

## **Exploring the Causes of Speaking anxiety of Iraqi EFL Students**

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### **Abstract**

*The study aims to explore the causes of speaking anxiety of Iraqi EFL students. The data were obtained from semi structured interviews with 15 Iraqi EFL students of Technical Institute for Medicine-AlMansoor, Middle Technical University, Iraq. The results showed that Iraqi EFL students experienced speaking anxiety which were caused by 1) nature of speaking comprising strange accent, speed of speech, and limited time given, 2) speaking activities such as long conversation, individual conversation, group conversation, and speaking topics such as politics and religious topics and telling a story, 3) low level of students' English proficiency, and 4) the classroom environment. It is hoped that this study which has revealed the causes as well as a glimpse of the impacts of anxiety on Iraqi EFL students will help to raise awareness among EFL Iraqi teachers in making informed pedagogical decision on suitable methods which could reduce students' anxiety when teaching and preparing students for speaking tasks.*

**Key words:** *foreign language anxiety, speaking skill, speaking anxiety, Iraqi students of English as foreign language (EFL)*

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### **I. Introduction**

Although there are many languages being used throughout the world, English has become the most widely used worldwide (Rao, 2019). According to Crystal (2003) English serves the purpose as a common language and a global language. Hence, English is often referred to as a 'world language' and has been used the lingua franca of the modern era. Whilst it is not an official language in most countries, it is the language most often taught as a foreign language (Crystal, 2008). It is the language mostly used not only by the scientists, business organizations and the internet but also higher education, and tourism sectors (Rao, 2017). There are many varieties of English such as British, American, Australian, and other English language varieties. Richard (2015) states that Standard English is a variety of language that has the highest status in a community. It is based on speech and writing of educated speakers of the language. In addition, Richard states that standard variety is taught at schools and taught to non-native speakers when they learn the language as a foreign language.

In learning English, learners need to master the four basic language skills which are: listening, reading, speaking, and writing (Sadighi & Dastpak, 2017). Salima and Zahira (2015) state that these four skills are divided into two kinds: 1) receptive skills: listening and reading. 2) Productive skills: speaking and writing. Among these four skills, speaking as a productive skill is the important one that is necessary for effective communication (Ur, 2001) and the ability to speak skillfully provides the speaker with distinct advantages such as greater chance for better education, finding good jobs, and getting promotion (Baker & Westrup, 2003). Likewise Crystal (2003) maintains that speaking is a pivotal skill to be mastered by EFL learners due its prominent position as a medium of international communication. However, speaking in English for EFL learners is a difficult task compared to other skills since it also requires the speaker to master many significant components like pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension as well as using words and phrases fluently without very much conscious thinking when producing sentences in the real communication. In addition it also involves activation of both linguistic knowledge along with the general knowledge in order to produce the message (Kusnierek, 2015). In the context of EFL environment, the learners may also have insufficient exposure to English as well as limited opportunities to use the language. In addition, there are many other factors that lead to difficulties in speaking skill such as anxiety, attitude, motivation, and beliefs about foreign language learning. However, the most important factor is anxiety (Horwitz, 2001; McDonough & Shaw, 1993). Krashen in an interview by Young (1992) claims that speaking can cause high anxiety level and one of the reasons for this is that teachers' expectation for students to perform beyond their level of proficiency.

In Iraq English is considered as an international language and the language of knowledge and science (Ihab, 2016). It is taught as “a mandatory subject in the Iraqi educational system from the first to the twelfth grade”(Al-Chalabi, 1976, p. 41) and it is given foreign language status because English is not widely spoken or used in the Iraqi daily (Ihab, 2016). According Al Hamdany (2018) traditional teaching method i.e. the grammar-translation method in teaching English prevails in the Iraqi. Although the learning of English has improved, the students remain weak. Speaking skill particularly receives less emphasis as it is the only skill that is not included in the exams. The focus is mainly on teaching reading and writing besides grammar and vocabulary which are tested in the exam (Elttayef& Hussein, 2017).As a result,the majority of Iraqi learners still find it difficult to speak in English (Ali, Hameed&Keong, 2015). As can be seen there are many issues with regard to the teaching and learning of English in Iraq. The current study highlights the issues of speaking anxiety from the perspectives of Iraqi ESL learners. Specifically, this study focusses on the causes and the effects of speaking anxiety experienced by Iraqi EFL learners.

