

STUDENTS' SPEAKING ANXIETY IN ENGLISH AS FOREIGN LANGUAGE (EFL) CLASSROOM AND THEIR STRATEGIES TO COPE WITH IT

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ABSTRACT

Speaking anxiety is a common challenge faced by students learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL), often hindering their ability to communicate effectively. This study investigates the nature of students' speaking anxiety in EFL classrooms and the coping strategies they employ to manage it. The study was conducted in Sumbawa University of Technology and the samples of the study were taken from Informatics Department. Data were collected through questionnaires distributed to 23 informatics students, focusing on their experiences of anxiety during speaking tasks and the techniques they use to overcome it. The findings reveal that fear of making mistakes, lack of confidence, and worry about negative evaluation are primary sources of speaking anxiety. Students exhibit various physical and emotional symptoms such as trembling, sweating, and nervousness. To cope with these challenges, students adopt strategies including thorough preparation, positive self-talk, peer support, and relaxation techniques. However, some students still resort to avoidance behaviors that may limit their language development. The study highlights the critical role of teachers/ lecturers in creating a supportive, low-pressure classroom environment that encourages risk-taking and normalizes errors as part of the learning process. It also suggests that institutions should provide training for educators to address affective factors and offer counseling services for anxious learners. By understanding and addressing speaking anxiety, educators can better support students in achieving greater fluency and confidence in English communication.

Keywords: speaking anxiety; anxiety strategies; English as Foreign Language students.

1. INTRODUCTION

Speaking is widely recognized as one of the most complex and demanding skills in second or foreign language learning. Among the four language skills, speaking requires not only mastery of linguistic elements but also the confidence to produce language spontaneously in real-time. For students

learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL), speaking anxiety has emerged as one of the most pervasive barriers to successful language acquisition. It is not uncommon for learners to report feelings of nervousness, fear of negative evaluation, embarrassment, or even physical symptoms such as sweating and shaking when asked to speak in class.

Foreign language anxiety, as defined by Horwitz et al. is “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process” (Horwitz et al., 1986). While anxiety can appear in various forms during language learning, speaking anxiety is often considered the most acute. It manifests when students are expected to produce verbal output in front of others, particularly in a classroom setting where performance is constantly monitored and evaluated.

Several studies have highlighted that speaking anxiety negatively impacts learners' oral performance, participation, and long-term confidence. For instance, MacIntyre and Gardner found that anxiety can interfere with all stages of language acquisition such as input, processing, and output (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). Speaking anxiety can prevent students from volunteering answers, engaging in conversations, or even attending speaking classes. It becomes a psychological filter that blocks communication and reduces willingness to communicate (Liu & Jackson, 2008).

In addition to internal psychological factors, external classroom dynamics also contribute to anxiety. These include fear of making grammatical errors, limited vocabulary, pronunciation difficulties, and fear of peer judgment. In cultures where making mistakes is frowned upon, students may experience heightened anxiety due to the perceived social risks of speaking incorrectly. Consequently, even proficient learners may struggle with speaking tasks due to these affective barriers (Tóth, 2008). Despite the challenges, students are not passive recipients of anxiety. Many adopt various strategies to cope with their speaking fear. According to Kondo and Ying-Ling, these strategies fall into several categories: preparation (e.g., rehearsing or studying in advance), relaxation (e.g., breathing techniques), positive thinking (e.g., self-encouragement), peer seeking (e.g., working with friends), and resignation (e.g., avoiding participation) (Kondo & Ying-Ling, 2004). These coping mechanisms, though varied, reflect students' efforts to navigate the emotional challenges of speaking in a foreign language.

Recognizing and addressing speaking anxiety is crucial for both learners and educators. Understanding the sources of anxiety and the strategies students use to cope can inform pedagogical practices and foster a more supportive classroom environment. Teachers can play a vital role in reducing anxiety by creating low-pressure speaking opportunities, encouraging positive peer interaction, and acknowledging students' emotional responses to speaking tasks.

Given the significance of this issue, the current study aims to explore the types and causes of speaking anxiety experienced by EFL learners especially the students of informatics department of Sumbawa University of Technology, as well as the strategies they use to manage or reduce this anxiety. This study was conducted in Sumbawa University of Technology due to speaking anxiety that often faced by the students, particularly those from non-language majors like informatics major. many students at this university, struggle with speaking anxiety due to limited language exposure and practice opportunities. By identifying these elements, the study seeks to provide insights that can contribute to more effective teaching practices and improved student outcomes in speaking performance.

