English Language Anxiety and Motivation towards Speaking English among Thai Tertiary Students

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Abstract

This study aimed to address challenges faced by students in speaking English effectively. The objectives were: 1) to investigate the levels of motivation for speaking English among students in the Faculty of Education at Udon Thani Rajabhat University; 2) to examine the levels of anxiety associated with speaking English among these students; and 3) to explore the relationship between motivation and anxiety in English-speaking skills. A total of 411 students, selected through stratified random sampling from a population of 2,896, participated in the study. Data were collected using a 36-item questionnaire and semi-structured interviews, with motivation assessed based on Deci and Ryan's (1985) Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and anxiety evaluated using Horwitz's (1986) framework. Results indicated

the following: 1) the students demonstrated moderate levels of motivation; 2) the students exhibited moderate levels of anxiety with communication apprehension emerging as the highest-scoring component of anxiety, and 3) a weak negative correlation suggested a slight inverse relationship between motivation and anxiety, implying that increased motivation might slightly alleviate anxiety. These findings underscore the importance of fostering intrinsic motivation and implementing targeted strategies to mitigate communication apprehension. Although the correlation was statistically significant, its practical significance appears limited, indicating that other factors may play a more substantial role in influencing students' English-speaking anxiety.

Keywords: motivation, anxiety, English-speaking skills, self-determination theory, foreign language anxiety

Introduction

In today's interconnected world, English proficiency is essential for effective communication in business, academia, and research (Graddol, 2023). However, Thai students often face significant challenges in developing spoken English skills, despite many years of formal study. This struggle is largely attributed to limited opportunities for practical application and real-world practice (Yusica, 2014). Qin and Poopatwiboon (2023) emphasized that inadequate speaking skills remain a critical barrier for Thai learners, undermining their confidence and limiting their ability to participate in international contexts. This issue is particularly pronounced in speaking, where students often lack exposure to authentic

communicative environments. Such limitations further hinder their linguistic development and reduce their competitiveness on the global stage.

Motivation is a critical factor in achieving success in language learning. According to Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), motivation can be classified into external factors, such as achieving grades or career advancement, and internal factors, such as personal interest and enjoyment. Research consistently shows that internal motivation leads to better long-term language learning outcomes, as it promotes sustained effort and engagement. While external motivators can provide initial drive, they often require the support of internal motivation to maintain progress over time.

On the other hand, speaking anxiety is a significant barrier to English language acquisition, particularly when students fear making mistakes or facing criticism (Qin & Poopatwiboon, 2023). This anxiety discourages participation in speaking activities, limiting opportunities for practice and improvement. In Thai classrooms, speaking English is widely perceived as one of the most difficult skills to develop. This challenge is reflected in Thailand's low ranking on the 2023 EF English Proficiency Index, highlighting persistent struggles with English communication ("The World's Largest Ranking of Countries and Regions by English Skills," 2023). Addressing this issue requires strategies that not only foster internal motivation but also reduce speaking anxiety to create a supportive learning environment for students.

At Udon Thani Rajabhat University, where students are expected to achieve at least CEFR level B2, many still experience anxiety that affects their speaking performance. This research investigates how motivation and anxiety influence Thai

students' English-speaking abilities, with the goal of developing teaching methods that build confidence and enhance speaking skills in the Thai educational context.

Research Objectives

1. To investigate the motivation for speaking English among students in the Faculty of Education at Udon Thani Rajabhat University

2. To examine the level of anxiety in speaking English among students in the Faculty of Education at Udon Thani Rajabhat University

3. To explore the relationship between motivation and anxiety levels in speaking English among students in the Faculty of Education at Udon Thani Rajabhat University

Literature Review

Motivation in Language Learning

The success of language learning is profoundly shaped by motivation, which drives students' dedication and achievement in English studies. Gardner (1985) emphasizes that motivated learners set clear goals, engage actively, and maintain a positive outlook toward language acquisition. According to Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), motivation falls into two categories: intrinsic motivation, which stems from personal satisfaction, and extrinsic motivation, which relies on external rewards. Intrinsic motivation, sustained by a sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, fosters enduring engagement in language learning. Recent studies affirm this perspective, demonstrating that when learners' fundamental psychological needs are met, their intrinsic motivation and commitment to language learning strengthen significantly (Oga-Baldwin & Hirosawa, 2023).

