

# **CHAPTER 1**

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 INTRODUCTION**

In the past decade or so, the issue of unemployment among local graduates has become a nationwide issue in Malaysia. A number of factors have contributed to the rise in the number of unemployed graduates. One of them is the poor command of English which indirectly leads to weak communication ability in English (Zulkifli, 2008). The lack of this ability has led these graduates to ‘suffer’ in their quest for a good job. Why does this happen? Most of these graduates find it hard to communicate in English after graduating due to their ‘limited English skills’ (Phang, 2006). For some, according to Choy and Troudi (2006), there are many reasons for their inability to converse in English and one of them could be English language anxiety. This could be traced back to their language learning experiences when they were students which could have been anxiety-ridden. Eventually, the anxiety experienced by them seemed to be difficult to eliminate and may have caused them to lose confidence (Jones, 2004).

This study is about language anxiety, specifically the anxiety that is affecting the second language speaking ability among Malay speakers of English. One of the main aims of this study is to find out if having this particular anxiety could affect the speaking ability of these speakers, especially in a context where they are being assessed.

As has been mentioned earlier, many Malaysian graduates are unemployed, their lack of English communication skills being one of the reasons. This problem of lacking in English communication skills probably is not a new problem to them as it may have been with them since their school days. Shahrier and Anton (2010) report that in Malaysia “although English is being taught from standard one through form five, the level of proficiency in English is still very low” (13). Due to the lack of English

proficiency, it could cause problems especially when it involves oral communication. From the researcher's experience as an English teacher, she has seen that many Malay learners of English have a problem related to second language learning anxiety. When these learners are asked as to why they experience such anxiety in English classes, no definite answers are provided. However, some might say that their 'negative' English learning experience in school may have contributed to their anxiety and it has been carried on to higher levels of education. The 'negative' experience could be a situation where teachers might have been strict with them, or it could also be that teachers were always correcting their errors especially in speaking where it could lead to loss of confidence to speak. This might be true to a certain extent because the most common second language learning anxiety that is exhibited among Malay learners of English seems to be that related to the speaking skill. Generally, a lot of people have problems to speak especially when it comes to speaking in public. This anxiety could intensify when they are also put in a test situation whereby both factors (public speaking and test situation) could contribute to increasing their anxiety level. This study aims to explore to what extent such an assumption is valid and if it is indeed so, what factors contribute to speaking language anxiety. It also attempts to look into the effect of language proficiency on speaking language anxiety. However, before delving further into the study, it would be useful to get an overview of certain constructs.

According to Lazarus and Averill (1972), anxiety is defined as "an emotion based on the appraisal of threat, an appraisal which entails symbolic, anticipatory, and uncertain elements. These characteristics, broadly conceived, mean that anxiety results when cognitive systems no longer enable a person to relate meaningfully to the world about him" (246-247). Anxiety can occur in different forms and it varies from one individual to another (this will be discussed further in Chapter 2). Two of the significant types of anxiety that occur in the field of applied linguistics are language anxiety and

test anxiety. In the language learning context, both types of anxiety can occur concurrently or on their own.

### **1.1.1 LANGUAGE ANXIETY**

Language anxiety, which has always been associated with second language learning (Young, 1999), is relevant to this study since the subjects are also second language learners. It is an issue that has been receiving wide recognition especially from researchers and language teachers of late. One of the main concerns in language anxiety is whether it inhibits or aids language learning. The reason why this comes into question is because “anxiety has been found to interfere with many types of learning and has been one of the most highly examined variables in all of psychology and education” (Horwitz, 2001: 113). If it does interfere with other types of learning, it would not be surprising to find that it does affect language learning in certain ways.

What is language anxiety? Language anxiety can be defined as “the worry and negative emotional reaction aroused when learning or using a second language” (MacIntyre, 1999: 27). In this context, language anxiety is not the same as other general types of anxiety whereby this type of anxiety only appears when there is a need to use the second language. There are three types of anxiety which indirectly, can lead to language anxiety. They are trait anxiety, situation-specific anxiety and state anxiety. MacIntyre (1999) mentions that trait anxiety can be defined as a part of an individual’s characteristics. Generally, people with a high level of trait anxiety are nervous people who are lacking in emotional stability (Goldberg, 1993). In other words, people with trait anxiety have the possibility to become anxious in any situation.

The next level of anxiety is situation-specific anxiety whereby it happens during certain situations only. It is somewhat different from trait anxiety in the sense that it does not necessarily occur all the time. Some examples of situation-specific anxiety are

math anxiety, stage fright and language anxiety. These anxieties are known as specific-situation anxiety because they happen only in specific types of circumstances. A person who experiences situation-specific anxiety can be nervous in one situation and not the others (MacIntyre, 1999). This type of anxiety also happens when a person experiences anxiety in a particular situation with the presence of certain factors (Pappamihel, 2002).

