Student Anxiety Factors in Speaking Courses

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Abstract

This study investigates speaking anxiety as a major affective factor influencing EFL learners' performance in English-speaking classrooms. Using a descriptive quantitative approach, data were collected through a ten-item Likert-scale questionnaire to explore students' emotional reactions to various speaking tasks. The findings revealed that EFL students experienced the highest levels of anxiety during spontaneous speaking and before class sessions began. Moderate anxiety was also observed in situations involving public speaking and fear of negative peer evaluation, while avoidance of participation was relatively low. These results indicate that speaking anxiety is multidimensional, influenced by anticipatory stress, performance pressure, and fear of social judgment, rather than solely by linguistic competence.

Keywords: classroom performance, emotional factors, foreign language anxiety, speaking anxiety, EFL learners,

Introduction

Language learning involves not only the mastery of grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, but also the management of learners' emotional and psychological experiences in the classroom. As Horwitz et al. (1986) argue, "anxiety is a specific, situation-bound construct" that emerges particularly in foreign language learning contexts. One of the most common affective barriers in language learning, especially in speaking-focused classes, is Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA). Horwitz et al. (1986) define FLA as a "distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning," characterized by worry, fear of negative evaluation, and apprehension when using the target language, particularly during speaking activities.

Speaking courses tend to provoke higher levels of anxiety because they require learners to perform publicly and spontaneously. MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) highlight that "anxiety can interfere with the acquisition, retention, and production of a second language," making speaking tasks especially challenging. Fear of making mistakes, being laughed at, or receiving negative feedback often leads students to avoid participation. Liu and Jackson (2008) similarly report that students with high speaking anxiety "tend to remain silent and withdraw from classroom interaction," even when they possess adequate linguistic knowledge.

In the Indonesian EFL context, anxiety in speaking courses is often intensified by limited opportunities for authentic English communication outside the classroom. As Woodrow (2006) notes, anxiety increases when learners are placed in "high-stakes speaking situations" where they feel their performance is constantly evaluated. Indonesian students frequently experience anxiety

due to concerns about pronunciation, grammar accuracy, and peer judgment, which inhibits their willingness to speak regardless of their actual proficiency. Cultural factors that emphasize saving face and avoiding public mistakes may further heighten students' emotional pressure in oral communication activities.

Several classroom-related factors also contribute to students' anxiety in speaking courses. Oral presentations, impromptu speaking tasks, role plays, and question-and-answer sessions are often perceived as highly threatening. Young (1991) states that "classroom procedures and instructional practices are major sources of language anxiety," particularly when correction is delivered publicly or abruptly. Teachers' attitudes, feedback style, and classroom atmosphere can either alleviate or intensify these feelings of anxiety.

This study aims to explore the types and intensity of anxiety experienced by university students in an English-speaking course. It seeks to identify classroom situations that most strongly trigger anxiety and to examine how this anxiety influences students' communicative behavior. By focusing on learners' perceptions, the study provides insight into the emotional challenges faced by EFL students and emphasizes the importance of emotionally responsive and supportive pedagogy in promoting effective oral communication.

Method

This study employed a descriptive quantitative approach to examine the levels and sources of speaking anxiety among EFL learners during English-speaking classroom activities. The research focused on students' psychological reactions in various speaking situations, including oral presentations, speaking tests, spontaneous questioning, and classroom discussions. The participants were 13 fourth-semester students from the English Language Education Study Program at a private university in Indonesia, selected through purposive sampling to ensure they had prior experience in speaking-focused courses. This sample was considered appropriate for identifying common psychological patterns associated with anxiety during oral tasks. Data were collected using a 10-item structured questionnaire adapted from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz et al. (1986). The questionnaire used a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The items measured key indicators of foreign language anxiety, including communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, test anxiety, and lack of self-confidence, and students were asked to respond based on their actual classroom experiences.

