

STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES WITH PUBLIC SPEAKING IN EFL CONTEXTS: BARRIERS AND COPING MECHANISMS

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Abstract: Public speaking is an important skill often taught in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. However, many students face various challenges when performing public speaking tasks, which affect their performance and self-confidence. This study aims to explore students' experiences with public speaking in EFL contexts, focusing on the barriers they encounter and the coping mechanisms they employ. Using a qualitative approach, this study involved in-depth interviews with a number of EFL students from diverse cultural and educational backgrounds. The results show that the main barriers students face include public speaking anxiety, limited vocabulary, pronunciation difficulties, and uncertainty about audience reactions. Additionally, external factors such as cultural differences and lack of support from instructors also contribute to students' lack of confidence. To overcome these barriers, students developed various coping mechanisms, such as thorough preparation of materials, practicing in front of friends, and seeking feedback from instructors and peers. Some students also reported the benefits of relaxation techniques and meditation to reduce anxiety. The findings of this study provide valuable insights for EFL instructors to design more effective learning experiences and support students in overcoming barriers to public speaking. The study also suggests that practice-based approaches and collaborative learning can help increase students' confidence and public speaking skills in EFL contexts.

INTRODUCTION

In today's era of globalization, the ability to communicate in English is very important. English has become the *lingua franca* in an increasingly connected world, allowing people to participate in global discussions, gain more information, and increase career opportunities. English not only serves as a communication tool, but it is also the basis for global interaction in many fields, such as diplomacy, business, and education. Success in penetrating an increasingly integrated global market depends on the ability to communicate fluently in English.

English is recognized as an important language that everyone in the world must master in order to compete on an international scale. It is important to master a number of skills, including speaking, writing, and listening. Speaking is one of them; For young language learners, speaking is the primary method of discovering, understanding, doing, and learning a new language. Speaking is the active use of language to convey meaning. According to Sadtono (1997) there are two factors that can affect language learning, namely linguistic factors and nonlinguistic factors. Linguistic difficulties contain all the challenges experienced by a language learner in the target language itself. There are several types of linguistic problems. There are three of them: difficulty starting a conversation, code switching, and vocabulary grammar difficulty. Nonlinguistic problems refer to nonlinguistic problems faced by a person studying a language. These problems are as follows: The existence of students' anxiety in speaking English, lack of a supportive environment, and anxiety or fear of failing exams and negative perceptions from others.(Lestari & Nugraha, 2023, p. 2143)

EFL or **English as a Foreign Language** is a term used to describe the learning of English by individuals who are not native speakers. This process takes place in countries where English is not widely used in everyday life or as an official language. In this context, the teaching materials used to teach English must be designed and adapted to the specific needs of students, including paying attention to their level of ability in understanding and using the language.

There are different types of teaching materials that can be used to support the English learning process for EFL students. For example, textbooks are often the first choice because they contain structured material that can help students understand grammar and vocabulary better. Additionally, audiovisual media, such as videos and sound recordings, can be used to practice listening and speaking skills while improving understanding of cultural contexts. Educational games are also one of the effective methods because they can increase students' motivation and interest while providing a fun learning experience. Last but not least, authentic materials such as news articles, songs, or real conversations, allow students to practice English in situations that are more relevant to the real world.(Alma Erin Mentari, 2024)

Al Hosni stated that EFL students face many problems in developing their speaking skills because they still lack linguistic knowledge. Hojati and Afghari explained that speaking skills are under the influence of a number of linguistic and non-linguistic factors such as grammar, vocabulary, pragmatic variables, and affective factors. EFL learners not only need to

equip themselves with sufficient vocabulary and grammar knowledge, but also need to pay attention to both fluency and accuracy in order to manage meaningful communication.

Shumin (1997) stated that speaking is a skill that demands EFL learners to have grammatical and lexical knowledge, but also knowledge of socially appropriate language. It further added that age, aural medium, socio-cultural and affective factors can affect the speaking skills of EFL adult students. Thornbury (2005) states that EFL speakers must have sufficient knowledge of culture, genres, speech acts, lists, discourses, grammar, vocabulary and phonology to manage oral communication in a second language in different real-life situations. In addition, Wang (2014) states that the factors *cognitive*, *linguistik*, and *effective* can affect speaking competence. As stated above, this study is intended to find out what are the obstacles? and the Handling Mechanism? (Hengki & Ratna, 2022, pp. 2–3)

