

PAPER

SPEAKING ANXIETY IN ESP CLASSROOMS: EVIDENCE FROM TECHNICAL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract

Speaking competence in English has become a critical requirement for students in technical higher education, where future engineers are increasingly expected to participate in academic discussions, deliver professional presentations, and collaborate in international contexts (Crystal, 2003; Jenkins, 2014). Despite its importance, oral communication remains one of the most challenging skills for technical university students, often accompanied by high levels of anxiety. Previous research identifies speaking as the most anxiety-provoking aspect of foreign language learning, particularly in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) classrooms (Horwitz, Horwitz, Cope, 1986). The present study aims to examine the level, sources, and effects of speaking anxiety among technical university students enrolled in ESP courses. A mixed-methods research design was employed, combining a questionnaire adapted from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) with semi-structured interviews. The participants were undergraduate engineering students studying English for professional and academic purposes. Quantitative results revealed a moderate to high level of speaking anxiety, with oral presentations and spontaneous speaking tasks identified as the most anxiety-inducing activities. Qualitative findings further indicated that fear of negative peer evaluation, limited technical vocabulary, and accuracy-focused classroom practices contributed significantly to students' speaking anxiety. The integration of quantitative and qualitative data highlights the situational and task-specific nature of speaking anxiety in ESP contexts. The findings suggest the need for anxiety-sensitive ESP pedagogy, emphasizing scaffolded speaking tasks, supportive classroom environments, and formative assessment practices. Such approaches may help reduce speaking anxiety and promote more confident oral communication among technical university students.

Key words: speaking anxiety, ESP, technical university students, oral communication, foreign language anxiety

INTRODUCTION

Global and Educational Context

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English has consolidated its position as the dominant language of science, engineering, and professional communication, shaping academic publishing, technological innovation, and international collaboration (Crystal, 2003; Jenkins, 2014). In technical higher education, English proficiency is no longer limited to reading specialized texts; graduates are increasingly expected to present research, participate in meetings, defend ideas, and collaborate orally in multilingual professional environments (Hyland, 2006). Consequently, oral communication has become a core competence for engineering students, directly influencing employability and professional mobility.

Speaking Skills in ESP Education Within English for Specific Purposes (ESP) programs, speaking skills occupy a central role, as instruction is typically aligned with workplace-oriented communicative tasks such as technical presentations, problem-solving discussions, project briefings, and teamwork communication (Basturkmen, 2010). ESP pedagogy emphasizes not only linguistic accuracy but also the ability to communicate meaning effectively within discipline-specific discourse communities (Hyland, 2007). However, for many technical students, speaking tasks represent a substantial challenge, particularly when precision, professional identity, and peer evaluation intersect in classroom interactions (Liu & Jackson, 2008; Woodrow, 2006).

Problem Statement

Despite sustained exposure to English instruction, persistent speaking difficulties remain common among technical university students. Research consistently identifies speaking as the most anxiety-provoking language skill, surpassing listening, reading, and writing in perceived difficulty (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; Young, 1991; MacIntyre, 2007). In ESP classrooms, oral tasks often involve high cognitive and affective demands, including spontaneous language production, technical vocabulary use, and public performance, which may intensify anxiety and avoidance behaviors (Tóth, 2010).

Speaking Anxiety as a Specific Affective Variable

Speaking anxiety is commonly defined as a situation-specific form of foreign language anxiety associated with oral communication and

performance (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). While closely related to general foreign language anxiety (FLA), speaking anxiety is distinguished by its immediate impact on participation, fluency, and communicative confidence (Woodrow, 2006; Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002). Elevated speaking anxiety has been shown to reduce willingness to communicate, disrupt cognitive processing, and negatively affect oral performance outcomes (Eysenck, Derakshan, Santos, & Calvo, 2007; Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015).

Research Gap

Although FLA has been extensively investigated, existing research remains dominated by general language learning contexts and language-major students (Horwitz, 2010). ESP- and speaking-specific anxiety studies are comparatively limited, particularly within technical higher education and non-Western contexts, including Central Asia (Suleimenova, 2013). This gap restricts context-sensitive pedagogical responses.