Research Problems

This study aims to explore the nature of speaking anxiety among EFL students of Informatics Department of Sumbawa University of Technology and the strategies they employ to cope with it. The research is guided by the following questions:

1. What are the main sources of speaking anxiety experienced by the students of Informatics department in the classroom?

2. What strategies do students of informatics use to cope with their speaking anxiety?

Literature Review

Speaking Anxiety in EFL Classrooms

Speaking anxiety is a specific type of language anxiety that arises when learners are required to use oral language in a second or foreign language setting. Horwitz et al. were among the first to systematically describe foreign language anxiety as a “distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning” (Horwitz et al., 1986). Speaking anxiety, as a subcomponent, is particularly debilitating because speaking demands real-time production, interaction, and social performance, which often trigger fear of making mistakes, being laughed at, or receiving negative evaluation.

Research indicates that speaking anxiety is a common phenomenon among EFL learners, particularly in contexts where English is not widely used outside the classroom. Liu and Jackson found that Chinese EFL learners often avoided speaking activities due to fear of negative evaluation, lack of confidence, and inadequate vocabulary (Liu & Jackson, 2008). Similarly, Nuur et al. emphasized that EFL students’ anxiety tends to increase during oral presentations and speaking tests, especially when they are unprepared or unsure of their language ability (Nuur et al., 2023).

Several factors contribute to speaking anxiety, including individual learner differences (e.g., personality, self-esteem), linguistic challenges (e.g., grammar, pronunciation), and contextual elements such as teacher behavior and peer attitudes (Arifin et al., 2023); (Tóth, 2008). In many Asian educational settings, students are often reluctant to speak up due to cultural tendencies to avoid public mistakes and maintain group harmony.

Impact of Speaking Anxiety on Learning

Anxiety has a profound impact on language learning outcomes. According to MacIntyre and Gardner, anxiety affects the three stages of language learning such as input, processing, and output which means anxious learners are less likely to absorb new material, think clearly in the target language, or produce spoken responses fluently (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). High levels of speaking anxiety are also associated with lower oral proficiency, reduced classroom participation, and poor academic performance (Nuur et al., 2023).

This emotional barrier can also reduce learners' willingness to communicate (WTC), a key predictor of speaking fluency and language development. When students fear judgment or ridicule, they tend to avoid speaking opportunities altogether, which limits their exposure to real-time language use and delays improvement (Nurfajri Maharani & Roslaini, 2021).

Coping Strategies Used by EFL Learners

Despite the challenges posed by speaking anxiety, learners often develop coping strategies to manage their emotional responses. Kondo and Ying-Ling categorized these strategies into five types: preparation (e.g., studying and rehearsing in advance), relaxation (e.g., deep breathing, meditation), positive thinking (e.g., self-encouragement), peer seeking (e.g., practicing with friends), and resignation (e.g., avoiding participation as a form of defense) (Kondo & Ying-Ling, 2004).

More recent studies confirm the relevance of these strategies. For example, Muhibbah and Amalia observed that EFL students involved in extracurricular speaking clubs, such as English debate societies, frequently use peer support and extensive practice to reduce anxiety (Muhibbah & Amalia, 2025). Furthermore, Theriana emphasized the role of teacher feedback and classroom atmosphere in encouraging students to speak more comfortably. Educators have a crucial role in helping students manage anxiety (Theriana, 2023). Afidawati et al. recommend that teachers incorporate anxiety-reducing

techniques in their pedagogy, such as using low-stakes speaking activities, creating a supportive environment, and offering constructive rather than punitive feedback (Afidawati et al., 2024).

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to explore the nature of speaking anxiety among EFL students and the strategies they use to cope with it. A qualitative approach is appropriate for understanding the emotional and psychological experiences of learners, especially in educational settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study sought to capture the depth and diversity of students' perceptions, feelings, and strategies in response to speaking anxiety through direct accounts and reflections.

The participants consisted of 23 students of Informatics department of Sumbawa University of Technology. They were selected using purposive sampling based on their willingness to participate and their experience in EFL speaking classes. The participants represented various levels of language proficiency (from beginner to upper-intermediate) and were enrolled in English course during the academic year 2024–2025. This participant size aligns with Creswell's suggestion that qualitative studies with 5 to 25 participants can provide rich insights while maintaining manageability in data analysis (Creswell, 2013).