RESEARCH METHODS

This study used a qualitative approach to explore in-depth students' experiences in public speaking in an EFL context. The main methods used were in-depth interviews and literature review. In-depth interviews were conducted by involving purposively selected informants. The interview process was designed in a semi-structured manner to provide flexibility in exploring the barriers and coping mechanisms experienced by students. Data obtained from the interviews were then analyzed using a thematic approach to identify key patterns and themes relevant to the research objectives. In addition to interviews, a literature review was conducted to support the empirical findings with theoretical basis and previous research. The researcher collected various literature sources, such as academic journals, books, and research reports, that were relevant to public speaking skills in an EFL context. This literature analysis not only helped to understand key concepts and previous findings but also provided a broader context for interpreting the interview results. By combining in-depth interviews and literature review, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of the barriers faced by students and the strategies they use to overcome them.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Students' Anxiety in Speaking English

Various teaching approaches have been tested to suppress students' anxiety levels in speaking English. Communicative methods, such as creating a safe learning atmosphere, encouraging the use of English in a relaxed manner, and facilitating

cooperation in pairs and groups, have been shown to be effective in reducing anxiety in foreign language classes. In addition, students' ability to manage language use and non-linguistic factors also play an important role in suppressing anxiety levels, so a well-designed program or method is needed (Firna et al., 2024, hal. 193).

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) interventions applied in school settings have also shown effectiveness in reducing anxiety among adolescents. This indicates that the integration of mental health approaches in education can be an effective strategy to deal with anxiety problems. However, interventions such as expressive writing and instructional approaches have not shown consistent results in reducing exam anxiety in different educational contexts, so more research is needed to find more specific and effective approaches.

Public speaking anxiety in EFL students can stem from several factors. Horwitz, et al. (1986) stated that there are three situations that can trigger anxiety in learning a foreign language, namely the fear of *communication application*, the *fear of negative evaluation*, and *test anxiety*.

First, the fear of communicating is a type of anxiety that triggers a person's fear of having communication interactions (DeVito, 1986; Horwitz, et al., 1986). In the fear of communicating, students feel uncomfortable, embarrassed, and afraid when they have to engage in real communication with others (Horwitz, et al., 1986). Some cases of communication fear affect students' difficulties, not only in talking to others, but also in listening to or understanding oral messages (Horwitz, et al., 1986). The level of fear of communicating in EFL students depends on their level of language proficiency. Thus, it can be said that the fear of communicating may be the main source of anxiety for students with low levels of language proficiency, but it is not the main source of anxiety for students with high levels of language proficiency (Aydin, 2016).

Second, according to Horwitz, et al. (1986), the fear of negative evaluation is related to students' concerns about other people's judgments. This makes them avoid evaluation situations and build expectations that others will judge them negatively. This type of anxiety is not limited to exam situations alone; This anxiety can also manifest itself in other social or evaluation situations, including job interviews or speaking in a foreign language class.

Third, exam anxiety refers to a type of performance anxiety that comes from the fear of failing. Exam anxiety makes students feel charged with unrealistic demands on

themselves and feel that something that lacks a perfect test result is failure. Students who feel anxious during exams in English classes may have quite a bit of difficulty since frequent exams and quizzes and even the best and most prepared students often make mistakes. "Concerns about evaluating others, avoiding evaluative situations, and the expectation that others will evaluate themselves negatively," is the third anxiety related to learning English. Although similar to exam anxiety, the fear of negative evaluation is broader in scope because it is not limited to exam situations alone, because it can occur anywhere, for example social evaluation situations such as job interviews or speaking in English classes. Uniquely, among other lessons, English requires constant evaluation by the only fluent speaker in the class, the teacher. Students may also be very sensitive to evaluations from their peers (Amanupunj, 2016, Hull. 5–6).

This anxiety arises because students have the thought that the only acceptable result in the exam is if they can do it perfectly. Exam anxiety plays a crucial role in influencing student learning outcomes. Various feelings, such as fear of failure or unpleasant experiences, are forms of exam anxiety that occur in students' minds (Sugiyati & Indriani, 2021, p. 58).

The last source of anxiety related to cognitive factors is the demands and stress in the process of learning a foreign language. Speaking in a foreign language requires complex mental processing. To communicate effectively, EFL learners must have knowledge and skills in various aspects of the language, such as grammar, vocabulary, comprehension, fluency, and pronunciation (Brown, 2004). Students need to know what they want to say, speak words clearly, have relevant vocabulary, and be able to arrange them in the right order. When students, especially those with low levels of confidence and self-esteem, face difficulties in speaking, they are more likely to experience anxiety.

