

A STUDY OF HOW LANGUAGE ANXIETY AND FIRST LANGUAGE INFLUENCE AFFECT THE SPEAKING SKILLS IN SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING

Annisa Syaqqina Kadar

Bosowa University, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

Second language acquisition (SLA) is a multifaceted process, and speaking proficiency is often one of the most challenging aspects for learners. This study investigates the impact of two critical factors language anxiety and first language (L1) transfer on the speaking skills of second language learners, with a focus on Indonesian learners of Mandarin. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, the study explores how anxiety and L1 transfer shape learners' ability to speak confidently and fluently. Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with five participants who have experienced both language anxiety and L1 transfer challenges. The findings reveal that language anxiety significantly impedes fluency, leading to hesitation, cognitive interference, and avoidance behavior. Similarly, L1 transfer had both positive and negative effects on speaking skills, with pronunciation and sentence structure often influenced by the learners' native language. The interaction between language anxiety and L1 transfer created a compounded effect, with negative transfer exacerbating anxiety and further hindering speaking performance. Positive L1 transfer, however, helped to alleviate anxiety and facilitated smoother speech. The study concludes by emphasizing the importance of addressing both emotional and linguistic challenges in SLA, suggesting that educators should adopt strategies to manage anxiety while leveraging positive L1 transfer to enhance speaking proficiency.

Keywords: second language acquisition, language anxiety, first language transfer, speaking skills, Mandarin, qualitative research

INTRODUCTION

Speaking is frequently one of the more difficult parts of second language acquisition (SLA), which is a complicated and multidimensional process. According to Putri (2013), fluency in the language is necessary for effective communication in a second language (L2), but so is the self-assurance to speak freely. But students often face obstacles that hinder their ability to communicate. It is commonly known that two of these factors—language anxiety and first language (L1) transfer—have a negative impact on L2 speaking performance. According to Erliana (2024), language anxiety, which is characterized by apprehension and uneasiness when speaking a second language, frequently results in a reduction in fluency and an avoidance of oral communication. Simultaneously, L1 transfer—the process by which learners apply structures or norms from their L1 to their L2—can have both positive and negative effects on speaking, especially when it comes to fluency, grammar, and

pronunciation.

The relationship between language anxiety and L1 transfer in the setting of L2 speaking is still poorly understood, despite the abundance of studies on each component separately. The purpose of this study is to examine the effects of language anxiety and L1 transfer on second language learners' speaking abilities. Theories of second language acquisition offer a basis for comprehending the difficulties faced by learners and the process by which speaking abilities are improved. According to Krashen (1985), language acquisition happens when students are exposed to understandable material that is just a little bit above their current level of competency. Speaking is one of the receptive and productive skills that are built upon this input. In support of this view, Swain (1985) contends that speaking and generating language are essential components of L2 proficiency development. According to Swain, output compels students to think more deeply about language and highlights any areas where they lack proficiency, which can be filled with more practice.

Alongside these ideas, Vygotsky (1978) emphasizes how crucial social interaction is to language development. According to Vygotsky, language acquisition is a socially mediated process in which students interact with more experienced people to co-create meaning and improve their proficiency. This theoretical paradigm emphasizes how important speaking is as a social and communicative skill, and how fear may impede a learner's capacity or willingness to engage in these exchanges. To address the objectives of this study, the research focuses on exploring the ways in which language anxiety affects the oral proficiency of second language learners, examining the influence of first language (L1) transfer on their speaking skills, and analyzing the interaction between language anxiety and L1 transfer in shaping second language learners' speaking performance.

METHOD

To find out how language anxiety and first language (L1) transfer affect second language (L2) speaking abilities, the study used a descriptive qualitative methodology. This method enables a more thorough investigation of participants' individual experiences and viewpoints, which are frequently challenging to record using quantitative techniques (Creswell, 2012). The goal of the study was to determine how language anxiety and L1 transfer impact learners' L2 speaking ability by concentrating on individual experiences through in-depth interviews.

Second language learners, particularly those learning Chinese, were among the participants, with an emphasis on Indonesian learners. Five participants who have struggled with L1 transfer and language anxiety were chosen through the use of purposeful sampling. This sample size is suitable for preserving data depth while collecting a range of viewpoints. The goal is to present in-depth, comprehensive perspectives from students who have faced

these particular SLA difficulties (Patton, 2002).

