Exploring English-Speaking Anxiety Levels and Contributing Factors among Indonesian EFL Undergraduate Students

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Abstract

This study explores the classification of English-speaking anxiety levels and identifies the underlying factors contributing to speaking anxiety among EFL undergraduate students. A descriptive qualitative approach was employed, using two main instruments: a questionnaire adapted from Horwitz et al.'s (1986) Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) and semi-structured interviews that provided deeper insights into students' perspectives and experiences. The participants were 24 students from an English Education program. The findings revealed that the majority of students (75%) experienced moderate anxiety, while 16.67% showed low anxiety and 8.33% high anxiety. These outcomes reflect a complex interplay of anxiety dimensions: Fear of Negative Evaluation was the most prominent factor (M = 2.47), followed by Communication Apprehension (M = 2.37), and Test Anxiety as the least influential (M = 2.24). The overall results indicate that speaking anxiety was present but not overwhelmingly severe among participants. The study highlights the importance of understanding both the frequency and sources of anxiety, as such insights can inform strategies to foster supportive and non-judgmental classroom environments. Creating these conditions may encourage students to develop greater confidence, enhance oral performance, and reduce their speaking anxiety in EFL contexts.

Keywords: foreign language classroom anxiety, speaking anxiety, language performance

1. Introduction

Proficiency in spoken English is crucial in today's globalized world, serving as a core medium of interaction across educational, professional, and technological domains. Speaking not only conveys ideas but also reflects an individual's confidence in social and academic contexts. In second language acquisition, oral proficiency is often regarded as a key indicator of success, as it demonstrates the learner's ability to engage in real-time communication. Various instructional methods, such as group discussions, role-plays, and presentations, are commonly employed to promote speaking skills and encourage active participation.

Despite its importance, speaking remains one of the most challenging skills in English language learning. It requires simultaneous cognitive processing, physical articulation, and socio-cultural awareness (Wijaya, 2023). These demands are particularly pressing in EFL contexts such as Indonesia, where learners have limited opportunities to use English outside the classroom. As a result, students are often expected to display fluency and confidence in formal settings despite insufficient real-world exposure.

In classroom interactions, EFL learners are frequently required to perform in oral presentations, discussions, or spontaneous exchanges (Najiha & Sailun, 2021). Many, however, report discomfort, hesitation, and low confidence during such tasks. This tendency is strongly associated with Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), a type of situational anxiety first conceptualized by Horwitz et al. (1986) through the development of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). FLA is not a clinical disorder but manifests in worry, tension, and discomfort when speaking a foreign language. According to Horwitz et al., FLA comprises three major components: communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety, all of which can reduce students' willingness to engage in communicative tasks.

In the Indonesian context, speaking anxiety persists as a significant obstacle. Students often avoid speaking activities due to nervousness, lack of preparation, or low self-efficacy, which limits practice opportunities and hinders academic performance (Wijaya, 2023; Surji & Surji, 2024; Kulsum & Ridwan, 2025). This cycle of anxiety and avoidance makes achieving communicative competence particularly challenging. Public speaking anxiety, a subset of

FLA, is especially evident in presentations or impromptu speaking tasks, with symptoms ranging from trembling and rapid heartbeat to fear of negative judgment and mental blocks (Horwitz, 2001; Wijaya, 2023).

Previous studies have highlighted both internal and external causes of speaking anxiety. Rajitha and Alamelu (2020) found that anxiety stems from shyness, low confidence, peer pressure, and pronunciation difficulties. Similarly, Kowaas (2020) reported that limited vocabulary and fear of ridicule contribute to students' hesitation. The classroom environment and instructional strategies also play a significant role in shaping anxiety experiences (Surji & Surji, 2024). These findings collectively emphasize the complex and multidimensional nature of speaking anxiety, suggesting that pedagogical sensitivity is essential.

To address these issues, the present study investigates the levels and contributing factors of English-speaking anxiety among undergraduate EFL students in Bandung, Indonesia. Guided by Horwitz et al.'s (1986) framework, this research employs a descriptive qualitative approach using FLCAS and interviews. By focusing on adult learners in higher education, the study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of foreign language anxiety and to provide pedagogical implications for fostering supportive, low-anxiety learning environments.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Challenges in Speaking English

Speaking is widely recognized as one of the most challenging aspects of second language acquisition due to its spontaneous and interactive nature (Wijaya, 2023). In EFL contexts such as Indonesia, opportunities to practice spoken English are often limited to the classroom. However, classroom opportunities are not always maximized because many students experience discomfort and nervousness when speaking in public. Internal and external factors—such as fear of errors, low self-confidence, shyness, and limited vocabulary—frequently contribute to learners' reluctance to participate in speaking tasks (Budayanti et al., 2023). As a result, students may remain silent despite understanding the content, which in turn hinders their communicative development.

