

## CAUSES OF BUSINESS ENGLISH SPEAKING ANXIETY IN THE BALKANS

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**ABSTRACT.** *Learner anxiety is a critical affective factor in foreign languages education. This study investigated the main causes of speaking anxiety in the context of business English (BE) instruction. In-depth interviews were conducted among BE instructors and learners at higher educational institutions in six countries in the Balkans. The study identified several causes of speaking anxiety, the most crucial being the lack of knowledge in economics and the BE lexis as the carrier content in BE learning. And especially so, when the latter combined with other causes, such as the necessity to speak unprepared in class in front of one's peers, or problems with BE vocabulary acquisition or recollection. A quarter of the interviewees who considered themselves low-anxiety when speaking general English were prone to elevated levels of speaking anxiety when performing complex speaking tasks in BE class which require a degree of fluency in general English.*

**Keywords:** Business English, speaking anxiety, causes, carrier content, the Balkans, in-depth interviews.

## LAS CAUSAS DE LA ANSIEDAD AL HABLAR EN EL APRENDIZAJE DEL INGLÉS DE NEGOCIOS EN LOS BALKANES

**RESUMEN.** *La ansiedad al hablar es un factor afectivo crítico en la enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras. El presente estudio analiza las causas principales de la ansiedad al hablar en el aprendizaje del inglés de negocios. Las entrevistas en profundidad que se han llevado a cabo entre los profesores del inglés de negocios y los alumnos de enseñanza superior en seis países de los Balcanes han identificado distintas causas de la ansiedad al hablar. Las más importantes son la falta de conocimientos en economía y el insuficiente léxico de los alumnos. Estos se consideran los principales obstáculos en la enseñanza del inglés de negocios, sobre todo cuando se les añaden otras causas tales como la necesidad de hablar delante del profesor sin preparación previa o los problemas de memorización del vocabulario. Una cuarta parte de los entrevistados que dicen tener una baja ansiedad al hablar el inglés general, han sido propensos a tener altos niveles de ansiedad al hablar cuando se han encontrado con tareas complejas en clase de inglés de negocios.*

*Palabras clave:* Inglés de negocios, ansiedad al hablar, causas, syllabus, Países Balcánicos, entrevistas en profundidad.

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Anxiety is an important factor affecting the learning of foreign languages (Horwitz *et al.* 1986; Young 1990; MacIntyre and Gardner 1994; Horowitz 2001; Yan Xiu and Horwitz 2008) that has been researched both qualitatively (Price 1991) and quantitatively (Horwitz *et al.* 1986). Spielberger (1983) defined anxiety as “the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the automatic nervous system” (Horwitz 2001: 113). Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope were the first to treat foreign language anxiety as a separate distinguishable phenomenon or as “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, feelings and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process” (1986: 128). Dornyei (2005: 39) believes that the complexity of foreign language anxiety is still not clearly defined and is too often equated with other fears or phobias. Foreign language anxiety is categorized as a situation-specific anxiety because it is not completely unchangeable and therefore possible to eliminate or diminish (Horwitz 2001). As much as one-half of all language students experience a startling level of anxiety (Campbell and Ortiz 1991). Horwitz *et al.* identified three interrelated components of foreign language

anxiety: *communication apprehension*, defined as “a type of shyness characterized by fear of or anxiety about communicating with people” (1986: 127); *fear of negative evaluation*, which refers to the “apprehension about others’ evaluation, avoidance of evaluative situations and the expectation that others would evaluate oneself negatively” (1986: 128); and *test anxiety*, “a type of performance anxiety stemming from a fear of failure” (1986: 128). Since speaking in the target language seems to be the most intimidating aspect of foreign language learning (Young 1990; Horwitz *et al.* 1991; Price 1990; Öztürk and Gürbüz 2014), this study focuses on foreign language speaking anxiety.

Horwitz *et al.* (1986) argued that anxiety has a negative impact on foreign language learning –the claim that spurred further research with different perspectives. Many scholars have examined the theoretical background of the relationship between anxiety and learner achievement (Scovel 1978; Horwitz *et al.* 1986; MacIntyre and Gardner 1991a, 1994; Young 1991), others the effects of specific types of language anxiety, for example the effects of anxiety on the learners’ speaking performance (Horwitz *et al.* 1986; Cheng *et al.* 1999; Gregersen and Horwitz 2002; Boyce *et al.* 2007; Subaşı 2010) and reading (Saito *et al.* 1999; Sellers 2000; Matsuda and Gobel 2004; Zhao *et al.* 2013). However, the causes of speaking anxiety of foreign languages for specific purposes, such as English for Specific Purposes and business English (BE) –its major and the most entrepreneurial arm, have not yet been investigated.

