An Investigation into the Influences of Anxiety in Non-English Major Tertiary Learners' Willingness to Communicate Orally in Vietnamese EFL Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

This paper scrutinized the impact of foreign language anxiety on tertiary Vietnamese students' willingness to communicate orally in EFL classrooms. The study had two research questions: 1) Which is the most common type of foreign language anxiety experienced by non – English tertiary Vietnamese students in EFL classrooms, and 2) What is the correlation between foreign language anxiety and Vietnamese students' willingness to communicate orally in EFL classrooms. The data was collected from 176 non-English major tertiary students learning in a public university in Ho Chi Minh City by facilitating the Willingness to communicate Scale and Foreign Language Anxiety Scale. The study's results analyzed in a quantitative descriptive approach indicated that communication apprehension was the most common type of anxiety experienced by the students in the English learning process. The study found that language anxiety negatively correlated with willingness to speak. It means the students were more anxious, they could not engage in the in-class communicative activities, which might affect their academic performance. The present paper hopes to provide educators and school managers who might encourage students' readiness to join speaking activities in Vietnamese EFL classrooms with a comprehensive understanding of the influence of foreign language anxiety on students' willingness to communicate.

Keywords: foreign language anxiety, willingness to communicate, fear of negative evaluation, communication apprehension, and test anxiety

1   Introduction

Developing communicative competence is considered a fundamental requirement for learners to improve their academic performance in second language acquisition. Therefore, the ultimate goal of current approaches in teaching the second language is to motivate learners to communicate effectively inside and outside the language classrooms (Swain, 1995). MacIntyre et al. (1998) suppose that willingness to communicate (hereafter WTC) plays a crucial role in boosting learners' communicative competence, especially orally. Learners with high WTC will have more opportunities to practice the target language (Wen & Clément, 2003).

However, in my observation of EFL classrooms, most learners are unwilling to use the second language even though they are encouraged to participate in speaking activities. In the same vein, Ozturk & Gurbuz (2013) state that speaking is regarded as the skill which causes anxiety for most learners in foreign language rooms. Horwitz et al. (1986) advocate that speaking is a complex process related to word pronunciation, meaning, word recognition, rules, and communication strategies, which learners have to master. As Oxford (1999) mentions, foreign language anxiety (FLA) has a negative influence on learners' willingness to speak and academic performance. In the last three decades, FLA has received great attention from scholars and researchers who seek out the way to motivate learners' interaction in second language acquisition, e.g.,

Brown (1994), Zhang (2001), Saltan (2003), Subasi (2010), Mak (2011). According to Baker and MacIntyre (2000), learners with higher anxiety will be more unready to speak in the target language. Horwitz (2001) supports foreign language anxiety is experienced by most EFL learners at various levels. Consequently, this factor, one of the main difficulties in the foreign language process, is considered as an essential predictor of willingness to communicate as it becomes (Zeng, 2010).

Although the impact of FLA has been researched for the recent decades, most studies have been conducted in the ESL context. It means there are insufficient studies related to FLA in the EFL context (Elaldi, 2016). Additionally, previous studies have mainly focused on anxiety and language achievement or performance. Still, the relationship between anxiety and willingness to communicate orally in ESL or EFL classrooms has not been highlighted. Therefore, the correlation between these two variables needs further studies (Von Worde, 2003).

Consequently, this present paper aims to the relationship between FLA and non-English major tertiary students' WTC orally in Vietnamese EFL classrooms. Moreover, this study also aims to explore non-English major tertiary learners experience the most common type of anxiety. With the mentioned research aims, the study has two research questions:

1. Which is the most common type of foreign language anxiety experienced by non – English tertiary Vietnamese students in EFL classrooms?
2. What is the correlation between foreign language anxiety and Vietnamese students' willingness to communicate orally in EFL classrooms?

2 Literature Review

2.1 Foreign Language Anxiety

Regarding the term of definition, FLA is offered with various definitions from several researchers. Horwitz et al. (1986) define FLA as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (p. 128). Meanwhile, Young (1992) describes FLA as a complicated psychological phenomenon occurring in the language learning process.