## **II. Literature Review**

The concept of learning anxiety in the field of foreign language learning has been studied since the early1970s (Horwitz, Horwitz& Cope, 1986; Young1992).Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986, p.125) define foreign learning anxiety as “the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness and worry associated with an arousal of autonomic nervous system” experienced by many people when learning a foreign language especially in classroom situation.Likewise Young (1992) describes language learning contexts as a provoking factor for language anxiety which is peculiar to language learning situation.He argues that speaking particularly in foreign language is an anxiety producing experience for most of the students. Ever sinceHorwitz et al.’s proposal (1986) that learning a foreign language is stressful and provokes anxiety, numerous studies on language anxiety have been carried out. Considering the importance of anxiety as one of the factors influencing EFL speaking performance, researchers have begun to investigate the causes and effects of speaking anxiety on EFL learners (Ali et al., 2015; Akkakoson, 2016; Batiha, Mustafa & Noor, 2016; Felicity, 2018; Hammad& Abu Ghali, 2015; Huda, 2018; Kayaoglu&Saglamel, 2013;Mukminin, Masbrorotni, Noprival,Sutarno, Arif&Maimunah, 2015;Ozturk and Gurbuz, 2014;Rafada&Madini, 2017;Siagian& Adam, 2017;Shuying, 1999; Yahya, 2013). The studies revealed several causes and effects of EFL speaking anxiety.

Akkakoson(2016) conducted a study on speaking anxiety in English conversation classroom among 282 Thai university students in EFL classroom. Quantitative data from the Foreign Language Anxiety Scale of the study showed that test-anxiety and fear of negative evaluation affected their speaking performance while qualitative data from semi structure interview revealed that the major source of speaking anxiety was limited repertoire of vocabulary.Hammadand Abu Ghali(2015) in their studyon Gaza pre-service teachers also found students' fear of making mistakes and apprehension about others' evaluation as the key sources of speaking anxiety in English classes.

Kayaoglu and Saglamel (2013)researched on learners’ perceptions of language anxiety in speaking classes at a north-eastern state university,Turkey. Data obtained through semi structured interviews revealed that the students identified competitiveness and fear of making mistakes as the major sourcesof the anxiety they experienced when speaking in EFL classes. Another similar study on speaking anxiety among Turkish EFL students of a state university by Ozturk and Gurbuz (2014) discussed some situations which provoked anxiety. They state thatthe students exhibited symptoms of anxiety i.e. such as forgetting appropriate words and not being prepared to talk as they were embarrassed to speak in front of the class as the result of the stressful situation.

Studies also showed that speaking anxiety was caused by teachers. A study by Shuying (1999) on speaking anxiety in classroom in China found that teachers were focused too much on preparing students for national exam and ignored communicative skill where learners needed real situations to practice the language. The teachers also employed traditional methods focusing on structure of the language. Another study conducted by Yahya (2013)at Arab American University also had similar finding. Yahya attributedstudents’ inability to speak English fluently and difficulty in pronouncing English words to traditional teaching method used by the teachers. As a result the students were reluctant to speak in English. Likewise a study by Ali et al.(2015) on Iraqi EFL students’ speaking anxiety found that teachers neglected communicative skill and focusedentirely on the acquisition of vocabulary and grammar. Hence, Iraqi EFL students’ ability to speak Englishwas poor. They also referred the difficulties EFL Iraqi students experienced in speaking English to use of the mother tongue (L1) instead of English in speaking between the students in the classroom and a lack of knowledge of the vocabulary in the target language.

Three studies inIndonesia also revealed similar findings. A study to describe and understand the sources of25 senior high school students' English language speaking anxiety at senior high schools in Jambi, Indonesia foundfive major themes related to students' English language speaking anxiety which include 1) low speaking skill due to the lack of vocabulary and grammar, 2) fear of negative responses from others, 3) low self-

esteem to speak in English. 4) fear of being evaluated by teachers, and 5) cultural difference (Mukminin, et al, 2015). Another study on speaking anxiety of 22 tenth grade students of Indomalay School in Batam, Riau, Indonesia in the classroom identified 6 factors which led to the students' anxiety to speak in the language classroom: lack of familiarity of task, fear of making mistakes, low motivation, incomprehensible inputs, lack of confidence and low English proficiency (Siagian & Adam, 2017). Likewise a study on speaking anxiety during class presentation among freshman of Universitas Islam Wolisongo identified the following factors that contributed to students' speaking anxiety: overthinking, lack of preparation, bad experience, low proficiency, low self-confidence, fear of making mistakes and test (Huda, 2018).