The common thread of all conceptualizations of BE has been the central role of learners’ needs or their reasons for learning the language. BE is centered on the language (grammar, lexis, register, etc.), skills, discourse and genres appropriate to particular disciplines, occupations and activities (Dudley-Evans and St. John 1998; Gatehouse 2001). In other words, “specificity clearly distinguishes ESP and general English” (Hyland 2002: 386). Since learning BE is clearly different from general English (Hyland 2002, 2008; Zhu 2008), we assume that the causes identified by expert literature for general English speaking anxiety will be different from those encountered by BE learners (Zhang and Zhong 2012). The goal of this qualitative study was to determine the causes of speaking anxiety in BE instruction in the Balkans. The explicitness of the causes is crucial if instructors and learners are to implement effective anxiety-reducing strategies with a view to improving learner proficiency. We carried out in-depth interviews with BE instructors and learners at higher-education institutions from Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, and Macedonia.

## 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: POSSIBLE CAUSES OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE ANXIETY

In their meta-analysis of the literature of possible causes of foreign language anxiety, Zhang and Zhong (2012) categorized foreign language anxiety as learner-induced, classroom-related, skill-specific, and culture-imposed, depending on different contexts.

### 2.1. LEARNER-INDUCED ANXIETY

Learner-induced anxiety may result from *learners' unrealistic or erroneous beliefs* about language learning (Zhang and Zhong 2012: 28). Studies show that the learners hold a range of beliefs that may lead to anxiety once expectations about language learning clash with real outcomes (Horwitz *et al.* 1986; Horwitz 1988; Price 1991). For example, Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986: 126) note that a number of students believe that nothing should be said in the foreign language until it can be said correctly and guessing is wrong. Such beliefs produce anxiety since students are expected to communicate in the foreign language before fluency is attained.

Learners may feel nervous if they fail to achieve self-imposed, *unrealistically high standards*, in the target language (Kitano 2001; Price 1991; Gregersen and Horwitz 2002; Zhang and Zhong 2012). Kitano (2001) found an inverse relationship between anxiety and perceived ability in the target language in comparison with native speakers.

*Poor language ability* either in the native language or in the foreign language can also be intimidating (Zhang and Zhong 2012). Researchers generally agree that acquisition of first language skills has a great influence on learners' linguistic development in other languages (Sparks and Ganschow 1991). Low English proficiency can be responsible for student reticence (Tsui 1996).

*Learners' self-perception of ability* is a strong cause of anxiety (Horwitz *et al.* 1986; Price 1991; Kitano 2001; Gregersen 2010; Subaşı 2010). Horwitz and her colleagues (1986) argued that much of the learner's anxiety stems from the threat to the learner's self-concept of competence and beliefs that their language skills were weaker than those of the other students (Price 1991). Anxiety, as expected, was higher as perceived ability was lower (Kitano 2001).

*The inclined competitive nature* of learners (Bailey 1983; Young 1991) can lead to anxiety when they compare themselves to others or to an idealized self-image. Bailey (1983) claimed that anxiety can be caused and/or aggravated by the

learner's competitiveness when self-assessed as less proficient than the object of comparison.

The *dispositional fear of negative evaluation* was also a key source of anxiety in foreign language classrooms (Horwitz *et al.* 1986; Kitano 2001; Noormohamadi 2009; Tsiplakides and Keramida 2009; Ay 2010). Learners are rather apprehensive about situations in which others might ridicule their ability in the target language. This presents a serious threat to self-esteem. Kitano (2001) found that anxiety was higher as fear of negative evaluation was stronger. One of the situations in foreign language classroom where students' anxiety may be really high is during group interaction in English.

Speaking in groups adds to the difficulty of communicating in English, regardless of the level of the interlocutors' proficiency, especially for non-native speakers (Levine and Moreland 1994). Ingroup members are constantly assessing each other's performance in English (Abrams *et al.* 2000; Pinto *et al.* 2010). The spontaneity, dynamics and unpredictability of group interaction in complex language-learning tasks is such that most individuals admit to feeling inhibited (Gregersen and Horwitz 2002; Matsuda and Gobel 2004; Yaikhong *et al.* 2012). According to the subjective group dynamics model, deviant ingroup members are interpreted as sources of threat, so degrading reactions may be displayed toward them (Marques *et al.* 1998). If "deviant" is understood as a threat to group communication in English to imagine the extent to which group dynamics contributes to raising students' speaking anxiety.