Moreover, FLA is also understood in a broader scope with three distinctive aspects, including situation-specific anxiety, trait anxiety, and state anxiety (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989). Zheng (2008) claims that a gradual shift from stability to transience is used to differentiate among these three categories. Particularly, trait anxiety has a stable tendency in which an individual is likely to be nervous in various situations because that anxiety form belongs to a feature of his characteristics; in contrast, that person who has situational anxiety seems to be anxious in a specific situation (Zheng, 2008). As MacIntyre (1998) states, situational anxiety is identified in the middle continuum. The last type of FLA is situation-specific anxiety, as this construct is "largely independent of other types of anxiety" (Horwitz et al., 1986, p.127). Brown (2007) advocates that FLA is identified to have a closer relationship with situation-specific anxiety rather than both trait anxiety and state anxiety. This last category of anxiety mainly focuses on specific forms happening systematically over time.

According to Horwitz et al. (1986), the construct of FLA includes three components: fear of negative evaluation, communication apprehension, and test anxiety. Regarding fear of negative evaluation, it is defined as a psychological status in which an individual is anxious about "others' evaluations, avoidance of evaluative situations, and expectation that others would evaluate negatively" (Horwitz et al. 1986, p.127). In terms of communication apprehension, that person who fears interpersonal communication or oral expression is likely to be nervous when asked to communicate in the target language (MacIntyre & Gardner 1989). The last component is test anxiety referring to the "type of performance anxiety stemming from fear

of failure" (Horwitz et al., 1986, p.127). As Covington (1985) claims, test anxiety consists of four phases: test anticipation, test preparation, test-taking stage, and test reactions. In the phase of test anticipation, students will self-evaluate their preparation, the previous knowledge, and the difficulty level of a coming test. They will even need to anticipate their possible performance in the test. In the test preparation, students will start preparing everything for their test as they are aware of the effectiveness of test preparation. MacIntyre (2017) supposes that several students have unfeasible demands on their test results, which invisibly causes their tension and anxiety during the test. In the test-taking stage, those students with a high level of anxiety could feel stressed and easily frustrated during their academic performance. In the test reactions, students tend to have some negative perceptions of the test taken (Poorman, Mastorovich, & Gerwick, 2019).

Regarding the causes of FLA, a great number of studies carried out suppose that the main reasons resulting in learners' anxiety in in-class speaking activities are from individual personalities, fear of making mistakes, low foreign language proficiency, and the classroom atmosphere (Cheng, Horwitz, and Schallert,1999; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989; Dewaele et al., 2008; Mahmoodzadeh, 2013). In those studies, FLA is considered to have a great influence on learners' learning process. Particularly, students with high anxiety seem unwilling to communicate with others, and they keep reticent in the classrooms. Those students gradually lose learning motivation, which leads to their low academic performance or even dropping out of the foreign language classes (Zheng & Cheng, 2018). Generally, FLA is regarded as an obstacle hindering students' speaking fluency and incentives for learning.

2.2 Willingness to Communicate

The definition of WTC, firstly introduced by McCroskey and Baer (1985), is related to first language communication. Based on its notion, MacIntyre et al. (1998) developed a second language WTC (L2 WTC) model in which WTC is defined as "a readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using an L2" (p.547). In the model of L2 WTC proposed by MacIntyre et al. (1998), there are six layers of variables arranged in the pyramid shape, including communication behavior (Layer I), behavioral intention (Layer II), situated antecedents (Layer III), motivational propensities (Layer IV), affective - cognitive context (Layer V), and social & individual context (Layer VI). Variables of the three bottom layers are stable during communication circumstances; meanwhile, variables from the three top layers tend to vary depending on the specific situation. Dewaele & Dewaele (2018) claim that this heuristic model has a considerable influence on second language acquisition.

In recent years, many researchers' focus has shifted from WTC in L2 to WTC in EFL to investigate the influence of cultural background on EFL learners' in-class WTC (e.g., Yashima, 2002; Liu, 2017; Peng & Woodrow, 2010; Jung, 2011; Yaghoubi, 2017). Farhady et al. (2010) highlight the importance of communication context in creating more opportunities for students to practice the target language. Those researchers claim that "Implementing even a single theory in two different contexts would lead to different procedures and outcomes" (Farhady et al., 2010, p. 14). As Brown (1993) similarly claims, learners living in L2 context where English is used to communicate as a first language; in contrast, learners in EFL context where their opportunities of speaking English mainly occur in classrooms. Peng (2019) also supports that the difference of communication context plays a vital role in learners' in-class WTC which is considered as a good predictor for their academic performance in speaking.