2.2. The Nature of Anxiety

Language learning anxiety refers to complex emotional and cognitive responses that arise during classroom interactions (Horwitz et al., 1986). From a psychological perspective, anxiety can be categorized into trait anxiety (a relatively stable personality tendency) and state anxiety (a reaction to specific contexts) (Najiha & Sailun, 2021). Speaking anxiety typically aligns with state anxiety, as it occurs in context-specific situations such as presentations, discussions, or spontaneous questioning. Horwitz et al. (1986) conceptualized foreign language anxiety into three main components: communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. These components are closely tied to learners' perceptions of risk and self-efficacy in communicative tasks.

The symptoms of speaking anxiety are often both physical (trembling, sweating, rapid heartbeat) and cognitive (self-doubt, worry, loss of concentration) (Budayanti et al., 2023; Alnatour, 2018). Such symptoms are readily observable in classroom settings, where students may avoid eye contact, hesitate, or exhibit nervous body language when required to speak.

2.3. Speaking Anxiety in Language Learning

Speaking anxiety—sometimes referred to as public speaking anxiety—is a type of performance anxiety that hinders effective communication in a foreign language. Horwitz (2001) noted that since the 1960s, linguists have recognized anxiety as a critical factor affecting second language acquisition and performance. In EFL classrooms, tasks such as presentations, role-plays, or debates often elicit high levels of anxiety (Tien, 2018). The anticipation of negative judgment, lack of preparation, and limited proficiency exacerbate this condition.

Purbaya et al. (2024) observed that students in evaluative tasks such as presentations or Q&A sessions often experience overwhelming pressure, which can lead to communication breakdowns. This tendency aligns with international findings: Rajitha and Alamelu (2020) in India, and Tien (2018) in Taiwan, reported that learners frequently experience physiological symptoms (e.g., sweating, memory block) that disrupt fluency. These studies suggest that speaking anxiety is not unique to Indonesian learners but reflects a global issue in foreign language education.

2.4. Level of Speaking Anxiety

Based on Horwitz et al. (1986), the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) identifies three general levels of anxiety: low, moderate, and high. Low-level anxiety is generally manageable and may even enhance performance by increasing alertness. Moderate anxiety, by contrast, causes hesitation and performance disruptions, while high-level anxiety can be debilitating, often accompanied by avoidance behaviors and negative self-talk

(Maher, 2023). Cross-cultural studies confirm that moderate anxiety is the most prevalent condition among EFL learners, indicating a widespread challenge for educators in various contexts.

2.5. Factors Influencing Speaking Anxiety

Factors contributing to speaking anxiety are multidimensional, spanning psychological, linguistic, and environmental aspects. Psychological factors such as low self-esteem, fear of failure, and negative self-perception strongly influence learners' willingness to participate (Horwitz et al., 1986; Nirwana et al., 2023). Linguistic barriers, including limited vocabulary, grammar difficulties, and inaccurate pronunciation, further intensify anxiety (Wijaya, 2023; Putri et al., 2024).

Environmental factors also play a crucial role. Teacher expectations, peer judgment, and classroom dynamics may either alleviate or aggravate anxiety. Supportive classroom practices—such as collaborative learning and constructive feedback—help students build confidence, while competitive or overly critical environments amplify stress (Wijaya, 2023). Purbaya et al. (2024) noted that test-related anxiety often arises from fear of not meeting academic expectations, resulting in heightened stress and impaired oral performance.

In sum, literature indicates that speaking anxiety is a complex and global phenomenon influenced by psychological traits, linguistic competence, and learning environments. Addressing it requires pedagogical sensitivity, supportive classroom environments, and strategies tailored to learners' emotional as well as linguistic needs.

3. Methodology

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach to investigate undergraduate students' English-speaking anxiety in a natural classroom context. A qualitative design was chosen because it allows researchers to explore how individuals interpret their experiences and social realities in depth (Hollstein, 2011; Mohajan, 2018). As Maxwell (2013) emphasizes, qualitative research is well suited to uncovering the meanings behind students' behaviors and emotional responses. More specifically, a case study design was adopted to provide an intensive and bounded analysis of a particular group of learners in their real-life educational setting (Hancock et al., 2021).