## 2.2. CLASSROOM-RELATED ANXIETY

Zhang and Zhong (2012: 29) also found that classroom-induced anxiety is mainly related to four *instructor factors* –instructor beliefs about language teaching, the manner of error correction, the level of perceived support, and the teaching style. Some learners are afraid of their errors being corrected, others would feel uneasy if the instructors let errors go unnoticed or uncorrected (Young 1990); it is the instructor's manner of correction that matters, not the correction itself. The degree of perceived instructor support is highly related to learners' feelings of anxiety (Trickett and Moos 1995, cited in Zhang and Zhong 2012: 29). Foreign language anxiety can be aggravated when there is a clash between the learning style of a particular student and the teaching style of a given language instructor (Oxford 1999).

Anxiety can also be induced by *peers* (Zhang and Zhong 2012: 29); learners often report that they fear being laughed at by peers or conversational partners (Young 1991; Gregersen 2003). In addition, very competent learners feel pressure

because their linguistic superiority over others might stir up resentment and jealousy (Allwright and Bailey 1991; Hilleson 1996).

*Classroom practices*, such as the types and natures of tasks, target language use, and the classroom climate, may induce language anxiety (Zhang and Zhong 2012: 29). Many studies (Koch and Terrell 1991; Price 1991) found a high incidence of anxiety related to oral presentation before the class. The instructors' intolerance of silence also creates a great deal of anxiety (Öztürk and Gürbüz 2014). In other words, learners experience higher speaking anxiety when they are exposed to instant or additional (sub)questions by their instructors.

### 2.3. SKILL-SPECIFIC ANXIETY

The third category of Zhang and Zhong's (2012: 30) possible causes of foreign language anxiety is skill-specific anxiety. As mentioned, speaking anxiety has consistently been shown to be the most critical (Price 1990; Young 1990; Horwitz *et al.* 1991; Öztürk and Gürbüz 2014); thus, we focus here on speaking anxiety in the context of BE instruction. The causes of speaking anxiety may have origins in the attempts to find the appropriate BE vocabulary items and pronounce them correctly (Hilleson 1996; Öztürk and Gürbüz 2014). Besides poor vocabulary, the overwhelming number of rules required to speak a language often makes learners nervous (MacIntyre 1995) as well as not being prepared for speaking (Horwitz *et al.* 1986; Öztürk and Gürbüz 2014).

### 2.4. SOCIALLY-IMPOSED ANXIETY

For our study, socially-imposed anxiety refers to language anxiety caused by cultural connotations, including parental intervention (Zhang and Zhong 2012: 31). Some learners may bring their own *cultural values or habits* with them into the language classroom (Tsui 1996; Allen 2003). Students' reluctance to speak in class is at times a result of different socio-cultural values, such as modesty in the case of Chinese students (Tsui 1996). *Parental expectation* was found to be an important source of language anxiety as parents compare their children to other students of foreign language (Zhang and Zhong 2012).

A substantial number of studies have been carried out to determine the causes of foreign language anxiety, however, none of them specific to BE instruction as part of ESP. In contrast to English for general purposes, BE integrates discursive competence, disciplinary knowledge and professional practice (Stevens 1988; Hyland 2002; Zhu 2008; Bhatia 2011). Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) emphasize a distinction between what they term *carrier content* and *real content*,

and regard this distinction as essential to BE. The presentation of certain language items (real content) in all foreign language skills should rely on topics from some discipline (carrier content). It is therefore necessary that BE learners possess knowledge of carrier content, in our case economics.

In light of this theoretical background and the objective, the current study was guided by the following research question: *What are the major causes of speaking anxiety of BE learners at higher education institutions in the Balkans?*

### 3. METHOD

#### 3.1. PARTICIPANTS

The sample consisted of 90 students (53 female and 37 male) in the first or second year at various Faculties of Economics in Slovenia (15), Croatia (15), Bosnia and Herzegovina (15), Macedonia (15), Serbia (15) and Montenegro (15), ages 18 to 22. In order to identify the potential socio-cultural anxiety-provoking causes among the students (and instructors), our research focuses only on BE students of economics from six neighbouring Balkan countries who have had approximately the same number of years of English language study –between 10 and 12. They were all studying BE for the first time, though not necessarily in their first year at the faculty. With a view to gaining an even more comprehensive insight, the study included 35 BE instructors (31 female and 4 male) (five from each of the six countries), ages 24 to 58. The syllabus for BE and the instruction itself are comparable in all six countries (Čepon *et al.* 2014).