Research Objectives and Questions

This study aims to:

- identify the level of speaking anxiety in ESP classrooms;
- explore the key sources of speaking anxiety;
- examine task-specific anxiety, particularly in presentations and spontaneous speaking; and
- derive pedagogical implications for ESP instruction in technical education. Significance of the Study

By focusing on speaking anxiety within ESP contexts, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of affective factors in technical language education. Practically, it offers evidence-based insights to inform ESP curriculum design, classroom practices, and assessment strategies aimed at fostering confident and effective oral communication among technical university students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualizing Speaking Anxiety

Speaking anxiety is widely recognized as a situational manifestation of foreign language anxiety (FLA), particularly linked to oral communication and performance contexts (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; MacIntyre, 2007). Horwitz et al.'s (1986) seminal framework

conceptualizes FLA as comprising communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety, with communication apprehension being most closely associated with speaking activities. This dimension reflects learners' fear or discomfort when required to communicate orally in a second or foreign language, especially in evaluative or public situations (Young, 1991). Subsequent research has consistently confirmed that oral performance tasks trigger higher anxiety levels than receptive skills, due to their immediacy, irreversibility, and social visibility (Woodrow, 2006; Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002).

Cognitive and Affective Effects of Speaking Anxiety

From a cognitive perspective, speaking anxiety interferes with processing efficiency, limiting learners' ability to retrieve vocabulary, construct grammatically accurate sentences, and maintain fluency under time pressure (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991; Eysenck et al., 2007). Anxiety consumes attentional resources, leading to breakdowns in speech planning and execution. Affectively, high speaking anxiety is strongly associated with reduced willingness to communicate (WTC), resulting in avoidance of oral participation even among learners with sufficient linguistic competence (MacIntyre, Dörnyei, Clément, & Noels, 1998; Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). Over time, repeated avoidance behaviors negatively impact learners' self-confidence and reinforce negative self-perceptions as language users (Liu & Jackson, 2008).

Speaking Anxiety in Higher Education

In higher education contexts, speaking anxiety is often intensified by increased communicative demands, such as seminar discussions, academic presentations, and collaborative problem-solving tasks (Hyland, 2006). First-year university students are particularly vulnerable due to the transition from teacher-led secondary education to more autonomous and interaction-driven learning environments (Suleimenova, 2013). Peer evaluation plays a critical role, as students frequently report heightened anxiety when speaking in front of classmates perceived as more proficient. Presentation anxiety, in particular, has been identified as a major barrier to effective oral performance in university settings (Woodrow, 2006).

Speaking Anxiety in ESP Contexts

In ESP classrooms, speaking anxiety acquires additional complexity due to discipline-specific discourse demands and professional identity considerations (Basturkmen, 2010). Technical students often prioritize content knowledge over language learning and may perceive oral communication in English as a threat to their emerging professional identity (Hyland, 2007). The use of specialized terminology, formulaic expressions, and genre-specific conventions increases cognitive load during speaking tasks, particularly in presentations and simulations of workplace communication (Cheng & Mok, 2008). As a result, ESP speaking anxiety is frequently task-specific and closely tied to performance expectations rather than general language proficiency.

Instructional and Contextual Factors

Classroom practices significantly influence speaking anxiety levels. Error correction strategies, overly accuracy-focused feedback, and teacher-centered instruction have been shown to heighten anxiety and inhibit oral participation (Young, 1991). In contrast, learner-centered approaches, collaborative tasks, and supportive classroom climates promote risk-taking and reduce fear of negative evaluation (Dörnyei, 2001). Assessment pressure, particularly high-stakes oral exams, further exacerbates speaking anxiety, reinforcing avoidance behaviors and performance-related stress (Teimouri, Goetze, & Plonsky, 2019).

Summary and Conceptual Positioning

The literature demonstrates that speaking anxiety is a multidimensional, context-sensitive phenomenon shaped by cognitive, affective, and instructional factors. However, ESP-specific investigations focusing on technical university students remain limited, particularly in underrepresented educational contexts. The present study addresses this gap by examining speaking anxiety within ESP classrooms, integrating quantitative and qualitative perspectives to capture both the prevalence and lived experience of anxiety in technical higher education.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design with a quantitative-dominant orientation, integrating survey data with qualitative insights

to achieve a comprehensive understanding of speaking anxiety in ESP classrooms. The rationale for combining methods lies in the complexity of affective variables such as anxiety, which involve both measurable tendencies and subjective experiences (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Dörnyei, 2007). Quantitative data enabled the identification of overall anxiety levels and patterns, while qualitative interviews provided contextualized explanations of students' perceptions and emotional responses.