3.1. Research Site and Participants

The study was conducted at Ma'soem University, located in Sumedang Regency, West Java, Indonesia. Data collection took place over a three-month period from April to June 2024. The participants consisted of 24 undergraduate students enrolled in the English Education Study Program. All participants had been learning English for approximately two years and were regularly engaged in speaking-focused courses.

To ensure depth in data collection, six students were selected for follow-up interviews based on their questionnaire results. This purposive selection strategy enabled representation from each level of anxiety classification (low, moderate, and high). Such sampling is common in qualitative research to ensure rich, varied insights while maintaining analytical focus (Maxwell, 2013).

3.2. Instruments and Data Collection

3.2.1. Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS)
The questionnaire, originally developed by Horwitz et al. (1986), served as the primary tool for measuring students' speaking anxiety. It consists of 33 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. The items were grouped into three subcategories: Communication Apprehension (CA), Test Anxiety (TA), and Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE). For example, items 1, 9, 14, 18, 24, 27, 29, and 32 measured CA; items 2, 8, 10, 19, and 21 measured TA; and items 3, 7, 13, 15, 20, 23, 25, 31, and 33 measured FNE. The remaining items captured general classroom anxiety.

Questionnaire results were used to classify participants into three levels of anxiety: low, moderate, and high. Following Young (1991), low anxiety is characterized by manageable nervousness, moderate anxiety by hesitation and visible symptoms such as trembling, and high anxiety by avoidance behaviors and intense physical responses.

3.2.2. Semi-Structured Interviews
Six participants were interviewed to provide deeper insights into their personal experiences with speaking anxiety. The interviews were designed to complement and validate the questionnaire findings, offering nuanced perspectives that could not be fully captured through quantitative data alone. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes and focused on students' feelings during speaking activities, their perceptions of classroom dynamics, and coping strategies. This method aligns with Young's (1991) observation that interviews in qualitative research encourage participants to express their thoughts more freely, thereby generating rich and contextualized data.

3.3. Data Analysis

The analysis followed Miles and Huberman's (1994) qualitative framework, consisting of four stages: data reduction, data display, interpretation, and conclusion drawing. During the reduction stage, questionnaire and interview responses were categorized into the three anxiety domains: CA, TA, and FNE. Data were then displayed in tables and descriptive summaries to highlight emerging patterns.

Interpretation involved connecting the findings to Horwitz et al.'s (1986) theoretical framework and comparing them with previous research to contextualize the results. To ensure credibility, triangulation was applied by cross-validating data from questionnaires, interviews, and classroom observations. This approach strengthened the reliability of the findings and minimized potential researcher bias (Al-Thani, 2025).

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Anxiety Levels in Foreign Language Classrooms

The findings indicate that undergraduate students experience three different levels of speaking anxiety: low, moderate, and high. Four students were classified into the low-anxiety group, demonstrating comfort and confidence with only occasional nervousness. These students generally managed their feelings well and showed willingness to communicate effectively. Eighteen students fell into the moderate-anxiety group, representing the majority (75%). They often displayed hesitation, noticeable physical symptoms (e.g., trembling, sweating, or rapid heartbeat), and difficulties in maintaining fluency during speaking tasks. Finally, two students reported high levels of anxiety, experiencing intense psychological and physical responses such as panic attacks, memory blocks, and avoidance behavior.

This distribution is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Levels of Speaking Anxiety (FLCAS Classification)

Level of Anxiety	Frequency	Range	Percentage
Low Anxiety	4	33–76	16.67%
Moderate Anxiety	18	77–120	75.00%
High Anxiety	2	121–165	8.33%
Total	24	–	100%

These results confirm that moderate anxiety is the most common condition among EFL students, consistent with prior research (Kowaas, 2020; Rajitha & Alamelu, 2020). In particular, students in the moderate-anxiety category often expressed nervousness in front of peers and lecturers, showing both verbal hesitation and non-verbal symptoms.

4.2. Factors Contributing to Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety

The sources of anxiety were further analyzed using the framework of Horwitz et al. (1986), covering Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE), Communication Apprehension (CA), and Test Anxiety (TA). The mean scores are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Mean Scores of Anxiety Factors

Anxiety Factor	Mean Score
Fear of Negative Evaluation	2.47
Communication Apprehension	2.37
Test Anxiety	2.24

Fear of Negative Evaluation emerged as the most dominant factor, showing that students are highly sensitive to peer comparison and critical judgment.