#### 3.2. DATA COLLECTION

To find answers to the research question, in-depth, semi-structured individual interviews were conducted. In-depth interviews are deemed appropriate for this kind of research because they provide a clear, accurate and inclusive opinion based on personal experience (Burgess 1982). Our goal was to explore what kind of reasons for BE speaking anxiety instructors and learners detect in the Balkans. We asked them questions such as: a) How much speaking anxiety do BE learners experience when speaking in English? and b) Why do they experience speaking anxiety? The interviews were carried out towards the end of 2014 and in the first half of 2015 in person and via Skype; they lasted from 30 to 90 minutes. Respondent confidentiality was maintained by referring only to the names of their countries. The translations from their mother tongues reflect both style and content accurately, and serve the purpose of avoiding the danger of interpreting the data through the author's own perceptions.

## 4. RESULTS

The research did not reveal any key differences among instructors' and students' claims with regard to causes of BE speaking anxiety. Similarly, there are no indicative discrepancies between the respondents from the six countries. The key finding is that most students (80) are extremely nervous when required to speak in their BE class. More than a quarter of them (26), who do not encounter speaking anxiety in general English, report experiencing such anxiety in BE. The causes will be presented according to the key categories proposed by Zhang and Zhong (2012).

### 4.1. LEARNER-INDUCED ANXIETY

The research identified quite a few causes of learner-induced anxieties which will be presented categorized under five main headings: a) learners' preconceived beliefs about speaking BE, b) learners' self-perception of their foreign language ability, c) trying to reach unrealistically high standards of speaking (business) English, d) inclined competitive nature of learners and e) dispositional fear of negative evaluation.

To start with *learners' preconceived unrealistic or erroneous beliefs*, it appeared that one quite common trigger was a generally accepted belief that it might be too late for foreign language learners to improve their speaking ability in English at higher education institutions. Such convictions proved to be quite detrimental to the motivations of high-anxiety interviewees trying to overcome their anxiety. A typical statement was by a Montenegrin student who was quite apprehensive because "... in college, it's too late to suddenly start speaking English really well. Good students have managed that way sooner!". Based on the results, some other preconceived beliefs determined as significant causes of learner-induced anxieties included claims that BE is much more arduous to learn than general English, principally when speaking tasks require knowledge of economics. Speaking anxiety was reported in BE class for scholarly purposes, but not while speaking general English in real life. In the words of a Serbian student, it took him "a while to realize that speaking was the most unnerving part in BE. Before the faculty, I was assured that with good grammar I would be fine, but now I have to master economics, too...".

A Croatian instructor was all too familiar with "such lame excuses", as she put it. However, she did recount that her students' internal perceptions truly were like this. According to her, also low-anxiety students quite fluent in general English felt the ill effects of speaking anxiety during BE discussions. The same instructor

pointed out that “In actuality, they enrol at the faculty convinced that BE is too difficult to grasp”. Similarly, a Bosnian student believed that she might feel “less stressed out when speaking English in real life because my instructor is not eavesdropping... Everyday English must be easier than BE”.

Based on quite a few student accounts, speaking anxiety emerged with the realization that their English would never match their ability in their mother tongues. A group of students believed that their speaking anxiety might be aggravated at the thought that in BE class they were studying an impractical, unusable BE containing too much BE vocabulary fit only for collegiate purposes and passing exams. They seemed to doubt the efficacy of their BE in regard to their professional futures. An additional cause for speaking anxiety was that they had studied BE much less than they had general English. A Serbian instructor said his students “... don’t understand that BE is ESP, thus not meant for lengthy study. It’s an upgrade of their general English, intended for more advanced students...”.

The study determined that one of the key causes of learner-induced speaking anxiety was *learners’ self-perceptions of their ability*, whether justified or a figment of their imagination. More than half of the interviewees speculated that not having adequate knowledge of English might be the main activator of their speaking anxiety in BE. Additionally, secondary and elementary school English instruction often proved insufficiently or poorly taught. All students seemed to suggest that speaking had been a neglected skill, so that now they experience anxiety while speaking in both general English and BE. A typical statement by a Croatian student was the following: “I could not speak any better back then than I can now. I got high grades for grammar, but speaking wasn’t assessed so much”.