Educators are instrumental in cultivating motivation in the educational environment (Dörnyei, 1994). They can accomplish this by establishing conditions that foster student autonomy, linking course content to real-world applications, and creating appropriate interpersonal relationships (Deci & Ryan, 1985). By providing positive feedback and demonstrating passion, educators can enhance student engagement, hence resulting in enhanced language acquisition outcomes (Ushioda, 2011).

Anxiety in Language Learning

Anxiety is a significant barrier to language learning, particularly when English is not the learner's first language. Defined as unease stemming from fear and self-doubt, anxiety can impair communication skills, leading students to avoid participation and decreasing overall learning efficiency (Semerphet & Waenphet, 2013). Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope (1986) categorize language anxiety into communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Factors such as personal beliefs, teacher attitudes, classroom procedures, and testing practices all contribute to heightened anxiety (Young, 1990). For instance, beliefs that language learning requires perfect pronunciation can amplify anxiety, as can overly corrective teaching. The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) measures these anxiety levels, emphasizing the need to create supportive environments that reduce pressure and enhance student confidence, promoting better learning outcomes.

Methodology

This study used a survey research design with quantitative and qualitative methods.

Population and Samples: The population consisted of 2,896 students from 19 majors (118 males and 293 females), aged 18-22, in the Faculty of Education at Udon Thani Rajabhat University. A sample of 411 students from Years 1 to 4 was selected using stratified sampling, following the guidelines of Krejcie and Morgan (1970).

Instruments

1. Questionnaire: The 36-item questionnaire, developed in Thai, was designed to rigorously assess motivation and anxiety in English speaking. The motivation section, based on Self-Determination Theory (SDT), evaluated constructs such as competence, autonomy, and intrinsic motivation, while the anxiety section incorporated items adapted from Horwitz's Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) to measure dimensions of communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. Structurally, the instrument comprised two sections: Part 1 gathered demographic data, and Part 2, with a 5-point Likert scale, measured students' motivation and anxiety. The development process involved an extensive theoretical review, item formulation, and validation by three subject matter experts, achieving an Index of Item Objective Congruence (IOC) threshold of 0.67. A pilot phase with a demographically similar sample facilitated refinements to ensure both item clarity and internal consistency before administering the questionnaire to the full study population.

2. Semi-structured Interviews: Semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted with selected students to gain deeper insights into their motivation and anxiety in English speaking. These interviews targeted students with both high and low scores in motivation and anxiety and included 16 open-ended questions adapted from SDT and FLCAS frameworks. The interview development process

entailed defining research objectives and creating questions, validating them with experts for accuracy (IOC analysis), conducting a pilot test with a similar sample, and making final revisions based on expert input.

Data analysis

Data analysis categorizes data into two types for analysis as follows:

Quantitative Data: Questionnaire responses on motivation and anxiety levels were analyzed using descriptive statistics, focusing on frequency and percentage to describe data characteristics, and Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to examine the relationship between motivation and anxiety levels.

Qualitative Data: Semi-structured interviews were transcribed and analyzed using content analysis. Similar content was grouped, redundancies were removed, and data were organized to address the research questions, identifying key themes and patterns.

Results and Discussion

1. Quantitative Results

1.1 Motivation level: The survey results on the motivation of students from the Faculty of Education at Udon Thani Rajabhat University were shown in the following table.