Two studies in Middle East were conducted by Batiha, Mustafa and Noor (2016), and by Rafida and Madini (2017). Batiha et al. examined the factors contributing to EFL speaking anxiety in Jordanian context and they found that four main factors were responsible for causing learners' speaking anxiety namely fear of negative evaluation, unpreparedness, fear of being in public and shyness, and general speaking class anxiety. Rafada and Madini (2017) conducted a mixed method study on the major causes of speaking anxiety. The interviews revealed that the major causes of female Saudis' learners speaking anxiety were related to the teachers' role in raising or reducing anxiety. These include; 1) lack of support, 2) lack of understanding due to language barrier, 3) the fear of teacher's negative feedback, 4) time limitation for practicing the target language, 5) lack of vocabulary, 6) the weak educational system at schools, 7) peer anxiety and 8) test anxiety. The results of the questionnaire indicated that the causes of speaking anxiety can be categorized into three main domains: causes related to the classroom atmosphere, associated with EFL teachers, and related to the test. These three main domains cause speaking anxiety as students need to get used to the classroom atmosphere, being familiar with how the teacher evaluates them, and being familiar with the test structure.

### III. Methodology

This qualitative case study employed four data collection techniques: observations, interviews, and writing samples. However, this article only presents findings from face to face semi-structured interviews with 15 participants who were undergraduate students of Technical Institute for Medicine, Middle Technical University, in Iraq. Merriam (1998) and Yazan (2015) state that interviewing is the most appropriate method for collecting data in case studies of few selected individuals. The students, aged ranged between 19 to 21 years old were selected from those who volunteered to reflect their experience in speaking anxiety. The interview questions aimed to obtain data on causes and effects of EFL learners speaking anxiety. The participants were informed that their personal information would be kept in strictest confidence and pseudonyms were used whenever they were referred to in the study.

### IV. Findings And Discussions

In this study, causes of speaking anxiety refer to reasons or factors that cause anxiety for learners when they are unable to speak or tell their opinion to other speakers in speaking classes. Findings were derived from interviews with participants on the causes of speaking anxiety in relation to their experience with anxiety when speaking English language. Four themes emerged from the interview responses of the participants which provided the answer to the research question: what are the causes of speaking anxiety for the Iraqi EFL students? It was found that the causes associated with speaking anxiety are as follows; first, nature of speaking which includes strange accent, speed of speech, and limited time given; second, speaking activities such as long conversation, individual conversation, group conversation, and speaking topics and telling a story; the third, low level of students' English proficiency and finally, the classroom environment.

The first cause of anxiety is related to the nature of speaking anxiety. Sub themes of this theme comprises strange accent, limited time given, and speed of speech. Table 4.1 shows the themes, sub-themes and the occurrences. The occurrence column displays how many times each sub-theme was found for instance, the first sub-theme was mentioned 8 times by the participants while the second was mentioned 11 times.

**Table 4.1**  
*Nature of speaking which causes anxiety*

Theme	Sub-theme	Occurrences
Nature of Speaking	Strange Accent	8
	Speed of speech	11
	Limited time given	7

As shown in Table 4.1 the findings indicated unfamiliar or strange accents provoked anxiety. Eight of the Iraqi EFL students admitted that they could not recognize speeches with unfamiliar accents. Speaking tasks that were given in strange accent which the participants were not exposed to have, made the tasks difficult to comprehend. This contributes to the feeling of anxiety. For example, Omer claimed that the accent of the speaker was the most anxiety provoking to him. In other words he had difficulty to understand what was being said when speaking to people who pronounced words differently. As a result he felt anxious. He said:

Speaking to fluent speakers of English is a big problem for me. I face problems with the accents.... I feel that the words are pronounced in a strange way. To be more precise, the words are linked with each other. So, I can't separate them.

Similarly, Fatema said:

When I speak to a fluent speaker. I feel that I can't express my ideas because I know that he/she won't understand me clearly.

Likewise Ali expressed that the accent was a major problem for him. He said:

Some accents of the speakers could be unclear. I always memorize words, but I was surprised that during the speaking I can't understand the words. I try to think for a while to try to comprehend his/her speech.

Other participants Rand, Rana, Hadeel, Zyad, and Ahmed faced the same problem. All of them admitted that the accent of a speaker was a major hindrance in understanding the speech. Therefore, they felt this problem made them worried and anxious and eventually it affected their speaking performance. Ahmed said:

I am afraid of speaking because I speak with an accent which is different from our teacher's accent. The accent of my teacher who is an Iraqi but speaks fluently in English language are unfamiliar to us. This is considered as a big problem as I did not practice speaking English anywhere.