Data was collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, which offer flexibility to explore key themes while maintaining a structured approach. The interviews focused on three main areas: language anxiety, where participants shared their feelings of nervousness when speaking in L2 situations and the first language transfer, where learners discussed how their L1 either facilitated or hindered their L2 learning, particularly in speaking tasks; and impact on speaking skills, focusing on how anxiety and L1 transfer have influenced their fluency, pronunciation, and general speaking performance. Interviews were conducted in a comfortable, confidential setting, with participants' consent obtained for audio recording. The interviews will then be transcribed for further analysis.

Thematic analysis, a qualitative technique that finds and explains patterns or themes in data, was used to examine the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After becoming acquainted with the interview transcripts, the next step was to code pertinent passages pertaining to speaking abilities, L1 transfer, and language anxiety. Following their grouping into more general themes, these codes were evaluated within the framework of current SLA research, providing insights into how L1 transfer and language anxiety affect second language learners' speaking proficiency. In this investigation, ethical considerations were quite important. The goal of the study was explained to the participants, and their agreement was acquired prior to their involvement. Additionally, they would be informed of their freedom to leave at any time without facing any repercussions. To ensure confidentiality, any identifiable information is being kept private, and the data was anonymous.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Impact of Language Anxiety on Oral Proficiency

The data gathered from the interviews reveals significant insights into how language anxiety affects second language learners' oral proficiency in Mandarin. Anxiety emerged as a dominant factor that inhibits the learners' ability to speak confidently and fluently. Several participants noted that they experience high levels of anxiety when speaking Mandarin, primarily due to the fear of making mistakes or being misunderstood. This fear leads to hesitation and a lack of confidence, both of which are barriers to effective communication. As Participant 1 stated, "Saya merasa cemas saat berbicara bahasa Mandarin karena takut salah ucap dan tidak dimengerti," highlighting the core concern of learners that anxiety stems from a fear of miscommunication and embarrassment. Similarly, Participant 2 noted, "Kecemasan membuat saya kesulitan berbicara dengan percaya diri, jadi saya sering ragu-ragu," reflecting how anxiety reduces their confidence and causes them to hesitate, which significantly disrupts fluency.

Anxiety's effects extend beyond reluctance; it also impacts the mental processes involved in speaking. Participant 3 noted that anxiety can impair word

recall and sentence structure, saying, "Kecemasan menghambat saya dalam berbicara karena saya sering kehilangan kata-kata atau tidak bisa menyusun kalimat dengan baik." When learning a second language, where accuracy and fluency are crucial, this cognitive interference can be very harmful. Additionally, anxious students often become fixated on making mistakes, which hinders their ability to talk freely. Participant 4 emphasized how the lack of fear promotes a more natural and fluid speaking experience when she said, "Tanpa kecemasan, saya lebih bisa berbicara dengan lebih alami dan tidak terikat oleh pemikiran tentang kesalahan."

In addition to affecting fluency and cognitive performance, anxiety also leads to avoidance behavior. Several participants admitted to avoiding speaking Mandarin in order to prevent the discomfort associated with anxiety. For instance, Participant 1 shared, "*Kadang, saya menghindari berbicara dalam bahasa Mandarin karena cemas, dan itu membuat kemampuan saya terbatas,*" and Participant 2 stated, "*Kadang-kadang, saya menghindari berbicara dalam bahasa Mandarin karena cemas, dan itu membuat saya tidak berkembang dengan baik.*" This avoidance limits opportunities for practice and further language development, exacerbating the problem of anxiety and slowing down progress.

However, some participants reported that with time and increased practice, their anxiety lessened, and their oral proficiency improved. Participant 3 described, "*Jika saya tidak cemas, berbicara menjadi lebih mudah dan saya lebih bisa menikmati percakapan,*" illustrating that once anxiety is reduced, speaking becomes more enjoyable and fluid. Over time, regular practice contributed to an increase in confidence, with Participant 3 noting, "*Saya merasa semakin percaya diri seiring berjalannya waktu, meskipun kecemasan saya belum sepenuhnya hilang.*". This indicates that while anxiety may not be entirely eliminated, it can be managed and diminished through consistent speaking practice, leading to greater confidence and improved fluency.

Overall, the interviews align with existing literature on language anxiety and its impact on second language learners' oral proficiency. As stated by Horwitz, and Cope (1986), language anxiety often manifests as fear of negative evaluation, which is evident in the participants' concerns about being judged by peers or teachers. The interviewees' fear of making mistakes, and the resulting hesitation to speak, reflects a common characteristic of language anxiety, which can lead to reduced opportunities for practice and improvement, as emphasized by Sadiqqa et al. (2024).