Table 1

The Levels of Motivation among Students of the Faculty of Education in Udon Thani Rajabhat University

Types of Motivation	$\bar{X}$	*SD.*	Result
Competence	3.19	1.14	Moderate
Autonomy	2.83	1.16	Moderate
Relatedness	3.20	1.20	Moderate
Amotivation	1.78	1.09	Low
External Regulation	3.07	1.22	Moderate
Introjected Regulation	3.16	1.26	Moderate
Identified Regulation	4.21	0.99	High
Integrated Regulation	3.30	1.15	Moderate
Intrinsic Regulation	3.56	1.14	Moderate

From Table 1, the following discussions were made:

Competence: Students reported moderate perceived competence in English-speaking, with a mean score of 3.19, reflecting foundational proficiency but varied levels of self-efficacy. According to Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory, these beliefs impact engagement and language outcomes, supported by Dörnyei (2001), who emphasizes that building confidence enhances motivation and acquisition.

Autonomy: An average score of 2.83 showed moderate autonomy, aligning with studies that link autonomy with language success. Ushioda (2011) and Alrabai (2021) found that fostering autonomy boosts motivation, engagement, and language proficiency.

Relatedness: An average score of 3.20 suggested that students felt moderately connected to peers and the learning environment, which supported collaborative learning. Ruzek et al. (2016) noted that emotional support from teachers boosted relatedness, autonomy, and engagement.

Amotivation: A low score of 1.78 reflected high motivation for English-speaking, aligning with Ushioda's (2011) intrinsic motivation theory, which tied low amotivation to sustained interest in language tasks, as supported by Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory.

External Regulation: The score of 3.07 indicated moderate motivation from external factors, such as grades. Although external rewards spark initial engagement, Corsino (2022) and Deci et al. (1991) noted that intrinsic motivation enhances long-term success.

Introjected Regulation: A score of 3.16 showed moderate motivation from internal pressures like guilt or obligation. Reducing such pressures fostered engagement and well-being, as suggested by Assor et al. (2005) and Mouratidis et al. (2011).

Identified Regulation: A high score of 4.21 showed that students strongly value English for future goals. Navas (2023), and Ryan and Deci (2000) found that linking language learning to personal aspirations increased engagement and persistence.

Integrated Regulation: With an average of 3.30, students were beginning to integrate English learning into their identity. Ryan and Deci (2000), and Pham Quoc Thinh (2021) emphasized that aligning learning with personal values promoted sustained motivation.

Intrinsic Regulation: A score of 3.56 reflected enjoyment in English activities, a key factor in sustained learning. Deci and Ryan (1985), and Jindathai (2014) highlighted intrinsic motivation's importance for creativity and academic success.

In sum, this study highlights a combination of motivational factors that influence English-speaking skills. While moderate levels of competence and autonomy indicate room for growth, low amotivation suggests a positive learning outlook. High identified regulation emphasizes the value students place on English for their future goals; however, moderate external and integrated motivation indicate a need for stronger intrinsic alignment. The study's limitations include potential biases in self-reported data and oversimplified quantitative measures. Future research should incorporate mixed methods and diverse samples to develop more effective strategies for fostering intrinsic motivation and sustained language learning success.

      1.2 Anxiety level: The survey resulted on the anxiety level of students were shown in the following table.

Table 2

The Levels of Anxiety among Students of the Faculty of Education in Udon Thani Rajabhat University

Type of anxiety	$\bar{X}$	*S.D.*	Result
Communication apprehension	3.64	1.11	Moderate
Fear of negative evaluation	3.40	1.20	Moderate
Test anxiety	3.58	1.20	Moderate

From Table 2, the following discussion were be made:

      Communication Apprehension: A mean score of 3.64, indicating a moderate level, reflects significant anxiety among participants during English-speaking tasks, often characterized by nervousness and fear of judgment, which can hinder language acquisition. This aligns with communication apprehension, a key aspect of language anxiety, as defined by Horwitz et al. (1986) through the FLCAS,

which is known to limit speaking practice and slow learning progress (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). To address this, recent studies recommend incorporating technology into learning. For instance, Sholikhi (2024) highlights the effectiveness of digital platforms like YouTube for self-paced speaking practice, while Nasir et al. (2023) emphasizes structured support and consistent practice as strategies to reduce communication apprehension and improve speaking confidence.