Table 4.1 indicates that speed of speech which was mentioned the most i.e., 11 occurrences was also a threat to the students. They associated speaking anxiety with the speed of speech claiming that a speaker speaking at a fast rate provoked anxiety for them. In this situation, the students had no control over the speed of a speaker's speech. The participants were not able to follow the speech and could not recognize the words mentioned when the speaker spoke at a fast rate. For example, AbdAlaziz commented:

I have a problem with the speech that is said in a fast way. I can't catch the speech directly because the speaker speaks quickly. It makes me lose concentration and puts me under pressure.

Reem experienced similar problem:

The speech is very fast, and this makes me stressed. I have difficulty in recognizing the words because they are difficult to comprehend and follow the speakers at the same time. Of course, I will miss some parts of the speech. Therefore, I can't answer.

Fatema thought that she would be able to understand the other speaker's speech if she/he speaks slowly and clearly. She said:

I hope the other speaker speaks slowly. That would help me to understand better because I can't recognize the speech. Sometimes I can't catch even one word from the speech.

Omer made the same claim that the fast speed of speaking made it difficult for him to understand the speech since his English was just at a basic level to understand. He said:

The rate of speech is very high. I am poor in English and that is difficult for me. I can't follow the speaker. I need time to understand the speech and to think of how to express my idea. It is difficult to me to understand the speech quickly.

The third subtheme quoted by the participants as a source of anxiety for them under nature of speaking anxiety is limited time given to speak and respond to the speaking tasks. Six out of fifteen participants said that the time given during the speaking examination was too short which caused anxiety among them. They were not able to interpret, understand the question, and then choose the correct answer within the limited time. Such situation led to the feeling of frustration among the participants. One of the participants, Ali said:

One of the major challenges that I face in speaking exams is that the time given is not enough to understand the questions and then answering it. The total time for speaking section is 15 minutes and I have to speak continually without stopping to think. That is too short; I can't do all those things within the time given.

Reem also believed that the time given for speaking tasks was insufficient. She said:

The time given in speaking is very short. On the one hand, I can't explain the speech from one time I lost words or ideas during the first time of speaking. On the other hand, many times I could not complete all the questions because the time was not enough to transfer the answers especially questions that needed long description in order to be understood.

Apart from insufficient time, the participants also attributed their problem with speaking anxiety to number of practice given to each speaking task. He said:

Actually, I always feel that I did not get enough practice for speaking English language because my level of English is not good. So, I need to practice more on speaking; at least three times.

As revealed, accent, speed of speech and limited time are identified by the students as factors which contribute to anxiety among the Iraqi EFL participants. This finding is congruent to the study conducted by Huda, (2018). Participants of this study believed that anxiety happened when they could not understand the questions when the speakers were speaking at a fast rate or with an accent as they needed more time to process the message and it might be reduced if the speech was slow enough to enable them to follow the speech. In the interviews the students also mentioned that it could also be due their poor command of English that compounded the problem. With respect to the time limitation, the participants linked it to the lack of practice in speaking as the reason for their inability to complete their speaking task within the time given. This finding is in line with the findings of Mukminin et al. (2015) who found that students' lack of practice provoked anxiety because they felt they were unprepared and could not structure their speech properly. Likewise Ali et al. (2015) and Yahya (2013) also attributed Iraqi EFL students' speaking anxiety to teachers ignoring communicative skill and focusing entirely on acquisition of vocabulary and grammar. As a result students were not exposed to speak in English and were not familiar to English language. As English status in Iraq is foreign language, the opportunity to use English language outside the class is remote (Ihab, 2016).

Apart from the nature of speaking, Table 4.2 indicates that another cause of anxiety is the types of speaking activities. This theme consists of four sub-themes: 1) long conversation, 2) individual conversation, 3) group conversation, and 4) speaking topics and story-telling. Table 4.2 shows the themes, sub-themes and occurrences of speaking activities that produce anxiety among the participants.