Moreover, the cognitive effects of anxiety, such as forgetting words or experiencing a mental block, were also prominent in the interview responses. This is consistent with Papi and Khajavy's (2023) findings that anxiety leads to cognitive overload, impairing learners' ability to process language and respond fluently in speaking tasks. The slowness in speech and stuttering reported by the participants in this study mirrors the challenges identified in prior research,

where anxiety has been shown to hinder fluid speech production and lower speech accuracy (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012).

First language influence the speaking skills of second language learners

The findings from the interviews reveal the significant impact of first language (L1) transfer on second language (L2) speaking skills, which aligns with existing research on language acquisition. Participants reported both positive and negative influences of their L1, Bahasa Indonesia, on their Mandarin speaking abilities. Negative L1 transfer was evident in the participants' struggles with pronunciation and sentence structure, as differences between Bahasa Indonesia and Mandarin created challenges. One participant mentioned, "Saya sering kesulitan dengan pengucapan karena Mandarin memiliki nada, sedangkan Bahasa Indonesia tidak, jadi saya sering bingung dengan nadanya dan terdengar salah." This observation reflects the findings of Fitri and Awaliyah (2023), who identified that learners can face difficulties in tonal languages when their L1 lacks similar phonological features. Such mispronunciations or wrong intonations can impede effective communication and hinder the development of oral proficiency.

In addition to pronunciation issues, some participants also experienced difficulties with sentence structure due to the differences between the two languages. As one participant explained, "*Kadang saya menggunakan urutan kata dari Bahasa Indonesia, yang membuat kalimat Mandarin saya terdengar aneh atau salah.*" This illustrates the negative syntactic transfer discussed by Derakhshan and Karimi (2015), where learners' reliance on their L1 sentence structures can create errors in L2 production, particularly in a language like Mandarin, which has a different syntactic system.

On the other hand, positive L1 transfer was also reported, particularly when participants encountered similar vocabulary between Bahasa Indonesia and Mandarin. One participant noted, "*Beberapa kata dalam Bahasa Mandarin mirip dengan Bahasa Indonesia, jadi saya lebih mudah mengingatnya.*" This positive transfer is consistent with Cheng (2023), who highlighted that learners can benefit from similarities between their L1 and L2, especially when vocabulary and meaning overlap. Such similarities can serve as cognitive scaffolding, making it easier for learners to recall and use new vocabulary in context. Overall, the interaction between L1 transfer and speaking skills in Mandarin highlights both the challenges and advantages that come with using a first language as a reference point in second language acquisition. These findings confirm that L1 transfer is a crucial factor in the development of speaking proficiency in L2, and that educators must address both positive and negative transfer in their teaching practices.

The Interaction Between Language Anxiety and L1 Transfer in Second Language Learners' Speaking Performance

The interaction between language anxiety and first language (L1) transfer significantly influences the speaking performance of second language (L2) learners, as revealed through the interviews. The findings suggest that language anxiety, in conjunction with L1 transfer, creates a compounded effect on learners' ability to speak confidently and fluently in Mandarin. As several participants mentioned, the fear of making mistakes due to incorrect L1 transfer exacerbates their anxiety, which in turn negatively affects their speaking performance. One participant shared, *"Saya sering cemas saat berbicara dalam Bahasa Mandarin karena takut salah, dan kadang kesalahan itu disebabkan oleh pengaruh Bahasa Indonesia, yang membuat saya semakin ragu dan sulit berbicara apa lagi dengan adanya tone."* This anxiety is heightened by the fear of making L1-related mistakes, reinforcing the cognitive load and emotional stress learners experience, which aligns with the findings of Papi and Khajavy (2023), who noted that anxiety due to mistakes can lead to a cycle of self-doubt and hesitation in speech.

Moreover, some participants explained how L1 transfer influences their language use, making them more self-conscious and fearful of further errors. As one interviewee reflected, *"Ketika saya menerjemahkan langsung dari Bahasa Indonesia, saya merasa khawatir orang akan salah paham atau bahkan tertawa, dan itu membuat saya semakin cemas untuk berbicara."* This quotation supports the idea from Kakar and Sarwari (2022) that negative L1 transfer can increase anxiety, as learners become aware of the potential for miscommunication and are therefore less likely to take risks in speaking. The fear of negative evaluation from others, another aspect of language anxiety identified in the literature (Saddiqa et al., 2024), was also evident in the participants' responses, as they expressed concern about being judged for their L1-based mistakes.