Research Context

The research was conducted at a technical university, where English is taught as part of a compulsory English for Specific Purposes (ESP) program for engineering students. The ESP courses aim to develop students' professional communication skills, with particular emphasis on speaking tasks such as technical presentations, group discussions, and problem-solving activities relevant to engineering contexts (Basturkmen, 2010). Instruction is delivered in weekly sessions over a semester and follows a syllabus aligned with students' disciplinary needs.

Participants

The participants consisted of undergraduate engineering students enrolled in ESP courses. A total of $N = 38$ students participated in the quantitative phase of the study. All participants were first-year students, reflecting the transitional stage of academic adjustment. The sample included both male and female students, with males representing the majority, consistent with enrollment patterns in engineering programs. Participants were drawn from various engineering specializations, including mechanical, electrical, and information engineering.

Instruments

Speaking Anxiety Questionnaire

Speaking anxiety was measured using a questionnaire adapted from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz et al. (1986). The instrument included speaking-related items focusing on oral participation, presentations, and spontaneous speaking. Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." Previous studies have established the FLCAS as a valid and reliable

measure of language anxiety (Horwitz, 2010). In the present study, internal consistency reliability was confirmed using Cronbach's alpha.

Semi-Structured Interviews

To complement the survey data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive subsample of participants. The interviews aimed to explore students' perceived sources of speaking anxiety and their experiences during ESP speaking tasks. Guiding questions addressed classroom participation, presentation experiences, peer evaluation, and instructional practices.

Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected over one academic semester. Participation was voluntary, and ethical considerations, including informed consent and confidentiality, were strictly observed.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and selected inferential tests. Qualitative data were analyzed through thematic analysis, following established coding procedures (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Trustworthiness and Validity

Triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data enhanced the trustworthiness of findings, while transparent reporting ensured methodological rigor.

RESULTS

Overall Speaking Anxiety Levels

Quantitative analysis revealed that participants experienced moderate to high levels of speaking anxiety in ESP classrooms. The overall mean score on the speaking anxiety questionnaire was $M = 3.41$, $SD = 0.62$ (on a 5-point Likert scale), indicating that anxiety was a common and salient experience among technical university students. To provide a clearer picture of distribution, anxiety levels were categorized into low, moderate, and high groups based on mean score ranges.

As shown in Table 1, over 80% of students reported moderate to high speaking anxiety, suggesting that oral communication represents a significant challenge in ESP contexts.

Task-Specific Speaking Anxiety

Task-level analysis indicated notable variation across speaking activities. Oral presentations generated the highest anxiety ($M = 3.78$, $SD =$

Table 1. Distribution of Overall Speaking Anxiety Levels ($N = 38$)

<u>Anxiety Level</u>	<u>Score Range</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>%</u>
<u>Low</u>	1.00–2.49	7	18.4
<u>Moderate</u>	2.50–3.49	19	50.0
<u>High</u>	3.50–5.00	12	31.6

0.71), followed by spontaneous speaking such as answering questions without preparation ($M = 3.55$, $SD = 0.66$). In contrast, pair and group discussions were perceived as less anxiety-provoking ($M = 3.02$, $SD = 0.59$), although still above the mid-point of the scale.

Sources of Speaking Anxiety

Item-level responses indicated that fear of negative evaluation was the most prominent source of anxiety, particularly concerns about making mistakes in front of peers. Technical vocabulary limitations also contributed substantially, as students reported difficulty expressing discipline-specific ideas accurately. Additionally, tension between accuracy and fluency emerged as a recurring issue, with many students prioritizing grammatical correctness at the expense of communicative flow.

Group Comparisons

Gender-based analysis showed that female students reported slightly higher speaking anxiety than male students, though the difference did not reach statistical significance. Comparisons across engineering specializations revealed minimal variation, suggesting that speaking anxiety is a shared experience across technical disciplines rather than specialization-specific.

Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis of interview data yielded four dominant themes:

Limited prior speaking experience, particularly in communicative classrooms;

Fear of peer judgment, especially during public speaking tasks;

Classroom practices that emphasized error correction and accuracy;

Assessment-related anxiety, linked to graded presentations and oral exams.