To emphasize the fundamental role of WTC in learning a target language, MacIntyre and Charos (1996) claim that an individual with low WTC often encounters difficulties to be a proficient speaker in that language. Moreover, those learners tend to avoid communicating with others; therefore, they miss numerous chances to practice the target language in-class activities. If this phenomenon lasts for a long

time, their motivation to learn a foreign language will decrease; some of them will hate being asked to speak to other partners in the language class. On the contrary, learners with high WTC tend to be engaged in oral communication with authentic language use (Clement, Baker, & MacIntyre, 2003).

2.3 Foreign Language Anxiety and Willingness to Communicate

Regarding the correlation between FLA and WTC, a great number of language researchers and scholars consider FLA as one of the common obstacles that most EFL learners have to encounter in the foreign language learning process, for example, Wu (2010), Riasati (2012), Horwitz (2001), Elaldi (2016), MacIntyre et al. (1999). Particularly, Horwitz and Young (1991) suppose that there is a significant surge in the number of anxious learners in language classes with different levels of anxiety. Additionally, Riasati (2012) also emphasizes the negative influence of FLA on students' WTC since some nervous students who are called to speak in the class often keep reticent. Liu & Jackson (2008) advocate that "their unwillingness to communicate and their FL anxiety were significantly correlated to their self-rated English proficiency and access to English" (p. 12).

3 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The present study was designed in a quantitative approach to investigate the level of anxiety that tertiary students experience in Vietnamese EFL classrooms, as well as explore the correlation between FLA and WTC in those English classes.

3.2 Participants and Research Site

There were 176 non-English major tertiary students studying in a state university in district 10 of Ho Chi Minh city. They were freshman students whose academic majors were mainly logistics, accounting, industrial management, information technology. In the sample, the percent of female and male participants whose age ranges from 18 to 20 years old were respectively 78.8% and 21.2%. In the whole semester, the participants have to join 70 periods with approximately 40 students per intermediate-level English class.

3.3 Research Instrument

In this study, a questionnaire was employed to collect the data with two separate parts. The first part was related to students' WTC adapted from Weaver's (2005) Willingness to communicate Scale (WTCS), including ten items (from item 1 to 10). This scale was facilitated to investigate non-English major freshman students' readiness to speak in English classrooms.

The second one, adjusted from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), was used to investigate their FLA in EFL classrooms. The original FLCAS, which has 33 items, was designed by Horwitz et al. (1986); however, the current study just chose and adapted 20 items that are considered to suit the Vietnamese EFL context with the purpose of identifying the most common type of foreign language anxiety that tertiary students experience. FLCAS was classified into three main types of anxiety: fear of negative evaluation consisting of six items (from item 11 to item 16); communication apprehension with ten items (from item 17 to item 26); and test anxiety with four items (item 27 to item 30). The whole questionnaire included 30 items answered on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

To ensure the current study's reliability and validity, the pilot study was conducted with 20 participants excluded from the sample. Before the pilot testing was conducted, this research tool was validated by four experienced English teachers to seek their recommendations about the content of items, ungrammatical

points, and several wordings. Later, the questionnaire was translated into Vietnamese to ensure that all participants could understand it completely. The result of the pilot testing was thoroughly analyzed in Cronbach Alpha of SPSS version 22.0 with $\alpha = 0.73.$ According to Shemwell, Chase, & Schwartz (2015), the research instrument is considered acceptably reliable if its result of Cronbach Alpha should be over 0.70. As a result, the official questionnaire was delivered to 176 non-English major tertiary students in the university.

3.4 Data analysis

To answer the first research question, the descriptive statistics in SPSS were employed to diagnose the most prevalent type of anxiety influencing the students' readiness to speak in English classrooms. Regarding the second question, the relationship between FLA and WTC was analyzed through Pearson correlation and Regression in SPSS to judge the strength of these two variables' association and their direction.

4 Results and Discussion

Results of research question 1: What is the most common type of anxiety experienced by non – English tertiary Vietnamese students in EFL classrooms?