4.2.1. Communication Apprehension (CA)

Students reported uneasiness, especially when asked to speak spontaneously or in front of classmates. Some interviewees (e.g., Student 6) mentioned experiencing memory blocks if unprepared, accompanied by rapid heartbeat and speech disruption. These experiences are supported by the FLCAS item scores in Table 3.

Table 3: Mean Scores of Communication Apprehension Items

Item	Statement (shortened)	Mean Score
1	Not sure of myself in class	2.25
9	Panic when unprepared	2.46
14	Not nervous with native speakers	2.43
18	Confident in class	2.15
24	Self-conscious in front of peers	2.74
27	Nervous and confused when speaking	2.32
29	Nervous if don't understand teacher	2.11
32	Comfortable around native speakers	2.52

The highest score (2.74) shows that peer presence increases students' self-consciousness and discomfort, which often disrupts fluency.

4.2.2. Test Anxiety (TA)

Although less dominant, test anxiety was still relevant. Many students worried about oral exams or presentations, as confirmed by Student 9's statement: "I experienced test anxiety when my performance was evaluated." The mean scores of TA items are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Mean Scores of Test Anxiety Items

Item	Statement (shortened)	Mean Score
2	Don't worry about mistakes	2.04
8	At ease during tests	2.56
10	Worry about failing	2.88
19	Afraid teacher corrects every mistake	1.84
21	More I study, the more confused I get	1.90

The highest score (2.88) reflects strong fear of failure, which often triggered physical symptoms such as shaking hands or blanking out before speaking tests.

4.2.3. Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE)

This factor had the highest overall mean and dominated students' emotional responses. Students frequently compared themselves to peers, expressing low self-esteem and embarrassment. For instance, Student 19 admitted: "I feel anxious because I always compare my English with classmates and think they are better than me." The detailed scores are displayed in Table 5.

Table 5: Mean Scores of Fear of Negative Evaluation Items

Item	Statement (shortened)	Mean Score
3	Tremble when called in class	2.15
7	Other students better than me	2.98
13	Embarrassed to volunteer answers	2.43
15	Upset when not understanding corrections	1.84
20	Heart pounding when called in class	2.63
23	Other students speak better	2.98
25	Class too quick, worry left behind	2.60
31	Afraid others will laugh	2.01
33	Nervous when unprepared	2.67

Items 7 and 23 (mean = 2.98) clearly show that peer comparison was the strongest source of anxiety.

4.2.4. Highest and Lowest Scoring Items Across Factors

For a clearer overview, the highest and lowest scoring items are summarized in Table 6.

Table 6: Highest and Lowest Scoring Items Across Factors

Item	Statement (shortened)	Score	Factor Category
7	Other students are better than I am	2.98	FNE (Highest)
23	Other students speak better	2.98	FNE
24	Self-conscious in front of peers	2.74	CA
33	Nervous when unprepared	2.67	FNE
20	Heart pounding when called	2.63	FNE
25	Worry about being left behind	2.60	FNE
32	Comfortable with native speakers	2.52	CA
21	More I study, the more confused	1.90	TA (Lowest)
19	Afraid teacher corrects every mistake	1.84	TA

This summary highlights the dominance of FNE in shaping anxiety, while TA appeared to have the least impact.

5. Conclussion

This study examined English-speaking anxiety among undergraduate EFL students using the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) and semi-structured interviews. The results revealed that most students (75%) experienced moderate levels of anxiety, while 16.67% showed low anxiety and 8.33% reported high anxiety. Among the three main factors, Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE) emerged as the most influential, followed by Communication Apprehension (CA) and Test Anxiety (TA).

The dominance of FNE suggests that peer comparison, low self-esteem, and anticipated criticism strongly hinder students' oral performance. Meanwhile, CA was evident in spontaneous speaking situations, and TA was the least dominant factor, though still relevant in evaluative contexts such as oral examinations.

These findings highlight the need for educators to create a supportive and non-threatening classroom atmosphere. Teachers should provide constructive feedback, encourage collaborative speaking activities, and help students manage negative self-perceptions. By addressing both psychological and social aspects, institutions can reduce speaking anxiety and promote greater confidence and participation in English language learning.

Acknowledgment

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