Another commonly known type of anxiety is state anxiety. MacIntyre defines state anxiety as “the moment-to-moment experience of anxiety; it is the transient emotional state of feeling nervous that can fluctuate over time and vary in intensity” (1999: 28). This type of anxiety would normally affect emotions, cognition and actions. An advantage of understanding trait and situation-specific anxieties is that it is easier to find out who has the tendency to experience state anxiety, which then can lead to the prediction of the negative effects of anxiety stimulation. This is applicable to the second language learning context as it can be assumed that someone with a high level of language anxiety will go through state anxiety frequently and vice-versa.

Considering all the possible sources of language anxiety, MacIntyre (1999) believes that the most important one is the fear of speaking in front of people using a language that one is not so proficient in. Due to this reason, it does not only affect the language learning of the learner, but it also affects the emotional state and self-esteem of the language learner. Therefore, language anxiety, specifically English language anxiety in this context, can be ‘damaging’ as it creates potential problems for the learners (Von Worde, 2003). One of the problems that can occur is that when learners are required to use their second language, they tend to feel not confident of themselves because of their inadequacy in the second language. This is one of the common problems faced by learners especially when it comes to the speaking skill.

### **1.1.2 PUBLIC SPEAKING**

Other than experiencing language anxiety, students in the L2 classroom might also have another problem to deal with, which is public speaking, an added situation that can arouse the anxiety level. This is due to the fact that public speaking is generally believed to be a task which is very difficult for many people to carry out. One of the reasons is because public speaking usually requires an individual to speak in front of people who may be strangers. For some people, it can increase their anxiety level which can eventually result in certain unpleasant effects such as sweaty palms, heart palpitations or even word loss. This could also lead to embarrassment to the individual especially if he or she were to suddenly become speechless and were unable to continue with his or her speech. Phillips (1992) reports that many researchers have found that second language learners face considerable difficulties especially where oral skills are concerned.

From the researcher's experience as an ESL teacher, it has been found that her learners do not feel confident and comfortable when they have to use English in class. This situation can be seen happening every semester. For these learners, their public speaking anxiety starts at the beginning of the semester when they are told about their individual speaking assessment. The worried looks on their faces reflect their anxiety and when asked, many would say that they do not like public speaking. Public speaking makes them feel restless, anxious and uneasy whenever they are asked to speak in front of the class whether they are well-prepared or not. The situation is made worse during individual oral presentations whereby the learners have to talk about a certain topic and their performance is evaluated by their teacher. Some of them might even become speechless, tremble or lose concentration due to their high anxiety level. Also arising from this fear, learners would have the tendency to feel that they are also being evaluated by their peers, not just their teacher, which can further aggravate their

anxiety. This experience can be debilitating for the learners especially when it negatively affects their performance and is noticeable in oral evaluative situations. There are also some learners who take this anxiety as a positive experience whereby they use it as a 'push' factor for them to perform well. In this situation, it is known as facilitating anxiety (this will be discussed further in Chapter 2, Section 2.5.1). To these learners, they might feel that their worry is something good which can motivate them to strive for the best. If they do not experience anxiety, they might feel like they are not worried about anything and thus, may not have the drive to do well.

### **1.1.3 TEST ANXIETY**

An additional factor that seems to contribute to the high anxiety level of learners is a test situation. ESL learners not only have to deal with their language anxiety and fear of public speaking, but they are also being put in a test situation which may further increase their anxiety level. Test anxiety can occur to any learners in any type of test situation. It is natural for learners to experience anxiety arousal in a test environment. Hence, in this study, test anxiety is expected to occur together with speaking language anxiety when the learners have to speak in public and at the same time, they are being evaluated. In some cases, both types of anxiety could affect the learners' performance. This is supported with the claim that "there is growing evidence that anxiety is a factor of considerable importance in influencing test performance" (Sinclair, 1971: 95). Thus, the influence of anxiety in test performance could either have positive or negative effects.

## **1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

To the best of the researcher's knowledge, there has been no research in this area focusing specifically on Malay second language learners of English. Thus, this

study will look into the factors that lead to speaking language anxiety among Malay second language learners. It also intends to compare the performance of low and high proficiency learners, to discover if there is a difference in the speaking anxiety level of these learners and also to find out if test anxiety can affect the performance of learners.

The subjects that have been chosen for this study are students of an institution of higher learning. They are Malay ESL learners and are learning English at the upper-intermediate level. Two groups have been selected with one group having a higher proficiency than the other. This was determined by the English Placement Test (EPT) that they have to sit upon entry into the institution. This is a test to place students in levels which reflect their English level proficiency with level one being the lowest and level six, highest. Although both groups are pursuing a course at an upper-intermediate level of English proficiency, their language abilities are not similar. This is because the low proficiency group started from level three which shows that their English proficiency is weaker than the high proficiency group which has been directly emplaced into level six upon admission.