Table 3.1 *Types of anxiety Gap width of Likert scale*

Item description	Score range
Strongly agree	4.21 – 5.00
Agree	3.41 – 4.20
Neutral	2.61 – 3.40
Disagree	1.81 – 2.60
Strongly disagree	1–1.80

4.1 Fear of Negative Evaluation

In this study, three aforementioned categories of foreign language anxiety were discussed through analyzing and comparing their mean score in SPSS. Firstly, the fear of negative evaluation results was interpreted in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1 *Fear of negative evaluation*

Item	Content	Mean score
11	I don't worry about making mistakes in language class.	3.56
12	I keep thinking that the other students are better at language than I am.	3.77
13	It embarrassed me to volunteer answers in my language class.	3.48
14	I am afraid that my language teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make.	2.34

15	I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak a foreign language.	3.56
16	I get nervous when the language teacher asks questions I haven't prepared in advance.	3.73
	Overall mean score	3.41

Table 4.1 shows that the overall mean score of the negative evaluation was 3.41, which means that non-English major students generally felt nervous about being assessed negatively. Most of them also worried that they were not as good at English as others (M=3.77). Moreover, they agreed that they did not feel confident enough when the given questions were not prepared in advance (M=3.73). However, the participants agreed that they were not anxious about correcting their mistakes in the class (M=2.34). It means that they were not afraid of making mistakes in learning a foreign language (M=3.56).

4.2 Communication Apprehension

The second type of FLA is communication apprehension, presented in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2 *Communication apprehension*

Item	Content	Mean score
17	While participating in a conversation with a new acquaintance, I feel very nervous.	4.68
18	I talk less because I'm shy.	3.82
19	I am afraid to express myself in a group.	2.97
20	I feel that I am more fluent when talking to people than most other people are.	2.46
21	I am tense and nervous while participating in group discussions.	2.90
22	I always avoid speaking in public if possible.	4.64
23	When communicating, my posture feels strained and unnatural.	3.24
24	I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in language class.	4.85
25	I have no fear of facing audiences.	2.02
26	I look forward to an opportunity to speak in public.	2.97
	Overall mean score	3.56

As shown in Table 4.2, communication apprehension got a mean score of 3.66, reflecting that the students were afraid of starting communication with others. Particularly, they feel nervous about making a conversation with new acquaintances (M=4.68). They also admitted that they frequently avoid the opportunities of public speaking (M=4.64). It refers that they had a fear of facing audiences while having public speaking (M=2.02). Especially, they agreed that they lacked self-confidence if they had to speak without any preparation for the given topics in their English class (with the highest mean score M=4.85).

4.3   Test anxiety

The last category related to FLA is test anxiety analyzed in Table 4.3.

Table 4.3 *Test anxiety*

Item	Content	Mean score
27	I am usually at ease during tests in my language class.	2.42
28	I am worried about the consequences of failing my foreign language class.	4.16
29	Even if I am well prepared for a language class, I feel anxious about it.	3.62
30	The more I study for a language test, the more confused I get.	3.41
	Overall mean score	3.40

In table 4.3, it is clearly illustrated that all participants admitted they were worried about the test with a high overall mean (M=3.40). They agreed that they were anxious about failing the English test with the highest mean (M=4.16). Even though they had a good preparation for the test, they felt unconfident about doing well in the test (M=3.62). In other words, they denied that they felt breezy during language tests (M=2.42).

4.4   Correlation between foreign language anxiety and willingness to communicate orally.

To explore the relationship between students' anxiety and their readiness to communicate in EFL classrooms, Pearson Correlation Coefficient was employed to measure the correlation of these two variables. The data relating to their correlation was displayed in Table 4.4.

Table 4.4: *Correlation between students' foreign language anxiety and willingness to communicate*

Correlations

		WTC_AVER	FLA_AVER
WTC_AVER	Pearson Correlation	1	-.596**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	Sum of Squares and Cross-products	85.592	-44.030
	Covariance	.489	-.252
	N	176	176
FLA_AVER	Pearson Correlation	-.596**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	Sum of Squares and Cross-products	-44.030	63.735
	Covariance	-.252	.364
	N	176	176