As regards learner-induced speaking anxiety arising from interviewees’ *unrealistically high standards of speaking (business) English*, these were self-imposed, based on the students’ prior real-world, business experience with English or simply their desires, and not enforced by the English curriculum or school policies. A Bosnian student supported this view by saying that he’d “love to sound like an English person. Even when I can remember BE words, my English doesn’t sound like real English”. The results indicated that the unattainable desire of non-native speakers in the Balkans to speak faultless English with immaculate pronunciation was one of the key causes of their speaking anxiety. When asked to provide reasons, it became clear that it gave them a false promise that it might eliminate their speaking anxiety or account for a better job. A Slovenian student described how he spoke only “when absolutely sure that I’ll be able to say something without mistakes. It’s safer not to say anything, the instructor then lets you off the hook”.

The instructors' comments fully corroborated this view. However, according to them, a minority of students, both quite fluent and less fluent, did not abide by these rules as they appeared to be focused mostly on getting a message across. Their eagerness precluded anxiety when making mistakes while speaking or when receiving corrective feedback from instructors.

To move on to students' competitive disposition, this aspect of student nature was established as a decisive cause of learner-induced speaking anxiety. According to some interviewees, the students who had taken foreign language courses at the primary and high school level were inclined to experience decreased levels of speaking anxiety as did those who had visited foreign countries, taken language courses or attended summer schools abroad. Less 'fortunate' students appeared not only to attribute better English knowledge and lesser speaking anxiety of such students to these factors, but also resented the fact that they had been unable to have the same experiences. Low-anxiety students appeared to accentuate rather than to conceal the difference between them and higher-anxiety students, increasing the competitiveness. Moreover, the positive effects of their stays abroad were quite exaggerated, overemphasizing the benefits for minimizing their speaking anxiety. Similarly, a prior history of doing business in English with foreign business partners (or simply being some part of such business deals) as well as having any kind of real-life BE experience was found to contribute towards minimizing the students' speaking anxiety. A Serbian student openly admitted that "I see myself as disadvantaged compared to somebody whose parents are in business and have enough money to send him abroad".

Finally, the last group of probable causes of learner-induced speaking anxiety indicated that the students' *concern over a negative evaluation* from the instructor or their peers accounted for a great deal of speaking anxiety in BE classrooms. Quite a few interviewees agonized over their classmates' opinion about their potentially less-than-perfect English. However, the highest anxiety was triggered by the possibility that one might reveal one's lack of understanding of economics. The interviewees clearly felt that their speaking performance in English was under constant scrutiny by both the instructor and their classmates. A Bosnian student said: "while I'm speaking I think about my classmates' opinion. And I hate it when I don't know what is correct in economics".

The interviewees also recounted an entirely opposite type of speaking anxiety, typical of quite proficient students who are able to speak good (business) English. They asserted how being above average was not always regarded as "cool" by some of their more envious classmates. Allegedly, being able to converse with the instructor fluently was viewed by one's peers as an excessive

display of intelligence, talent for languages, and even one's parents' wealth. A typical statement by a Macedonian student was "if you looked closely around the classroom, you could sometimes spot some of the classmates listening with a sneer, scornful and derisive". High-anxiety students admitted to exhibiting avoidance behaviours, postponing homework, being less likely to volunteer answers or participate in oral discussions, looking down to avoid the instructor's gaze, being silent, pretending to be too sick to participate... A Montenegrin instructor illustrated this by adding:

Some really anxious students have tried to strike a deal with me at the beginning of the term so that they would be excluded from discussions for different reasons –from stuttering to wanting to hide their poor English or lack of economics knowledge. Or, they just openly admit to being ashamed of their classmates' comments.

#### 4.2. CLASSROOM-RELATED ANXIETY

Within the category of classroom-related anxiety, very few students referred to the so-called instructor factors as causes of speaking anxiety. In other words, neither instructors' beliefs about language teaching nor their teaching styles were perceived as sources of speaking anxiety. Yet the level of perceived support offered to students and the manner of error correction appeared to affect the level of anxiety. A lack of empathy from the language instructor and/or their expressed ignorance of the problem of speaking anxiety could trigger more anxiety. A Croatian student illustrated this by stating that "an instructor may insist on getting the answer by being quiet and waiting patiently, even though she can clearly see that I can't answer". Some students even assumed that instructors intentionally sought out and focused on the students who felt more speaking anxiety.

Regarding the manner of error correction, some interviewees claimed that receiving corrective feedback from instructors could provoke anxiety when instructors explicitly corrected them. However, when the manner of error correction comprised recasts, elicitation, clarification, repetition of error or metalinguistic feedback, students' anxiety levels were much lower. Reportedly, the least anxiety-inducing was a speaking task after the instructor's proactive focus on linguistic form with which the perceived linguistic problems were presented in advance, thus successfully minimizing speaking anxiety. Such situations did not appear to raise the students' levels of speaking anxiety as much as instructors' immediate, reactive focus.