Research Instruments

Two primary research instruments were used to collect data in this study. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain in-depth information about the participants' sources of speaking anxiety and the coping strategies they employed. These interviews followed a flexible protocol, allowing the researcher to ask follow-up questions based on participants' responses, thereby facilitating a more nuanced understanding of their experiences (Dörnyei, 2007). Second, open-ended questionnaires were distributed to all participants prior to the interviews in order to collect initial data and identify major themes. These questionnaires provided students with the opportunity to reflect on their experiences with anxiety and the coping mechanisms they used, without the pressure of real-time interaction. Both instruments were adapted from previous research by (Kondo & Ying-Ling, 2004) and (Tóth, 2008), and were reviewed and validated by two experts in language education to ensure clarity, relevance, and appropriateness for the target population.

Data Collection Procedure

The data collection process was conducted over four weeks. First, students completed the open-ended questionnaires online via Google Forms to reveal the types and causes of students anxiety in speaking, while the interviews were administered to investigate the strategies and reasons to use certain strategies to cope with the anxiety they face when doing speaking activity in the class. The interviews lasting approximately 20–30 minutes for each students, and was conducted in either Bahasa Indonesia or English, based on the participant's comfort level. To ensure ethical research practice, **informed consent** was obtained from all participants, and they were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. Participation was entirely voluntary, and they were allowed to withdraw at any time without penalty.

Data Analysis

The data from both interviews and questionnaires were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process involved six steps: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Three major themes were anticipated: (1) causes of speaking anxiety, (2) emotional and physical symptoms of anxiety, and (3) strategies used to cope with speaking anxiety. Patterns were identified across responses and cross-validated to ensure consistency. To enhance the credibility of the findings, member checking was employed, where participants were asked to review and confirm the accuracy of the interpretations made from their responses. In addition, peer debriefing was conducted with fellow researchers to minimize bias.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal several key themes related to students' speaking anxiety in the EFL classroom. In terms of sources of anxiety, students commonly reported a fear of making mistakes, low self-confidence, and concern about negative judgment from their peers. The symptoms associated with this anxiety were both physical and psychological, including sweating, trembling, mental blocks, and even panic in some situations. To cope with their anxiety, students employed a range of coping strategies such as preparation before speaking tasks, engaging in positive self-talk to boost confidence, and seeking emotional or academic support from peers. While for the role of the teacher and classroom environment emerged as a critical factor. A supportive and encouraging classroom atmosphere was found to significantly reduce students' anxiety levels. In contrast, environments where teachers used harsh correction or criticism tended to increase anxiety and discourage participation.

Summary of Key Findings

Theme	Key Findings
Sources of Anxiety	Fear of mistakes, low self-confidence, peer judgment
Symptoms	Sweating, trembling, mental blocks, panic
Coping Strategies	Preparation, positive self-talk, peer support, avoidance
Teacher and Classroom Role	Supportive environments reduce anxiety; harsh correction increases it

Sources of Speaking Anxiety

Analysis of the open-ended questionnaires and interview transcripts revealed that students experienced speaking anxiety due to three main factors: fear of making mistakes, low self-confidence, and peer judgment. Most participants reported that they often hesitated to speak in class because they feared being laughed at by their peers or receiving negative feedback from their lecturers. One student noted:

“Saya tahu jawabanya, cuman saya gak bisa ngungkapin aja. Saya takut kalau grmmarnya salah dan orang-orang pasti menghakimi kesalahan saya itu.

“I know the answer, but I just can't say it. I'm scared my grammar is wrong and everyone will judge me.”

The finding above is consistent with Liu and Jackson (2008), who found that fear of negative evaluation is a key predictor of speaking anxiety in Asian EFL contexts. Other contributing factors included lack of vocabulary, poor pronunciation, and previous negative experiences, such as being corrected harshly in front of others. As Arifin et al. emphasize, culturally-rooted norms like maintaining face and avoiding embarrassment often amplify anxiety in Indonesian classrooms, where students prefer silence over risk (Arifin et al., 2023).

Manifestations of Anxiety

Students described a variety of symptoms linked to their speaking anxiety. These included physical symptoms such as sweating, trembling, and heart palpitations, as well as psychological effects like panic, blanking out, and self-doubt. Some students also admitted to skipping speaking classes or pretending to be ill when they knew they would be required to speak. These manifestations align with Horwitz et al.'s theory of foreign language classroom anxiety, which categorizes such responses into communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation (Horwitz et al., 1986).