Fear of Negative Evaluation: An average score of 3.40 indicates that many participants fear negative judgments of their English proficiency, which can hinder communication and language development. Fear of negative evaluation, a key aspect of language anxiety, involves concerns about errors or criticism, reducing oral participation. Horwitz et al. (1986) included this in the FLCAS, highlighting its adverse effects on performance and engagement. Okyar et al. (2023) also found a positive link between this fear and speaking anxiety in Turkish EFL learners.

Test Anxiety: An average score of 3.58 indicates a moderately high level of test anxiety among students, marked by excessive worry and nervousness before or during tests, which disrupts concentration, memory, and overall performance. Zeidner (1998) notes that test anxiety is common in educational settings, often impairing academic outcomes. Students with high test anxiety may experience both physical symptoms (e.g., sweating, rapid heartbeat) and cognitive symptoms (e.g., negative thoughts, difficulty focusing), creating a cycle of anxiety and poor performance. Sarason (1984) further explains that cognitive interference, such as self-doubt and fear of failure, prevents anxious students from effectively processing and recalling information, thereby lowering test scores and hindering academic success.

The present study found that while university students reported a moderate level of anxiety when speaking English, this anxiety nonetheless poses a significant obstacle to language development. Fear of negative evaluation and test-related stress were identified as key contributors to this apprehension. To enhance language proficiency and overall academic success, it is imperative to implement strategies that mitigate anxiety and foster a supportive learning environment.

2. Qualitative Results

The analysis of the semi-structured interviews was based on the following key themes:

1. Fear of Making Mistakes and Lack of Confidence: The interview findings revealed that many students' primary source of anxiety in speaking English is a fear of making mistakes, driven by worries about being misunderstood or speaking incorrectly. Statements like "*I'm afraid of making mistakes and not being understood*" or "*I feel like I don't make sense when I speak.*" reflect their apprehension, often worsened by pressure for perfect grammar and pronunciation. This aligns with Horwitz et al. (1986) and Gregersen and Horwitz (2002), who noted that fear of negative evaluation and perfectionism heighten language anxiety. Kitjaroonchai (2012) found that Thai students, struggling with native intonation and understanding, often feel frustrated and anxious. Studies by Faida and Azhimia (2020), and Tzoannopoulou (2016) further confirm that fear of negative evaluation is a key anxiety factor. To address this, teaching approaches should foster supportive environments, reduce emphasis on perfection, and build student confidence through encouragement and gradual skill development.

2. Environmental and Social Influences: The findings highlight the strong impact of social context on students' attitudes toward speaking English. A positive

social environment boosts motivation and confidence, while a negative one, marked by peer ridicule or classroom disruptions, increases anxiety and hinders speaking. One student shared, "*The environment discourages me. People close to me mock me even when I try to speak*," illustrating the role of social interactions in language anxiety, as supported by Horwitz et al. (1986). Ruparvichet and Mona (2009) also found that fear of mockery or losing face significantly discourages students from speaking English.

Conversely, supportive peers and instructors emerged as key motivators, with participants noting that encouragement from proficient peers and a desire to engage in English-speaking activities positively influenced their learning. This underscores the role of a supportive environment in boosting language confidence and motivation. Mulyani (2021) confirm the positive link between a supportive social context and language learning outcomes, while Young (1990), and Dörnyei and Csizér (1998) highlight how supportive interactions reduce language anxiety and increase engagement.

3. External Pressures and Rewards: The findings show that external pressures, such as expectations from teachers, parents, and institutions, strongly influence students' motivation to speak English. For example, one student noted, "*Exchange programs forced me to speak English, which improved my skills*." highlighting how structured external environments drive language learning. Academic demands, like high grades and exams, also push students to prioritize English practice. This aligns with Ryan and Deci's (2000) Self-Determination Theory, indicating that while external pressures can spark motivation, their long-term impact may be limited. Interviews revealed that some students thrived under external motivation, while others relied on intrinsic motivation. Noels et al. (2000), and

Ushioda (2011) support the idea that while external pressures initiate learning, intrinsic motivation is crucial for sustained success.

In conclusion, external pressures and rewards can serve as powerful motivators for English language learning. However, understanding the individual differences in how students respond to these pressures is crucial for developing effective instructional strategies.