A last group of classroom-related causes of speaking anxiety was categorized under the heading *classroom practices*. Both instructors and students confirmed

that performing/simulating real-life or complex speaking tasks, typical of BE instruction, (presentations, debates, discussions, negotiations, business-meeting simulations...) was very intimidating, especially when certain aggravating factors were present, such as the use of “tricky” grammar, reliance on economics knowledge and the unpredictability of the speaking situations arising from the complexity of group interaction. During such tasks, even low-anxiety students with good English admitted to avoiding conveying complex messages, freezing up and performing in a restrained, self-conscious manner. A quite proficient Slovenian student recalled that he “had quite a few serious mental blocks during a simulation of a business meeting. I was then thinking about my lousy performance for hours after it ended”. As the main reason for their anxiety, they stated that a group interaction rendered them incapable of pre-preparing any English, thus leaving them at the “mercy” of spontaneity. Another trigger was apparently the fact that instructors did not take enough time to prepare them for such intimidating speaking acts. A Croatian student stated that she “would appreciate more help from my teacher to help us become more relaxed...”. However, the instructors’ accounts clearly showed a different understanding of the reasons that may underlie classroom-related causes of speaking anxiety. To their minds, it was a students’ lack of requisite foreign language competence, not so much instructors’ erroneous classroom practices. A Slovenian instructor emphasized four potentially anxiety-raising factors that may resurface during a simulation of a business meeting:

Firstly, there is the issue of not knowing enough BE vocabulary; secondly, the issue of not knowing or understanding Economics as their field of study; thirdly, the inability to express various functions in English, how to agree, disagree, clarify, suggest... And lastly, the inability to maintain an adequate level of formality necessary in such meetings.

#### 4.3. SKILL-SPECIFIC ANXIETY

As a foreign language skill, speaking was determined as the most anxiety-inducing by previous research (MacIntyre and Gardner 1991b). The study corroborated these findings since the development of speaking skills in BE class was deemed the most problematic by three quarters of the interviewees. The results on skill-specific causes of speaking anxiety were the most indicative of the key assumption for this study, that the specifics of BE instruction were especially conducive to inducing BE students’ speaking anxiety. The ill effects of speaking anxiety were mostly evident when speaking anxiety rendered them unresponsive for BE input as well as when it prevented them from getting their message across,

thus expressing themselves as young intellectuals. Two causes were given for such claims: BE-word knowledge and a lack of carrier content. More precisely, not knowing the meaning and/or the pronunciations of the requisite BE lexis or from the inability to recollect it, and, secondly, the realization that the knowledge of economics, professional practice and business experience as a broader background for BE lexis was still missing. A combination of both causes appeared to exert the most detrimental effects on students' speaking anxiety. It accounted for increased speaking anxiety of more than a half of the interviewees whereas about a quarter of students with good general English seemed to be prone to speaking anxiety just due to poor carrier content. Some students emphasized the difference between general and BE lexis, claiming that BE must be quite radically different from general English vocabulary inasmuch as they cannot make use of the latter when speaking BE. A Serbian student pointed out that "when we speak about everyday life, sports, movies, concerts, I know the words. However, I can't speak BE using these words. I need new BE words, and some experience from the business world". Others professed to being hardworking and learning BE vocabulary extensively only to realize that they still experienced difficulty in retrieving words or that this practice did not reduce their speaking anxiety. A Bosnian student said: "I always take a lot of time to learn BE words, but still can't remember the right ones when I need them. The more I study them, the more business words appear".

Most of this type of anxiety seemed to arise from the concern over the ruinous effects of shame following one's inadequate or faulty understanding of economics terms both in BE and in their mother tongues. The latter was especially acute for speaking tasks that required debating, explaining or arguing. A Slovenian student noted that "in BE I still don't have enough knowledge of let's say accounting or stock markets in Slovenian, let alone in English. I probably need some business practice, not necessarily in English". A Bosnian instructor emphasized that "the most speaking anxiety is caused by the fact that students are required to speak about business practices that they cannot discuss even in Bosnian".