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Results

The qualitative findings strongly converged with

quantitative results, offering explanatory depth for the high anxiety levels observed in presentations and spontaneous speaking tasks. Together, the data illustrate that speaking anxiety in ESP classrooms is task-specific, socially mediated, and shaped by instructional context, highlighting the complementary value of the mixed-methods approach.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that speaking anxiety is a prominent affective challenge for technical university students enrolled in ESP courses, with oral presentations and spontaneous speaking tasks emerging as the most anxiety-provoking activities. This pattern reinforces the view that speaking anxiety is situational and task-specific, intensifying when learners are required to produce language publicly, under time pressure, and in evaluative contexts (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre, 2007).

The dominance of presentation anxiety can be explained by the high cognitive and social demands associated with this task type. Presentations require simultaneous management of content accuracy, linguistic form, audience awareness, and professional identity, which places a heavy load on learners' attentional resources (Eysenck et al., 2007). In ESP contexts, this pressure is further intensified by the expectation to use discipline-specific terminology and professional discourse, increasing the perceived consequences of error (Basturkmen, 2010; Hyland, 2007). Similarly, spontaneous speaking tasks trigger anxiety because they limit planning time, making learners more vulnerable to breakdowns in fluency and accuracy (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991; Woodrow, 2006).

The results align closely with previous studies on foreign language anxiety and oral performance. Consistent with Horwitz et al. (1986) and Young (1991), fear of negative evaluation emerged as a central source of anxiety, particularly in peer-visible speaking situations. The findings also support research demonstrating that speaking anxiety reduces willingness to communicate, even among learners with adequate linguistic competence (MacIntyre et al., 1998; Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). In ESP-specific research, similar patterns have been observed among technical and

engineering students, who often report heightened anxiety during presentations and professional simulations (Suleimenova, 2013).

Contextual factors provide further insight into these patterns. Many participants reported limited exposure to communicative language teaching in their prior educational experience, where instruction traditionally emphasized grammatical accuracy and written skills over oral interaction. Such teacher-centered instructional traditions may reduce learners' tolerance for error and increase anxiety when communicative demands suddenly intensify at the university level (Liu & Jackson, 2008). Additionally, assessment-driven speaking tasks were perceived as high-stakes events, reinforcing performance-oriented anxiety.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings support the view that ESP speaking anxiety constitutes a distinct affective profile shaped by task type, disciplinary discourse, and professional identity. This underscores the need to conceptualize speaking anxiety not merely as a subcomponent of general FLA, but as a context-sensitive phenomenon requiring targeted pedagogical responses in technical ESP classrooms.

Limitations of the Study

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the research was conducted within a single technical university, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other institutional or national contexts. Speaking anxiety in ESP classrooms may vary depending on curricular design, teaching traditions, and student demographics. Second, the study relied primarily on self-report instruments, including a questionnaire adapted from the FLCAS and semi-structured interviews. Although these tools are widely used and provide valuable insights into learners' perceptions, they may be influenced by social desirability bias or inaccuracies in self-assessment. Third, the research employed a cross-sectional design, capturing speaking anxiety at one point in time. This approach does not allow for examination of changes in anxiety levels across different stages of academic development or in response to pedagogical interventions. Future studies could address these limitations through longitudinal designs, multi-institutional samples, and the inclusion of observational or performance-

based measures.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated speaking anxiety in ESP classrooms among technical university students, focusing on its level, sources, and instructional implications. The findings revealed that students experienced moderate to high levels of speaking anxiety, with oral presentations and spontaneous speaking tasks identified as the most anxiety-provoking activities. Fear of negative evaluation, limited technical vocabulary, and accuracy-oriented classroom practices emerged as key contributors to speaking anxiety. The integration of quantitative and qualitative data confirmed that speaking anxiety is task-specific, socially mediated, and strongly influenced by instructional context.

The study contributes to existing research by extending investigations of foreign language anxiety to ESP speaking contexts within technical higher education, a setting that remains underrepresented in the literature. By highlighting the distinctive anxiety profile of technical students, the findings support the need for context-sensitive and task-aware approaches to speaking instruction in ESP programs.

Future research should explore speaking anxiety using longitudinal and experimental designs to examine how anxiety develops over time and how it responds to targeted pedagogical interventions. Expanding research to multiple institutions and incorporating behavioral or performance-based measures would further enhance understanding of speaking anxiety in technical ESP classrooms and support the development of more effective instructional practices.

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