**Table 4.2**

*Speaking Activities which cause anxiety*

Theme	Sub-theme	Occurrences
Speaking Activities	Long conversation	8
Individual conversation	10	
Group conversation	9	
Speaking topics:	7	
a. political and religious topics	6	
b. Telling a story	5	

As shown in Table 4.2, the first type of speaking which provokes anxiety is long conversation. Of the 15 participants in this study, eight admitted that they had difficulties when the speaking tasks involved long conversations. They explained that involving in a long conversation in English was difficult because it needed high motivation and they had to choose words carefully as well as not committing grammatical mistakes. Hadeel expressed her feeling having to speak in a long conversation:

Having to speak in English for quite some time is very difficult for me because I need to be brave and choose my words carefully and not to make grammatical mistakes. Unfortunately, I missed some of the words so that I felt shy and afraid to practice.

Similarly, Saif states that his difficulties when engaging in a long conversation is because such conversation requires ample preparation and well-formed structure. He said:

I believe that long conversations are the most difficult because it is very demanding and requires a lot of preparation.

The finding that engaging in long conversation induces anxiety among participants of Iraqi EFL is parallel to studies done by Akkakoson (2016). The finding shows that a long conversation places the participants under great pressure as they struggle to speak more and at the same time searching for words.

Apart from long conversation, Iraqi EFL participants also felt anxious when they had to engage in individual conversation in English. Table 4.2 shows that out of 15 participants, 10 admitted that they had difficulties with individual conversation. For instance, Abdu-Alaziz explained that individual conversation is a difficult task because it causes hesitation in choosing the exact vocabularies. Abdu-Alaziz expressed his predicament with regard to individual conversation:

The individual speaking is the main problem for me and I pause a lot during this speaking task. It is difficult. I am always searching for words.

Omer had similar experienced. He said:

I tried to speak but when I realized that I had to speak alone, I felt lost and I couldn't focus. I felt so anxious. This is a big problem and I do not know how to solve it but I think it is because I lack practice.

Likewise Sara mentioned that speaking alone in front of the class in which she becomes the centre of attention prevents her from speaking. She said:

When I stand in front of the class, I feel anxious as all the students are looking at me and that makes me nervous. I think this is happened to me due to lack of practice. I have never tried to speak in front of a group of people in English before.

In brief, individual conversation induces anxiety as Iraqi EFL participants have to rely on his/her own ability when performing the task. This task also places them as the focus of attention. Their limited vocabulary, absence of practice speaking in English and in front of audience in addition to lack vocabulary heighten their anxiety. Similar findings were also revealed in a study conducted by Akkokason (2016), Mukminin et al. (2015), Rafada and Madini (2017), and Batiha et al. (2018)

The third type of speaking which causes anxiety among Iraqi EFL is conversation in groups. Nine out of the 15 participants in this study admitted that they had difficulties with group conversations. They explained that group conversations involved members with different levels of proficiency. Hence, members with low level of proficiency struggled to express their own ideas as they had few and basic vocabulary. Rana, for example, expressed her problem with group conversation. She said:

I have simple vocabulary and group conversations tend to have member with different levels of proficiency. In addition, students who have higher level of proficiency can only help to a certain extent only and for just a few times.

Another participant, Ahmed remarked that:

In group conversation, I know I could discuss with my friends but when I saw them preparing their answer quickly and then said they finished their part, but I did not complete mine yet, I panicked. I couldn't focus on words and vocabulary to use and even my ideas disappeared. I felt that I had not prepared anything.

Seven other participants, Sara, Rana, Rami, Ahmed, Zyad, AbdAlaziz, and Hadeel also attributed their problem of speaking anxiety to group conversations. They admitted that being in group did not help them to get good grades as some group members wanted to show that he/she was better than others. Ahmed lamented that he knows himself that his level is weak and he needs a lot of information. So, he is not able to share his ideas with his group members. He said:

Actually, I know my level is weak so when I share with a group I do not benefit them and as a result they have to help me but of course they will perform better than me. Therefore, I prefer to stay alone.

On the same note, Rami said:

I face a problem when speaking in groups. I forget the ideas when others say their ideas and their ideas are better than mine. So I prefer to be silent.

In summary, group conversation is also one of the causes of speaking anxiety that the Iraqi EFL students suffer. Although working in group enable them to help each other, differences in their proficiency levels intimidate members with low proficiency. This finding is inline with studies by Mukminin et al (2015) who mentioned low self-esteem and by Batiha et al. (2018) who referred to peer anxiety in group discussion. In addition some are not willing to share their ideas in order to keep their competitive edge. Kayaoglu and Saglamet (2013) referred this condition as competitiveness. Their focus on content to speak is distracted by their fear of making grammar mistakes. This is parallel to the finding by Hammad and Abu Ghali (2015).