4. Perceived Importance of English: Semi-structured interviews revealed students widely view English proficiency as essential for personal and career goals, linking it to better job prospects, higher earnings, and global communication skills. Statements like "*English is crucial for communication and technology advancements*" and "*English speakers often get better jobs*" reflect this sentiment. These findings align with Graddol (2006), and Crystal (2003), who highlighted English's prominence in international business, science, and technology, and Žefran (2020), who found students value English for career advancement. Beyond careers, students see English as a tool for personal growth, cultural connection, and confidence, supporting Ushioda's (2011) view that aligning language learning with personal goals enhances motivation.

5. Enjoyment and Satisfaction in Learning English: Semi-structured interviews showed varied experiences in English learning enjoyment. Many students enjoyed interactive activities like games and singing, saying, "I enjoy games and singing in English." This aligns with Lee (1995), and Coyle and Gracia (2014), who found enjoyable activities reduce anxiety and boost motivation. Others found satisfaction in practical uses, like teaching math in English, supporting Savignon's (1997) emphasis on real-world application for motivation. However, students facing

proficiency challenges reported less enjoyment, highlighting how self-efficacy affects motivation (Bandura, 1997; Alanazi & Bensalem, 2024).

　　　6. Anxiety Management Strategies: The results showed students manage English-speaking anxiety primarily through preparation, practice, and structured tasks like presentations, which reduce unpredictability (Horwitz et al., 1986). Peer support also eased anxiety, echoing Young's (1990) findings on its benefits in language learning. Despite these strategies, many students still felt anxious in high-stakes situations, reflecting MacIntyre and Gardner's (1994) findings on test anxiety. Avoidance behaviors, such as evading spontaneous speaking, were common and can hinder language proficiency (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002).

　　　　These findings highlight the importance of a motivational environment that balances intrinsic and extrinsic factors, supports autonomy, and reduces anxiety to improve students' English-speaking skills. Effective strategies include promoting self-efficacy, encouraging autonomy, and building peer connections. Linking language learning to students' personal goals and real-life contexts sustains long-term interest. Addressing anxiety, especially fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety through supportive practices boosts confidence and participation. By incorporating these elements, educators can create a holistic language-learning environment that enhances academic outcomes and student engagement.

The relationship between students' motivation levels and anxiety levels

Table 3

The Relationship between Students' Motivation Levels and Anxiety Levels

Parameter	Value
Pearson correlation coefficient (r)	-0.1036
r^2	0.01073
P-value	0.03578
Covariance	-0.0586
Sample size (n)	411
Statistic	-2.1064

Table 3 illustrates the relationship between motivation and anxiety in English learning among 411 students, revealing a weak yet statistically significant negative correlation (r = -0.1036, p = 0.03578). This indicates that higher motivation is associated with slightly lower anxiety, though motivation accounts for only 1.073% of the variance in anxiety (r^2 = 0.01073). These findings align with existing research on the complex impact of affective factors in language learning (Khasinah, 2014). While motivation can enhance engagement (Hiver et al., 2024), anxiety remains a considerable obstacle. The weak correlation suggests that additional factors may play a more prominent role in influencing anxiety levels.

Recommendations

Future research should examine the influence of cultural and environmental factors, particularly peer interactions and Southeast Asian conventions, on longitudinal language learning outcomes. Comparative studies investigating the effectiveness of online and offline platforms, alongside the integration of peer support in digital learning contexts, could yield valuable insights. Additionally, exploring technology-driven approaches to reducing speaking anxiety, such as virtual

reality and gamified platforms, may uncover innovative solutions for building confidence. Research into self-regulation techniques, gender-related anxiety patterns, and individual motivational styles could inform the development of personalized strategies. Moreover, investigating hybrid educational methodologies, including the combination of project-based learning, flipped classrooms, and microlearning, would contribute to creating adaptable, culturally sensitive, and evidence-based teaching practices for diverse language learners. These research efforts would ultimately guide the design of targeted resources and support systems to enhance engagement and language acquisition.

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