakorn & Phettakua (2023), which also identified test anxiety as a dominant form of anxiety among Thai undergraduate students. For the students in this study, who were enrolled in English for Everyday Life as their first course, with two additional courses required for completion, their concerns about test performance likely stemmed not only from the impact of speaking performance on their course grades and cumulative GPA, but also from the risk of failing to meet required standards. Such failure could hinder their progression to subsequent courses, requiring them to retake the class and potentially delaying their academic timeline.

The study further examined anxiety experienced by students in three distinct speaking activities in the course. Similar to Liu's (2006a) study on Chinese learners, this research found that among the three speaking formats examined (public speaking, speaking with partners, and speaking with the teacher), public speaking produced the highest anxiety levels. This suggests that students experience greater emotional vulnerability when performing individually before a large group. Conversely, speaking with partners was associated with reduced anxiety. These results align with Qizi (2025), who emphasized the value of peer collaboration in minimizing learner stress. Peer support can create a psychologically safe environment that promotes confidence, and interaction in small groups can lower performance pressure and encourage participation.

2. Factors Contributing to Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety

Regarding the factors contributing to FLSA, the findings from both the questionnaire and interviews highlight that students' FLSA is primarily influenced by internal factors rather than external ones. Specifically, questionnaire results revealed that linguistic factors, including limited vocabulary, inadequate grammatical knowledge, a lack of speaking fluency, and poor pronunciation, were highly influential contributors to anxiety. These factors were echoed in the interviews, where students commonly described grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation as anxiety-inducing. This aligns with studies by Bhattarachaiyakorn & Phettakua (2023), Poolperm & Boonmoh (2024), and Suratin & Sribayak (2025), which similarly identified language-related factors such as vocabulary and grammar inadequacies as major contributors to speaking anxiety. This consistency of the results firmly establishes a lack of core linguistic competence as a central driver of FLSA, especially among low-proficiency learners. Students' awareness of their linguistic limitations imposes a cognitive burden that shifts their focus from content to form, leaving them feeling unprepared and insecure when speaking.



Beyond linguistic difficulties, the questionnaire data highlighted several interrelated internal factors as highly influential in speaking anxiety. These included individual expectations, fear of making mistakes, a lack of confidence, individual personality, and comparisons with other learners, all of which underscored the role of self-perception. The interview data further reinforced these findings, revealing similar challenges, especially students' struggles with self-confidence, self-expectation, and negative peer comparison. These findings are consistent with Suratin & Sribayak (2025), who found that lack of confidence and feelings of inferiority when comparing oneself with others were significant factors contributing to students' FLSA. Similarly, Lin (2023) and Qin & Poopatwiboon (2023) highlighted self-confidence as a prominent source of speaking anxiety. These internal factors reflect how learners perceive and evaluate their language abilities. A learner's low self-perception of their L2 proficiency directly influences their individual expectations, fear of making mistakes, and overall confidence, thereby intensifying their speaking anxiety. This intricate relationship corroborates previous studies (e.g., Liu & Jackson, 2008; Okyar, 2023; Tsang, 2022) stressing a negative correlation between self-perceived L2 proficiency and anxiety.

Regarding external factors, while most were rated as less influential in the questionnaire findings, three stood out as high-impact contributors: fear of performance in test situations, a lack of familiarity with topics, and fear of being the focus of attention. The interviews supported these results, identifying similar anxiety-provoking elements, such as audience attention, evaluation of activities, and speaking topics. Together, both sources underscore situational factors as important contributors to speaking anxiety, consistent with previous research. Suratin and Sribayak (2025) found that specific classroom activities, including public speaking, test-like activities, and challenging topics, all increase students' anxiety levels. Similarly, Namsang (2011) reported assessment activities as having the strongest influence on students' anxiety. Being the center of attention, anticipating judgment, and unfamiliarity with the content increase cognitive load and emotional stress, which undermine students' ability to communicate effectively and heighten anxiety.



Implications of the Study

To effectively address FLSA among Thai non-English major undergraduates with low English proficiency, a combination of classroom-level practices and institutional measures is essential.

For the classroom-level practices, a potential instructional strategy for alleviating speaking anxiety involves gradually exposing learners to speaking tasks of increasing difficulty. Rajendran et al. (2025) recommended starting with low-pressure activities and progressively escalating to more challenging ones to build learners' confidence incrementally. Considering the findings that public speaking elicited the highest anxiety, pair work the lowest, and test anxiety was high, this progression could begin with low-stress formats, such as pair work or small group conversations, and gradually advance to more public or evaluative activities.

On top of that, to foster a low-stress and emotionally safe classroom, providing psychological support is necessary. Cultivating a growth-oriented classroom culture, where mistakes are viewed as learning opportunities rather than failures, could reduce the fear of making mistakes. Creating a friendly and relaxed atmosphere could help motivate learners to practice speaking with ease and boost their confidence (Poolperm & Boonmoh, 2024). Additionally, constructive, strength-based feedback that emphasizes individual progress may support learners in focusing on their achievements rather than comparing themselves with peers.

Regarding the institutional measures, curricula for non-English major undergraduates may benefit from including confidence-building speaking tasks and balanced assessments that combine high-stakes evaluations and ongoing low-pressure opportunities. Incorporating anxiety identification and support strategies into teacher training may further enhance classroom emotional support.

Limitations

Although this study offers valuable insights into FLSA among Thai non-English major undergraduates with low English proficiency, several methodological limitations should be acknowledged. First, the research was conducted at a single university with participants from one course, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other institutions or educational settings. Second, the study relied heavily on self-reported data from questionnaires and interviews. Although these methods provided rich insights, they are susceptible to biases, including social desirability



and recall limitations. Third, selecting interviewees through volunteering may have introduced selection bias, potentially affecting the representativeness of the results. Fourth, the brief interview duration may have constrained the depth and richness of the data, which could affect the generalizability of the findings. Fifth, translating selected interview excerpts from Thai to English for this paper may have introduced bias. The researcher's subjective selection of excerpts could have influenced the presentation of findings, and despite validation by two translation experts, limitations of cross-language translation may have resulted in some loss of cultural meaning and contextual nuances. Moreover, the primarily descriptive nature of the quantitative analysis restricts the ability to establish causal relationships and limits generalizability to a broader population. Finally, the cross-sectional nature of the study did not permit an analysis of how speaking anxiety changes over time or across different stages of language learning. Future research should consider longitudinal designs and include direct observations of classroom interactions to capture how FLSA evolves and manifests in real-time learning contexts.

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