The fourth sub-theme that emerged from the study was speaking topics. Of the 15 participants in this study, seven admitted that they had difficulties with topics to speak about. They explained that the topics given to them to discuss were difficult due to their low proficiency level of English which result in not having adequate vocabulary to enable them to conduct discussions on the topics. Furthermore the topics given were also beyond their knowledge. As mentioned by Krashen (Young, 1992) speaking could cause anxiety due to teachers' expectation for the students to perform beyond their level of proficiency.

The students found topics related to politics and religious difficult to discuss. Of the 15 participants, six admitted that they had difficulties with these topics, as they needed more vocabulary and time to think. They were also embarrassed to conduct the discussion in front of others. In addition, it causes physical effects to EFL students such as sweating and trembling hands. Ahmed, expressed his feeling and problem with regard to the topic given for discussion. He said:

Politics and religious topics, it makes my hand trembled, or my eyes closed, trying to remember something.

Saif expressed the same difficulties when he had to speak on topics such as politics and religious. He explained that he took much more time to remember the appropriate words to say in the time given. In addition, he was terrified of remembering the appropriate words. He said:

Remembering the appropriate words to say it in the time given. This problem embarrasses me because I pause a lot since I need to remember the word.

Another topic which the participants were afraid was telling a story. Five of the 15 participants stated that they were anxious when they had to tell a story. For instance, Abdul Aziz mentioned that when he was asked to tell a story, he was not able to think of what to say. In his opinion telling a story needs a lot of vocabulary and

experience to narrate the story and to use sentences that are clear and comprehensible to the other learners. He said:

Telling a story is a major problem for me and I am hesitant when the speaking topic is difficult because I need more vocabulary and time to think of ideas and words. If I can't remember I just stop speaking.

Another participant, Saad expressed similar predicament. He said:

I feel worried when the topic is telling a story. I have many stories but I can tell it in Arabic but not in English. I tried to tell a story but I just can't.

Again lack of vocabulary and lack of experience i.e. practice prevent the participants from telling a story successfully.

In brief having to speak on topics not familiar to them was really stressful for the students. Likewise telling a story which was an easy task if it was in Arabic became a daunting task if it was to be narrated in English. As mentioned repeated by the students, limited vocabulary was the major problem. In addition lack of opportunities to practice speaking in classes itself made speaking in English an anxiety provoking situation. These findings were reported by studies by Akkakoson (2016), Ali et al (2015), Mukminin et al (2015), Rafada and Madini (2017) and Shuying (1999). In the case of unfamiliar topics, inadequate knowledge of content and terms worsened the students' anxiousness. For some, this strain was also manifested through physical signs such as trembling hands, long pauses, forgetting words and ideas, or simply unable to continue speaking as revealed in Ozturk's and Gurbuz's (2013) study.

The third theme that emerged from this study is low English language proficiency of the students. The low English language proficiency of students refers to the ability of individuals to perform in a foreign language. Most participants i.e., 11 out of 15 participants stated that they were frustrated about not being competent in English language especially in speaking skill. This theme is divided into three sub-themes: 1) ways of teaching speaking skill, 2) lack of vocabulary, 3) low self-confidence. The occurrence of this theme and its sub-themes are presented in Table 4.3.

**Table 4.3**  
*Low proficiency and its sub themes which cause anxiety*

Theme	Sub - theme	Occurrences
	Ways of teaching speaking skill	9
The low level of students' English proficiency	lack of vocabulary	11
	low self – confidence in speaking	7

The first sub-theme that emerged from the theme low level of English proficiency is ways of teaching speaking skill. Nine out of the 15 participants said that they were anxious in speaking class. According to the participants, they only learnt English language in general at school while at the university they have taken intensive English course focusing on the grammatical structures which centered on reading and writing skills and are also required to take a speaking course. This gap between English courses they have learnt at school and at university makes the students afraid to learn English and to speak in English in particular. This situation leads them to feel embarrassed and anxious. Saad said:

I feel my English is bad as I finished the high school with low marks; especially in speaking because we did not speak but just read and write. So I feel that I cannot learn English language.

Similarly, Sara said:

Actually, I am weak in English language. All the time I get surprised by what my teacher says and wonder how come some of my classmates can speak like that. In the class, our teacher does not give us any chance to speak and he himself just speaks in few words in English. Most of the time, he speaks in Arabic. So, I think it is difficult for me to speak English. All the time I feel worried.