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Based on the analyzed data, there was a negative correlation between FLA and WTC with r=-.596. That figure indicates that these two variables moved in the opposite direction. The correlation between FLA and WTC was obviously presented in the following figure 1. Additionally, the p-value of the Pearson Correlation Coefficient was 0.000, which refers that their correlation was significant.
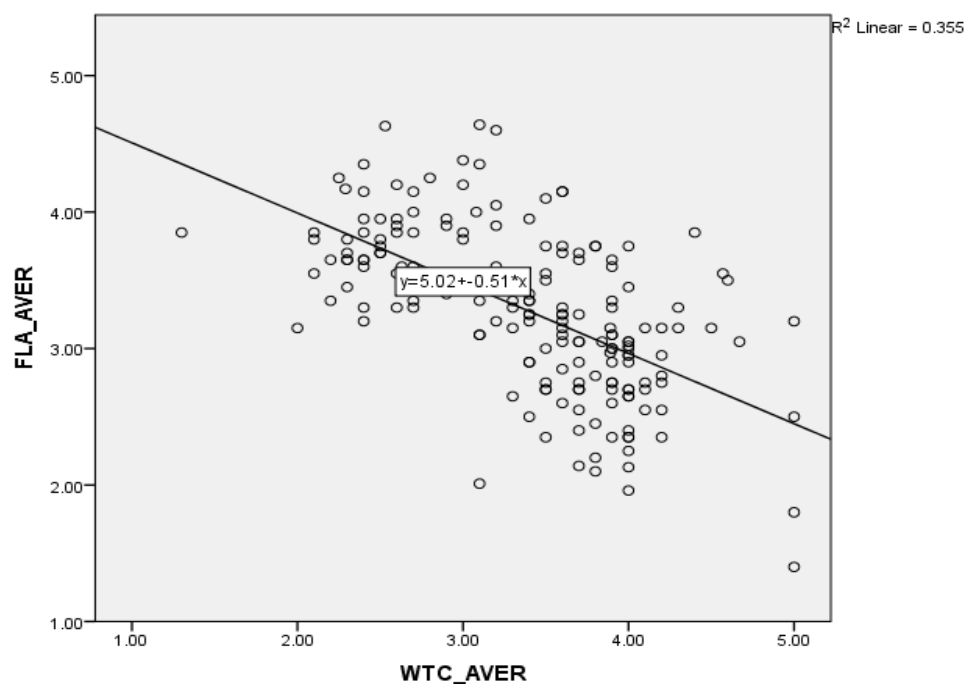
5   Discussion

Research Question 1: **What is the most common type of anxiety experienced by non – English tertiary Vietnamese students in EFL classrooms?**

As Horwitz et al. (1986) mention, there are three types of anxiety that every learner will experience in learning a foreign language, including fear of negative evaluation, communication apprehension, and test anxiety. In fact, communication apprehension occurs when students feel nervous to begin a real conversation with others; meanwhile, fear of negative evaluation happens in case they lack their self-confidence because of being worried about others' bad impressions towards their performance. The last type is test anxiety, in which learners often have a feeling of tension in the test.

Based on the calculated overall mean score of anxiety types from FLCAS, the research summed up the participants' responses towards those types in the following table.

Table 4.5 *Ranks of types of foreign language anxiety*

Categories	Overall mean score	Rank
Fear of negative evaluation	3.41	2
Communication apprehension	3.56	1
Test anxiety	3.40	3

From the presented data in Table 4.5, it is clear that communication apprehension has the highest rank (M=3.56), followed by the fear of negative evaluation (M=3.41) and test anxiety (M=3.40). It refers that the respondents are likely to be unconfident when talking with others in English. The fear of communication might influence non-English major tertiary students' willingness to communicate orally. The reason for this fear might be because they are freshman students who are still reluctant to speak with

new acquaintances or have a public speak. Most respondents admitted that they were afraid to speak without any preparation; they felt tense and anxious. They could lack self-confidence in speaking English if they prepare vocabulary, ideas, and structures for an unfamiliar topic.

This finding from this paper is similar to the results of previous studies, e.g., Price (1991), Levine & McCroskey (1990), Tanveer (2007), Raja (2017). Based on the calculated results, it could be explained that communication apprehension might cause some physical disorders like sweating, strained, and unnatural postures while talking to others in English since the speaker feels unsafe and unconfident. Consequently, communication apprehension is regarded to lower students' performance, which influences their second language acquisition (Bartholomay & Houlihan, 2016).