#### 4.4. SOCIALLY-IMPOSED SPEAKING ANXIETY

The analysis of the interviews revealed a number of socially-imposed causes of students' speaking anxiety. Quite a few indicated that the students have brought their own cultural values to BE class. Since some of the cultures in the Balkans may pressure students to respect the instructor as an authority, some students reported making less of an attempt to convey a personal opinion in English that would vary from that expressed by instructors or the majority of

classmates. Put simply, high-anxiety students seemed more willing than low-anxiety students to agree with everything said in their BE class to avoid two issues: firstly, expressing themselves in English, and secondly, expressing conflicting opinions. A Serbian student said "...in BE class some students keep a low profile because they'd need to say what they think about let's say contemporary advertising in English". A Slovenian instructor sought the reasons for students' avoidance behaviour in their elementary and high school experience with English, stating that

all too often elementary and high school English instructors are known to discourage really communicative speaking activities in English classes, focusing on reading, writing and controlled speaking activities, because these are easier to assess. Since really good objective criteria to evaluate speaking activities are hard to come by, or they are not instructor-friendly, they tend to do functional speaking tasks, such as giving directions to tourists in a city.

The second socially-imposed cause for speaking anxiety involved placing extremely high value on the attainment of English language proficiency, especially immaculate, faultless, native-speaker-like pronunciation, mainly as a measure of perceived future job competence and social acceptance. Thus, most interviewees feared that their less-than-perfect English may be indicative of their prospective lower socioeconomic status as well as their future professional underachievement. In a typical statement a Croatian student pointed out that "If nothing else, it's embarrassing if you speak English with a Croatian accent, and you're not going to get a good job... a course or two abroad could save the day".

Lastly, *parents' high expectations* were found to be a decisive socially-imposed anxiety-provoking cause. Quite a few students were apprehensive that their inferior knowledge of BE may have a disappointing impact on their parents, who were reportedly quite hopeful that successfully finished studies of economics meant a good knowledge of English along with improved opportunities for finding a better job.

## 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study tried to fill the research gap and determine the causes of speaking anxiety in BE classes in the Balkans. Although earlier research found that facilitating and debilitating anxiety work in unison (Scovel 1978; Dörnyei 2005), the study did not corroborate this fully as very few interviewees were able to distinguish among the two types of anxiety. Consistent with some earlier research (Young 1991), almost all of them, not just high-anxiety students, perceived their speaking anxiety as situation-dependent, thus higher in evaluative situations. However, it appeared

to be more or less always debilitating, quite unmanageable, often giving rise to avoidance behaviours, and precluding positive motivation. The results do not indicate any substantive differences among the interviewees from the six neighbouring countries. This finding was expected since due to the countries' long historical mutual heritage originating from the same country, ex-Yugoslavia, that they had been a part of, similar value and school systems with only a few negligible differences continue to prevail (Čepon *et al.* 2014). The inclusion of both instructors and students in the study has proved fruitful, enabling us to explore novel problem dimensions and compare a variety of standpoints and to identify the causes of speaking anxiety based on personal experience.

The study corroborated earlier findings on the causes of general English anxiety (Zhang and Zhong 2012), proving their relevancy and applicability to BE instruction. Just like general language anxiety, BE speaking anxiety appeared to be learner-induced, classroom-related, skill-specific, and socially-imposed. However, the research results confirmed the main assumption that the causes identified by expert literature for general English speaking anxiety would be different from those encountered by a target group of BE learners (Zhang and Zhong 2012). The major finding was that BE instruction does induce additional levels of speaking anxiety. More than half of the interviewees reported feeling quite anxious already while speaking general English, which was consistent with the research by Campbell and Ortiz (1991). Additionally, the majority of all interviewees claimed to experience speaking anxiety in the context of BE instruction. The reasons stemmed from the specifics of BE instruction, as it was clearly meant to be different from general English (Hyland 2002, 2008; Zhu 2008), intended for advanced learners and centred on the language, skills, discourse and genres appropriate for particular disciplines, occupations and activities (Stevens 1988; Dudley-Evans and St. John 1998; Gatehouse 2001). The two most obvious causes of BE speaking anxiety identified by this research were: firstly, students' lack of the real content of BE instruction (inadequate English language competence as a result of incomplete high-school foreign language instruction) and a lack of carrier content (still non-existent knowledge of economics and professional expertise). These two findings only reiterated the key significance of carrier content, related to various disciplines or occupations, for learning BE as a part of ESP, as previously noted by several authors (Stevens 1988; Dudley-Evans and St. John 1998; Gatehouse 2001).

To start with learner-induced causes of speaking anxiety, the study yielded quite a few valuable insights that have been categorized as follows based on earlier research: learners' unrealistic, erroneous or preconceived beliefs; setting

unrealistically high standards; poor language ability; learners' self-perception of their ability; inclined competitive nature of learners; and the dispositional fear of negative evaluation.