Other participants: Ali, Ahmed, Rana, Reem, Hadeel, Saad, and Rami explained that they are worried to speak in English because there is no speaking practice in the classroom. The English language classes focus on explaining grammar. Ali said:

I always do not like to speak in English in the classroom because our teacher just explains the grammar and I do not even think that I understand the grammar. This is my problem wherever I go I say I can't speak English because I feel anxious.

Information derived from the students on their English learning experience shows that speaking skill has not been given much attention at school as well as at tertiary level. Although at the university, they are required to take English speaking course, the focus is still on grammar and they are not given the opportunity to speak English and the teachers themselves use more Arabic than English when teaching speaking course to the students. As a result the students have limited exposure to speaking English and are ill prepared to conduct their speaking tasks. The teaching and learning of English situation in Iraq described by the students in their interviews are also elaborated by Al Hamdany (2018), Ali et al. (2015) and Elttayef and Hussein (2017). They state that traditional teaching method i.e. the grammar-translation method in teaching English in Iraq has been the prominent method of teaching English in which the focus is mainly on teaching reading and writing besides grammar and vocabulary. Consequently as revealed by Ali et al study (2015) the majority of Iraqi learners still find it difficult to speak in English. Similar situation was also described by Rafada and Madini (2017) in their study conducted in Arab Saudi. They found that one of the major causes of female Saudis' learners speaking anxiety was related to weak education system. Hence, in the process of learning to acquire the speaking skill the learners have to go through many anxious moments.

The second sub-theme of the main theme, the low level of English language proficiency of students, is concerned with lack of vocabulary. Almost all the participants i.e., 11 out of 15 participants mentioned that they experienced speaking anxiety because they did not have enough vocabulary to express their ideas during the speaking tasks. They related this problem to the need for sufficient vocabulary that would enable them to express their ideas in speaking tasks. Ali said that he felt that it was difficult to express his ideas because he did not have sufficient vocabulary to speak in the class. He commented:

I always memorize English words but still feel that I am poor in English vocabulary. I have difficulty with words. I think my background in English language is not good. I have just simple words but my speech seems to be boring because I use the same vocabularies over and over again.

Omer expressed similar problem. According to Omer to do well in speaking tasks required a large amount of vocabulary. He said:

I hate speaking because it needs a lot of vocabulary in order to express my ideas. I realize that I have a limited vocabulary. In fact, it is a big challenge for me. I also face this problem when listening to the question which I have to respond. I cannot understand the meaning of some words.

Another student commented on the variation of words which may cause anxiety when speaking in English. They explained that using synonyms or phrasal verbs instead of words aroused anxiety for them. As Rami said:

The fear starts increasing when I face different words in the questions. I cannot understand the questions because certain words are different from what I know. I try to find other meaning for the words or answer in away to be as a general answer so that it appears as if I understand the question.

In summary, lack of vocabulary play a major role in generating anxiety for the students in speaking classes due to the low level of English proficiency. This finding is in line with findings of studies conducted by Akkason (2016), Ali et al. (2015) and Rafada and Madini (2017).

The third sub-theme that emerged from the main theme was low self-confidence in speaking. Almost half of the participants (7 out of 15) admitted that they had low self-confidence in speaking classes. They attributed their lack of confidence to not having sufficient knowledge about the topic. They were upset when they were not certain if they could speak or explain the idea. Such feeling creates nervousness and tension to the students. Rand said:

Actually, I feel that I will never be able to succeed in speaking tasks. I quickly give up because I am convinced that trying to achieve these tasks will result in failure. This belief makes me stressed and worried.

Ahmed claimed that he was sure that he was unable to speak in speaking tasks. He did not have self-confidence towards speaking. He had negative views about speaking skills because of his bad experience in speaking classes. He said:

In speaking, I do not feel confident at all. I am afraid of speaking classes. I do not trust my ability to do speaking tasks. This comes from past failures in speaking exams.

Similarly, Hadeel expressed that lack of self-confidence caused anxiety even though he was doing well in speaking tasks. He said:

In fact, I am not satisfied with my ability to speak in speaking tasks even if I get good grades, I still feel anxious and think I am weak in English.

The participants' confessions indicate clearly the devastating effects of lack of self-confidence on the participants. It induces fear and stressed among them and it undermines their ability to succeed in speaking English. Repeated failures or lack of success in their speaking assignments have led them to believe that speaking English is a futile effort. Lack of self-confidence as one of the factors which causes anxiety among the students as revealed in the present study is congruent with studies conducted by Huda (2018), Mukminin (2015) and Rafada and Madini (2017).