Coping Strategies Used by Students

Despite experiencing high levels of speaking anxiety, students reported employing various coping strategies to manage their discomfort in the EFL classroom. One of the most frequently mentioned strategies was preparation. Many students stated that they rehearsed their speeches or practiced with friends before speaking in class. For instance, one participant explained:

“Saya catat dan latihan di depan cermin sesering mungkin sebelum saya presentasi di kelas. Cara seperti ini sangat membantuk saya untuk selalu merasa siap

“I write and practice in front of the mirror many times before my presentation. It helps me feel ready,”

The statement highlighted the role of preparation in building confidence and reducing uncertainty. Another commonly used strategy was positive self-talk, where students attempted to calm themselves with internal affirmations such as “Saya pasti bisa” (I can do this) or “Gak apa-apa berbuat kesalahan” (It’s ok to make mistakes). This aligns with the concept of positive thinking described by Kondo and Ying-Ling, which helps learners manage fear by re-framing their internal dialogue (Kondo & Ying-Ling, 2004).

In addition, many participants emphasized the value of peer support. They described practicing with trusted friends or forming informal study groups to rehearse together. This collaborative approach not only improved their speaking skills but also lessened their sense of isolation, reflecting the importance of social support systems in reducing speaking-related stress, as noted by Muhibbah and Amalia (Muhibbah & Amalia, 2025). However, not all coping strategies were constructive. Some students admitted to employing avoidance behaviors, such as staying silent during speaking tasks or avoiding eye contact with the teacher. While this is a common short-term response to anxiety, it can hinder language development if overused (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994).

Overall, these coping strategies indicate that students are not passive victims of their anxiety. Instead, they actively engage in self-regulation and social strategies to navigate the emotional challenges of speaking in a foreign language. Their efforts demonstrate resilience and a desire to improve, even in the face of psychological discomfort.

The Role of Teachers and Classroom Environment

Students emphasized that teacher attitude and classroom atmosphere significantly influenced their anxiety levels. Supportive teachers who encouraged students, corrected gently, and fostered a non-judgmental environment were praised. Conversely, strict or overly critical teachers tended to increase anxiety. Theriana suggests that EFL instructors play a pivotal role in reducing student anxiety through the use of low-stakes speaking tasks, gradual exposure, and scaffolded support (Theriana, 2023). Similarly, Afidawati et al. argue that implementing collaborative learning and peer feedback can make speaking activities more approachable (Afidawati et al., 2024).

The whole findings suggest that speaking anxiety remains a pervasive issue in EFL classrooms, particularly in cultures where learners place high value on face-saving and academic perfection. Although students adopt various strategies to manage their anxiety, these strategies are not always effective in the long term, especially when avoidance becomes a habitual response. Educators must therefore recognize the emotional dimension of language learning and incorporate affective strategies into their pedagogy. Creating emotionally safe classroom environments, offering constructive feedback, and designing progressive speaking tasks that gradually build learners' confidence are essential steps. Furthermore, as recommended by Nuur et al., integrating student-led speaking activities and peer collaboration can foster a sense of autonomy and comfort in oral language production (Nuur et al., 2023). The findings also underscore the need for broader institutional support, including access to counseling services, teacher training in affective teaching practices, and curriculum designs that balance the development of fluency, accuracy, and emotional well-being.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored the causes of students' speaking anxiety in EFL classrooms and the coping strategies they employ to manage this anxiety. The findings indicate that speaking anxiety is a prevalent issue influenced by fear of making mistakes, low self-confidence, and concern about peer judgment. Such anxiety manifests both physically and psychologically, hindering students' active participation in oral communication activities.

Despite these challenges, students actively adopt various coping mechanisms, including thorough preparation, positive self-talk, and seeking peer support. However, some students still rely on avoidance, which can be detrimental in the long run. The role of teachers and classroom environment is also critical; supportive, encouraging, and low-pressure settings significantly reduce anxiety and foster better speaking performance. In sum, addressing speaking anxiety requires a holistic approach that considers not only students' emotional needs but also pedagogical practices and classroom dynamics.

Several recommendations are proposed to address speaking anxiety in the EFL classroom. For teachers, it is essential to create a safe and supportive classroom environment where mistakes are viewed as a natural part of the learning process rather than as failures. For students, regular practice outside the classroom is highly beneficial. This could include rehearsing speeches, engaging in self-practice, or joining language clubs to build confidence in a low-stakes setting. Students should also be encouraged to use positive coping strategies, such as deep breathing and affirmations, to manage symptoms of anxiety. At the institutional level, schools and universities should provide teacher training programs that emphasize the importance of affective factors in language learning. At last, future research is encouraged to explore the longitudinal effects of coping strategies on students' speaking anxiety and to investigate how these patterns manifest across different cultural or educational contexts. Such research would contribute to a deeper understanding of anxiety in EFL settings and support the development of more effective, context-sensitive interventions.

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