Interestingly, there were instances where positive L1 transfer helped to reduce anxiety and facilitated smoother speaking performance. One participant noted, *"Ada beberapa kata dalam Bahasa Mandarin hampir mirip dengan Bahasa Indonesia, jadi saya merasa lebih percaya diri untuk mengucapkannya tanpa rasa takut salah."* This highlights how positive L1 transfer can enhance confidence, making learners feel more at ease when speaking, as they are able to rely on familiar linguistic patterns. In such cases, the reduction in anxiety allowed for more fluid speech, which corroborates the findings of Kakar and Sarwari (2022) regarding how positive transfer can alleviate some of the stress and self-consciousness associated with language learning.

In conclusion, the interaction between language anxiety and L1 transfer is a complex and multifaceted aspect of second language acquisition. Negative L1 transfer can heighten anxiety, which in turn reduces speaking performance, while positive L1 transfer can help to mitigate anxiety and improve fluency. Educators should be mindful of both the linguistic and emotional challenges

learners face and incorporate strategies to manage anxiety while capitalizing on the benefits of L1 transfer in their teaching methods.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored the significant roles of language anxiety and first language (L1) transfer in influencing second language learners' oral proficiency, specifically in Mandarin. The results demonstrate that language anxiety is a major barrier to fluency, leading to hesitation, cognitive overload, and avoidance behaviors that hinder effective communication. Learners often experience anxiety due to a fear of making mistakes, miscommunication, or being judged, which disrupts their confidence and impedes their ability to speak freely and naturally. However, with consistent practice and a reduction in anxiety over time, learners can experience improvements in oral proficiency.

Moreover, the study reveals the impact of L1 transfer on L2 speaking skills. Negative L1 transfer, particularly in pronunciation and sentence structure, often causes errors in Mandarin, as differences between Bahasa Indonesia and Mandarin create difficulties for learners. On the other hand, positive L1 transfer, such as vocabulary similarities, can facilitate language learning by offering cognitive support, making vocabulary recall easier.

The interaction between language anxiety and L1 transfer creates a compounded effect on speaking performance. Negative L1 transfer can heighten anxiety, leading to a cycle of self-doubt and hesitation, while positive L1 transfer can help reduce anxiety and improve fluency. Therefore, it is crucial for educators to address both emotional and linguistic challenges, developing strategies to manage anxiety and leverage the benefits of L1 transfer to enhance language learning. In conclusion, the findings suggest that language anxiety and L1 transfer significantly impact Mandarin speaking proficiency. Educators should provide a supportive learning environment that helps students manage anxiety and recognizes the influence of L1 transfer, thus fostering both emotional and linguistic development in second language learners.

REFERENCES

- Barua, S. (2022). Language anxiety variables and their negative effects on SLA: A psychosocial reality in Bangladesh. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*, 6(8), 400.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.
- Cheng, F. (2023). The role of first language in second language acquisition. In *Proceedings of the 2022 4th International Conference on Literature, Art and Human Development (ICLAHD 2022)* (pp. 1236–1243). Atlantis Press
- Creswell, J. W. (2012). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications.
- Derakhshan, A., & Karimi, E. (2015). The interference of first language and second

- language acquisition. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 5(10), 2112–2117.
- Fitri, R., & Alawiyah, T. (2023). The impact of first language on second language acquisition: Transfer and interference. *TIRES*, 2(4)
- Kakar, A. F., & Sarwari, K. (2022). Second language communication and interference from L1. *Journal of Business, Communication & Technology*, 1(2), 13-23.
- MacIntyre, P., & Gregersen, T. (2012). Affect: The role of language anxiety and other emotions in language learning. In S. Mercer, S. Ryan, & M. Williams (Eds.), *Psychology for language learning* (pp. 163–178). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Papi M, Khajavy H. Second language anxiety: Construct, effects, and sources. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*. 2023;43:127-139.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications.
- Ryteup. (n.d.). The influence of native language on second language acquisition. Ryteup. <https://ryteup.com/blog/the-influence-of-native-language-on-second-language-acquisition/>
- Saddiqa, A., Masood, S., Amjad, I., & Asif, A. (2024). Second language anxiety: Examining its role as a barrier or facilitator in second language acquisition. *International Journal of Contemporary Issues in Social Sciences*, 3(2), 378–388
- Swain, M. (1985). Communicative competence: Some roles of comprehensible input and comprehensible output in its development. *Sociocultural Theory and Second Language Learning*, 1-25.
- Tu, Jingjing. (2014). *The Effects Of Anxiety On Second Language Acquisition*. Electronic Theses and Dissertations. 901.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Harvard University Press.