Table 1
Constructs and Indicators

No	Construct	Indicator Description	Number of Items
1.	Communication Apprehension	Nervousness when speaking in front of the class and responding in English spontaneously	2
2.	Fear of Negative Evaluation	Concern over classmates' reactions and worry about making mistakes	2
3.	Test Anxiety	Anxiety during English-speaking or listening tests, even when well-prepared	2

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| 4. | Lack of Confidence | Feelings of confusion, discomfort, and reduced confidence when expressing ideas in English | 2 |
| 5. | Avoidance Behavior | Tendency to avoid participation or feel more relaxed when not speaking in public | 2 |

The questionnaire included statements designed to capture students' emotional responses during English-speaking activities. Sample items reflected common anxiety experiences, such as feeling nervous even when well prepared for an English presentation, avoiding class participation due to fear of making mistakes, feeling more relaxed when not required to speak in front of others, and worrying about being laughed at by classmates for making errors. These items were intended to explore feelings of nervousness, fear of negative evaluation, and avoidance behavior related to speaking in English.

The responses from 13 students were analyzed descriptively using Microsoft Excel. Mean scores were calculated for each questionnaire item to identify the most prominent indicators of speaking anxiety. These scores were used to determine patterns of anxiety related to students' psychological reactions during English-speaking activities. A pie chart was then generated to visualize the proportional distribution of anxiety across the ten indicators. Key statements analyzed included feelings of nervousness despite preparation for presentations, avoidance of participation due to fear of making mistakes, increased comfort when not required to speak in front of others, and worry about negative peer reactions. The results were interpreted to gain a deeper understanding of students' emotional responses to English-speaking tasks and to inform discussion on the importance of emotionally supportive classroom instruction.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the results of students' responses to the 10-item speaking anxiety questionnaire. The data collected from 13 fourth-semester students were analyzed to identify the types and intensity of anxiety they experienced in English-speaking situations. The descriptive analysis revealed that students demonstrated varying levels of anxiety across the ten statements, indicating differences in how they reacted to specific speaking tasks and classroom situations. The mean scores for each anxiety indicator are summarized in Table 1, which illustrates patterns of nervousness, fear of negative evaluation, and reluctance to participate during English-speaking activities.

Table 1
Mean Scores of Speaking Anxiety Indicators

No	Statement	Mean Score
1.	I feel nervous when I have to speak English in front of the class.	3.31
2.	I worry that my classmates will laugh at me if I make mistakes in English.	3.31
3.	I feel anxious during listening or speaking tests in English.	3.23

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4.	I often avoid participating in English class because I am afraid of making mistakes.	2.92
5.	I lose confidence when trying to express my thoughts in English.	3.15
6.	I feel tense and confused when called upon to answer in English class.	3.23
7.	I feel more relaxed if I don't have to speak English in front of others.	3.38
8.	I feel nervous even when I am well-prepared for an English presentation.	3.23
9.	My heart races when I have to use English spontaneously.	3.69
10.	I often feel worried before English class begins.	3.62

The highest average score (3.69) was recorded for the item "My heart races when I have to use English spontaneously," indicating that spontaneous speaking is the most anxiety-inducing scenario for students. This is closely followed by "I often feel worried before English class begins" (3.62), reflecting high anticipatory anxiety before entering the classroom.

Moderate scores were found in responses such as "I feel nervous when I have to speak English in front of the class" (3.31), "I worry that my classmates will laugh at me if I make mistakes in English" (3.31), and "I feel more relaxed if I don't have to speak English in front of others" (3.38). These items highlight that fear of negative evaluation and self-consciousness in public speaking are prevalent.

In contrast, the item with the lowest mean score was "I often avoid participating in English class because I am afraid of making mistakes" (2.92). This suggests that although students experience anxiety, most of them do not withdraw from speaking activities entirely, but rather continue to engage while managing their internal discomfort.

The analysis of the questionnaire responses indicated that anxiety levels were consistently moderate to high across several speaking-related situations. The statement "I often feel worried before English class begins" received the highest average score, suggesting that students experience anticipatory anxiety even before they enter the classroom. The next most common anxiety trigger was spontaneous speaking, with students reporting racing heartbeats and nervousness when asked to speak without preparation.