39 subjects are involved in this study, with 19 from the low proficiency group and 20 from the high proficiency group. There are two reasons why these two groups are chosen. The first reason is because the researcher intends to compare the anxiety levels between low and high proficiency learners, and the second is to compare the differences or similarities in experiencing speaking language anxiety between low and high proficiency learners.

Since many people find it very difficult to speak in public, the same could also be said about the subjects of this study. Other than having to do public speaking, they are put under a lot of pressure as the public speaking that they have to do is in English. Therefore, the situation they are in can be considered as a 'double blow' to them because they need to first overcome their fear of speaking in public, and then they also

need to overcome their worry of speaking English in public. To make matters worse, whatever they say is being assessed. Being put in any test situation can stimulate anybody's anxiety level to increase. Hence, the test situation can actually be problematic to these subjects and boost their anxiety level. If it does increase the anxiety level, does it affect the performance of the subjects?

### **1.3 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

There are four objectives to this study. Firstly, the study is done to determine whether learners experience test anxiety when speaking in public. The second objective is to find out if there is a difference in the anxiety level of high and low proficiency learners. The third objective is to ascertain whether there are any differences between the high and low anxiety learners in their speaking test assessment. Finally, the fourth objective is to identify the factors that lead to speaking language anxiety, if any.

### **1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The purpose of the study is presented in the form of research questions as stated below:

1. To what extent do second language learners experience test anxiety when they have to perform public speaking?
2. Is there any difference in the anxiety level of learners with high and low proficiency levels?
3. Do low anxiety learners perform better than high anxiety learners in a speaking test?
4. What are the factors that lead second language learners to experience speaking language anxiety?



In order to obtain answers for research questions 1 and 2, the researcher uses two kinds of instruments. The first one is the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) that has been adapted which is designed to measure speaking language anxiety that is specifically related to the task at hand. The answers are measured according to the Likert scale measurement from 1 to 5 with 1 revealing the subject with low anxiety and 5 with high anxiety. The second instrument that is used for research questions 1 and 2 is interview. For research question 3, the results from the questionnaire and the results of the given task are used to attain the answer to the question. Finally, interview is again the instrument used in getting the answer to research question 4.

### **1.5 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

It is believed that this study would help teachers in becoming more aware of their students' 'inadequacies' in speaking, especially in evaluative situations. It is hoped that by knowing the causes of their speaking anxiety, teachers can help to reduce their students' anxiety level and eventually help them to succeed in learning their second language and overcome their fear of speaking before an audience.

### **1.6 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

There are some limitations to the study in that the sample size of the subjects is rather small and may not be representative of the whole Malay ESL learner population. It is also a study which only focuses on the speaking skill of learners. Therefore, the results cannot be generalised across all skills in English language learning such as listening, writing and reading. Another limitation is the unavailability of subjects to be interviewed. This is especially so for the low anxiety subjects as only one was interviewed. The reason for this is because other subjects had other commitments at the

time of the interview. Yet another limitation is the unwillingness of some subjects to be interviewed. This resulted in having only 15 interviewees from the total of 39 subjects.

## **1.7 DEFINITION OF TERMS**

Language anxiety	Refers to the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically related to second language contexts, including speaking, listening, and learning (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1994: 284).
Test anxiety	Refers to a type of performance anxiety stemming from a fear of failure (Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope, 1986: 127).
Trait anxiety	Refers to a feature of an individual's personality and therefore is both stable over time and applicable to a wide range of situations (MacIntyre, 1999: 28).
Situation-specific anxiety	Relates to trait anxiety, except that it is applied to a single context or situation only (MacIntyre, 1999: 28).
State anxiety	Refers to the moment-to-moment experience of anxiety; it is the transient emotional state of feeling nervous that can fluctuate over time and vary in intensity (MacIntyre, 1999: 28).
Communication apprehension	Refers to a type of shyness characterised by fear of or anxiety about communicating with people (Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope, 1986: 127).

Fear of negative evaluation Refers to apprehension about others' evaluations, avoidance of evaluative situations, and the expectation that others would evaluate oneself negatively (Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope, 1986: 128).

## **1.8 CONCLUSION**

Briefly, there are several factors leading to speaking language anxiety that can affect the oral performance of learners. These factors can produce several effects on the learners that could negatively influence their success in learning the second language. To further understand the issue of speaking language anxiety, a number of important issues need to be considered. They are language anxiety, public speaking, as well as test anxiety. As has been mentioned earlier, all these issues have been reported in other studies to induce anxiety in learners. Thus, the next chapter will discuss these issues to gain a more in-depth understanding of the issues.