Regarding classroom-related causes of speaking anxiety, there were three clear causes: the level of perceived support offered to students, the manner of error correction, and the impact of certain complex speaking tasks used as BE classroom practices. Some anxiety-provoking causes here include instructors' ignoring, or exhibiting a lack of empathy for, students' speaking anxiety; intentionally seeking out high-anxiety students; and using the tactic of prolonged persistence, silent or not. One such finding that also lends support to certain other studies (Young 1991; Onwuegbuzie 1999; Tsiplakides and Keramida 2009), was the high anxiety-inducing potential of an instructor's insistence on a student's answer when a student was required to respond to questions in front of their peers. Regardless of whether the insistence took the form of unemphatic, prolonged, silent periods of an instructor's perseverance or an instructor's seemingly benign attempts to rectify a communication breakdown by asking multiple additional subquestions, the instructors' insistence at times brought about or exacerbated speaking anxiety (as it was perceived by students as interrogation). The instructors' perspectives did not differ from the students' observations, however the stated purpose of these actions was more benign: they were attempts to amend a communication breakdown and minimize students' speaking anxiety. Regarding the manner of error correction, the least anxiety-inducing appeared to be instructor recasts, elicitation, clarification, repetition of errors or metalinguistic feedback, while receiving corrective feedback in the form of an immediate, mid-sentence, explicit correction was rated as the most common cause of speaking anxiety (Horwitz *et al.* 1986; Young 1990), especially if it involved the correction of faulty economics knowledge.

Another very important cause of speaking anxiety, particularly anxiety-inducing when it involved a good knowledge of carrier content, was the unpredictability of group speaking situations in complex language-learning tasks. The latter could be so overwhelming that even low-anxiety students with good English experienced mental blocks, engaging in negative self-talk and ruminating over their poor performances (Gregersen and Horwitz 2002).

To move on to the results regarding skill-specific causes of speaking anxiety, it was evident from the results that the three most important causes (business-English word knowledge acquisition, a lack of the knowledge of carrier content in BE, and a necessity to speak unprepared in class in front of one's peers) quite often combined into a single, intimidating cause that exerted its detrimental effects

on BE students' speaking anxiety. The students who were required to speak unprepared in class in front of their peers and did not know or could not recall the necessary BE lexis and did not possess enough content knowledge of economics and were ashamed of it, felt the highest levels of speaking anxiety. As most interviewees also noted a lack of the knowledge of carrier content in their mother tongues, one of the logical solutions seems to be the preparation of a BE curriculum and learning materials based on the carrier content covered in other economics subjects. As advocated by earlier research (Horwitz *et al.* 1986; Price 1991), high-anxiety BE students from the study took more time to learn vocabulary items, but often experienced difficulty in recalling them. Taking these findings into consideration, and in compliance with some earlier research (Onwuegbuzie *et al.* 1999), any students' claims about conscientious vocabulary and BE lexis study accompanied by low willingness to participate in oral discussions could be warning signs of possible speaking anxiety.

Finally, the following three were identified as likely socially-imposed causes of speaking anxiety: a disinclination to express one's real opinion on economics topics in BE class, placing extremely high value on the attainment of BE language proficiency and parental expectation that one's good BE knowledge automatically leads to a better job. As per Steinberg and Horwitz (1986), the study found that BE students were reluctant to disagree with certain views presented in BE class due to a combined lack of real content and carrier content. According to the results, some students believed that their inferior English knowledge and/or flawed pronunciation might be suggestive of their current or prospective lower socioeconomic status as well as their future professional underachievement. They seemed to agonize over the possibility of being stigmatized because English appeared to have special status as an established, influential foreign language in the Balkans, almost to the point where knowledge of English could be an indicator of one's socioeconomic status (Pinter 2011). These findings confirmed some previous research (Horwitz 1988) that adult students may hold preconceived beliefs that pronunciation was the most important aspect of language learning, that a foreign language should be spoken with complete accuracy and that guessing at unknown foreign language words was forbidden.

Although this study investigated the causes of BE speaking anxiety in higher education institutions in the Balkans and found valuable insights into the causes of BE speaking anxiety, its findings are difficult to generalize to BE students at large. In future, researchers could perhaps conduct some quantitative studies on a representative sample with a view to generalizing the results. Additional methods, such as participant observation, could be used to identify the extent to

which the specifics of BE instruction induce BE speaking anxiety. Furthermore, future research into different educational environments, such as private language-learning centres –or conducted in other ESOL countries, could provide valuable information on minimizing BE speaking anxiety.

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