Another strong pattern emerged in responses to the item "I feel nervous even when I am well-prepared for an English presentation," indicating that preparation alone does not eliminate anxiety. These findings suggest that anxiety is rooted not only in linguistic ability but also in deeper psychological fears related to social judgment, error-making, and performance pressure.

Interestingly, while students expressed high levels of internal stress, their responses to the item "I often avoid participating in class" were generally lower. This means that although students experience discomfort, they still make efforts to engage in speaking tasks, albeit with internal struggle.

These results demonstrate that speaking anxiety among EFL students is a multidimensional experience, with strong emotional responses arising even before speaking takes place. Anticipatory anxiety, or the stress felt before class begins, indicates that speaking tasks are perceived as threatening experiences. Such perceptions may stem from previous negative experiences, rigid classroom practices, or personal insecurities.

The findings of this study reveal that speaking anxiety among EFL students is most strongly associated with spontaneous speaking and anticipatory stress before class begins. The highest mean score for the item *"My heart races when I have to use English spontaneously"* indicates that unprepared speaking situations trigger intense physiological and emotional reactions. This supports MacIntyre and Gardner's (1991) view that language anxiety "interferes with the cognitive processing of speech," particularly when learners must respond quickly without sufficient planning. Similarly, Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) describe such reactions as central characteristics of Foreign Language Anxiety, marked by tension and apprehension during real-time language use.

High levels of worry reported before English class begins reflect strong anticipatory anxiety. This finding aligns with Woodrow (2006), who notes that learners experience "heightened anxiety in high-stakes speaking environments" due to the anticipation of public evaluation and possible failure. The presence of anxiety before any task occurs suggests that students mentally prepare for negative outcomes, which can reduce their concentration and willingness to participate once the class begins.

Moderate scores related to fear of being laughed at and nervousness when speaking in front of the class underscore the powerful role of social evaluation in shaping students' emotional responses. Young (1991) argues that fear of negative evaluation is one of the strongest contributors to language anxiety, particularly in classrooms where errors are corrected publicly. These results confirm that learners are highly sensitive to peer judgment and classroom atmosphere, and that public speaking increases feelings of vulnerability and self-consciousness.

Interestingly, the relatively lower score for avoidance behavior indicates that most students do not completely withdraw from speaking activities despite experiencing anxiety. This finding supports Liu and Jackson's (2008) observation that many anxious learners "continue to engage in classroom interaction despite internal fear," suggesting that anxiety often manifests as internal stress rather than overt silence.

Another important finding is that anxiety persists even when students are well prepared, as reflected in their responses to prepared speaking tasks. This supports Horwitz et al.'s (1986) assertion that foreign language anxiety is not simply a result of limited linguistic competence, but a deeper psychological response related to self-perception and fear of judgment. Preparation alone, therefore, is insufficient to eliminate anxiety without emotionally supportive learning conditions.

Overall, the results demonstrate that speaking anxiety among EFL students is a multidimensional phenomenon involving anticipatory anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and physiological stress responses. These findings are consistent with previous research emphasizing the importance of emotionally safe classrooms. As Oxford (1999) states, "lowering anxiety should be a primary goal of language instruction," because it allows learners to take risks and communicate more freely. Furthermore, the strong anxiety associated with spontaneous speech aligns with Gregersen and Horwitz's (2002) findings on performance perfectionism, where learners fear that hesitation or errors signal incompetence. Although students may continue to participate actively, their internal discomfort highlights the need for emotionally responsive pedagogy as an essential component of effective speaking instruction.

Conclusion

This study concludes that speaking anxiety among EFL students is common and multifaceted, with the highest levels occurring before class and during spontaneous speaking activities. These findings indicate that language performance is closely linked to emotional readiness and that anxiety can affect even well-prepared and motivated learners. To address this issue, language instructors should implement activities that gradually build students' speaking confidence and reduce performance pressure, such as pair and group discussions, role-plays, and supportive feedback. Creating a classroom environment that encourages risk-taking and accepts mistakes as part of the learning process is essential. By prioritizing emotional safety in language instruction, educators can help students develop from anxious learners into more confident and effective communicators.

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