The fifth theme that emerged from this study was the classroom environment. Eight of the 15 participants declared that they experienced anxiety due to the classroom environment. This theme is divided into two sub-themes, which are students' motivation in the classroom and the atmosphere of speaking classes. Table 4.4 displays the main theme and the sub-themes.

**Table 4.4**

***Classroom environment***

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Sub-theme</b>	<b>Occurrences</b>
Classroom Environment	Students' motivation in the classroom	8
The atmosphere of Speaking Classes		7

The first sub-theme that emerged from the main theme was students' motivation in the classroom. About half of the participants (8 out of 15) admitted that they were worried about speaking because there did not get any encouragement to speak and express their ideas in English. When the speaking task involved for example easy topics then the students felt that they needed some kind of motivation so that they realized that it was not difficult to speak but motivations were not forth coming. This led them to be stressful and anxious. Zyadsaid:

I feel that my problem with speaking skill is motivation. Sometime I know how to answer but there is no one pushing me to participate in the classroom. This is a big challenge for me that I can't do it until I find another solution.

Similarly, Rana said:

When I want to speak I know myself that my answer is simple and I am not sure whether I choose or pronounce the correct words. So, I talk to myself many times to just start speaking but I can't.

The participants Rand, Saad, Reem, Omer, Hadeel, and Anas stated that they wish someone could encourage and motivate them in the classroom. Some motivation would ease their anxiousness and without motivation they became restless, worrisome and always unsure of themselves. All the participants agreed that there was nothing interesting in the classroom that could motivate them to learn together in order to speak. Anas said:

My apprehension in the classroom is the result of my feeling that I can't say it because there is nothing that motivate me to speak. Therefore, I am weak in English language and feeling stressed and anxious.

Participants' views highlight the negative effects of lack or absence of motivation in acquiring speaking skill. As they were weak in English and had low self-esteem, they were in dire need for encouragement and guidance. Without encouragement and guidance the students became helpless i.e. lacking the drive to push themselves to speak in English. Rafada and Madini (2017) also stressed on the role of teachers in reducing students' speaking anxiety and revealed that lack of support in guiding and motivating students as one of the major causes of Saudi's female students speaking anxiety.

The second sub-theme of the main theme classroom environment is the atmosphere of speaking classes, which reflects the students' feelings in speaking classes. Seven of the 15 participants admitted that they suffer from speaking anxiety because of the unfavourable atmosphere for learning English language. Abdu Alaziz said:

I am not interested in speaking classes or in the English language at all because I do not like the class. They do not give us something that benefits us.

Hadeel had the same opinion:

Actually, I do not like speaking simply because in English classes, we are obliged to learn the English grammar in which the class seems boring. I do not like the class. I want to be in another one with different teacher and topic.

As elaborated by the students, their speaking class did not meet their expectations: grammar was being emphasized despite it being a speaking course, a speaking class without speaking practice and a class teacher who did not motivate and guide students to speak English and who conducted the class by speaking Arabic much more than English. As a result the students were not able to see the benefit they could gain in terms of improving their speaking skill. This finding is similar to the findings of studies conducted by (Ali et al (2015), Akkakoson (2016), Huda (2018), Rafada and Madini (2017) and Shuying (1999).

## **V. Conclusion**

This article investigated the causes of speaking anxiety of Iraqi EFL students. Four themes emerged from the semi structured interviews with 15 students. It was found that the causes associated with speaking anxiety are as follows; first, nature of speaking such as strange accent, speed of speech, and limited time given. Second, speaking activities such as long conversation, individual conversation, group conversation, and speaking topics such as politics and religious topics and telling a story. Third, the low level of students' English proficiency. Finally, the classroom environment. The themes were derived from the participants' explanation of

their experience and the literature review. The recurring causes of speaking anxiety as highlighted throughout the main and sub themes are lack of vocabulary, low proficiency, low self-esteem and motivation, lack of exposure to English language, lack or absence of opportunities to practice and speak in English, lack or absence of motivation and support from teachers and unfavourable class atmosphere. These causes provokes fear and high anxiety among the students to some extent that some believe that they are incapable of succeeding in acquiring the speaking skill. This situation calls for improvements of the teaching and learning of English to reduce the anxiety ridden situation faced by students in the process of acquiring their English speaking skill and to assist them to cope with the tension they likely to face in foreign language learning situation.

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