As shown in Table 4.5, it could not be denied the effect of both fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety on students' readiness to communicate. Generally, most students are often afraid of losing their face if they make mistakes or their English competence is worse than their classmates. Fear of negative evaluation prevents them from expressing their opinions in English. Furthermore, test anxiety influences students' willingness to speak because they fear having bad academic performance on the test. Huynh (2021) states that Vietnamese students' speaking proficiency is not often focused and practiced much because of the grammar-oriented test. In other words, students do not have more opportunities to practice with their partners in real daily conversations; they feel confused about doing the speaking test. Consequently, test anxiety could hinder their willingness to communicate in EFL classrooms.

Research Question 2: **What is the correlation between foreign language anxiety and Vietnamese students' willingness to communicate orally in EFL classrooms?**

As presented in table 4.4, it is clear that there was a negative correlation between foreign language anxiety and willingness to communicate with r=-.596. According to Evans (1996), the correlation of two variables ranging from .40 to .59 is considered moderate, but this correlation in the current paper was significant as the p-value was lower than .005.

Furthermore, the linear line in the scatterplot indicated the direction of their correlation, which means that these two variables go in the opposite direction. It refers the more anxious learners are, the more unwillingly they speak in English classrooms. This result was in accordance with Shanti Manipuspika's (2018) findings which showed that speaking anxiety has a tendency to affect learners' willingness to communicate. Learners could improve their speaking competence if they feel confident and engaged in in-class speaking activities with their peers and teacher. Combining with computed data from the WTCS, the researcher realized that respondents preferred to communicate with their peers sitting next to them instead of with their English teacher. It might refer students to feel secure to express their ideas to their friends in the group.

Additionally, with the low mean score of item 9 and item 10, which were related to public speaking (see the appendix), it could be supposed that students are unready to speak in public. They might be afraid of losing their face as they make mistakes. They might also feel anxious when others have a negative assessment of their speaking competence. Therefore, the participants had a tendency to avoid speaking in the class even though they were given opportunities. The present paper's findings were in line with Javid's (2014) conclusion that foreign language anxiety becomes a common phenomenon that every EFL learner must experience in the learning process of a new language. Consequently, it is necessary for scholars, researchers, and educators to understand learners' foreign language anxiety. This variable is considered a predictor of learners' willingness to communicate in EFL classrooms.

6   Conclusions

The current paper revealed the relationship between non-English major tertiary students' foreign language anxiety and their willingness to communicate orally. The significantly negative correlation between students' anxiety and readiness to speak was obviously presented in the aforementioned figures. It refers that the more apprehensive they feel in English classrooms, the more unwilling they are to participate in speaking activities. It means that they could have fewer chances to enhance their oral skills. The relationship between language anxiety and willingness to communicate has been proved in numerous studies, such as Manipuspika (2018), Baran-Łucarz (2014b), Wu and Lin (2014), Yasuda and Nabei (2018).

The study also presented three types of language anxiety, namely test anxiety, communication apprehension, and fear of negative evaluation. Comparing the mean score of each type of anxiety with the others, the study indicated communication apprehension had the highest score. The results reflected that freshman tertiary students who are non-English major were anxious to speak in public. They were likely to avoid eye contact with the audience or have confused posture while speaking. They also felt unconfident while talking to new acquaintances or presenting their ideas about an unfamiliar topic. The other types of anxiety also lower students' willingness to communicate in English classrooms.

From those findings, it is necessary for both educators and school administrators to find proper strategies to increase their students' readiness to speak and reduce their language anxiety. This paper hopes that the following suggestions could be helpful for both teachers and students in teaching and learning speaking skills. The first suggestion is that teachers help their students identify their type of language anxiety and then explain it. Consequently, students can be aware that foreign language anxiety is a common phenomenon that every learner has to experience while learning English; they should be calmed instead of frustrated or anxious. The second suggestion is that EFL teachers could combine games, discussions, quizzes, and pair or group works into tasks, which could increase students' engagement in in-class speaking activities (Sreehari, 2012). The last one is to establish a low-anxiety environment for students who could be more comfortable studying. In a supportive learning community, anxious students will be more confident to speak although they make mistakes because their teachers and peers could give indirect corrections to those mistakes. Gradually, students no longer feel stressed or tense to engage in speaking activities with others. Furthermore, the encouragement from EFL teachers could be a dynamic for changing students' willingness to communicate. In general, lowering students' foreign language anxiety and increasing their willingness to speak has become a fundamental goal that educators try to achieve in English classrooms.

7   Acknowledgements

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