Research by Sadeghi et al. (2013) and Melouah (2013) shows that learners with low self-confidence often underestimate their linguistic abilities and feel unsure of their competence when speaking. Several experts, such as Kasbi & Shirvan (2017), Mukminin et al. (2015), Rahman (2017), and Sadeghi et al. (2013), highlight that the lack of adequate vocabulary, grammatical comprehension, and the ability to arrange words in the correct order are linguistic factors that can damage students' self-confidence. This is often due to excessive attention to the quality of their performance and concerns about the impact of failing in the course (Hanifa, 2018, pp. 232–234).

Many coping strategies are used to relieve students' anxiety when speaking, especially oral presentations by teachers and themselves. In traditional EFL classrooms, teachers can have a lasting impact in expanding students' speaking performance into practical oral presentation skills. As Liu and Chen (2015) note, teachers can encourage students to relieve their anxiety. For this reason, teachers have become more important in the role of support, facilitator, and tutor when students make oral presentations. What's more, the classroom atmosphere can bridge students to overcome anxiety about speaking a foreign language (Tsiplakides & Keramida, 2009). A classroom with a friendly atmosphere can help students feel more relaxed and reduce stress and tension when making oral presentations in a foreign language class. Another strategy to reduce anxiety in oral presentations is more presentation practice and good preparation (Kurakan, 2021, p. 73).

Several studies have also revealed that cooperative teaching methods have successfully lowered the anxiety of speaking in English among high school students. In addition, group counseling has been shown to be effective in overcoming communication anxiety in high school students. Communicative methods not only improve speaking skills but also help reduce students' anxiety in communication situations. The study as a whole emphasizes the effectiveness of interactive and collaborative methods, such as cooperative learning and group counseling, in overcoming anxiety in foreign language classes. Other effective strategies include the creation of a supportive learning environment, a comfortable atmosphere, and cooperative activities in groups and couples.

This approach helps students overcome the fear of making mistakes and increase confidence in communicating. Factors that are often associated with anxiety include shyness, lack of confidence, fear of mistakes, limited grammar and vocabulary, and worry about negative evaluations and exams. In addition, factors such as limited language skills, excessive use of the mother tongue, lack of nonverbal communication, and limited understanding of the material also contribute to students' anxiety. With the right application of techniques, educators can play a crucial role in helping students overcome foreign language anxiety and significantly improve their communicative performance.

The opinions of the teachers support the findings of the responses given by students. The teachers revealed that the discussion activities in the class as a whole

became a more stressful experience for students compared to other activities. This is because students feel that they must use English well, correctly, and clearly progressively during the discussion. The teachers also added that students' anxiety reached higher levels when they were in open discussion groups in class than when they worked in pairs.

This statement is in line with the results of previous research, such as that conducted by He (2013), which found that students often feel afraid to make mistakes during the learning process. The fear stems from the fear of being negatively evaluated by their teacher or classmates. In situations like this, students are often trapped in anxiety, which actually hinders their ability to speak or study optimally.

Teachers suggest that students need to be given the understanding that making mistakes during the learning process is natural. These mistakes can be part of the normal learning process and are an opportunity to grow. In addition, students should be aware that receiving corrections from teachers is an important aspect that helps them improve their English language skills. By providing this kind of understanding, teachers hope to reduce the anxiety felt by students and create a more supportive learning environment (Taly & Paramasivam, 2020, p. 205).

2. Environment affects English proficiency

The environment is a place where every individual interacts in their daily lives. The environment plays an important role in the formation of a person's identity and character. In addition, the environment also has a great influence in supporting language learning. This is due to the nature of humans as social creatures who always interact with others, both in the family and community environment.

In the context of English learning, the environment has an important role as a means for students to express and apply the English skills they have learned. A supportive environment allows students to practice the use of English in their daily lives, thus helping them develop their language skills more effectively (Girsang, 2016, e.g. 24).

The environment has a very important role in determining a person's ability to speak English. A supportive environment, where students use English as a means of everyday communication, can help improve their language skills. For example, if a student uses English in a family setting, positive responses from family members will

greatly support the development of the student's English skills. This shows that the environment has a great influence on improving one's English skills, because when a person is in an environment that consistently uses English to communicate, they will gradually be encouraged and motivated to develop their English skills (Lubis, Fitri, & Ridwan, 2024, pp. 3603–3604).

Learning environment affects anxiety of speaking in English Various teaching methods have been explored to reduce anxiety levels among students. Communicative methods, such as creating a safe environment, encouraging the use of relaxed English, and implementing partner and group work, have been shown to be effective in lowering anxiety levels in foreign language classes. In addition, the management of language use and non-linguistic aspects by students also helps reduce anxiety, emphasizing the importance of well-prepared methods or programs. Furthermore, school-based cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) interventions have been shown to be effective in reducing anxiety among adolescents, demonstrating the potential for the integration of mental health interventions in educational settings to address anxiety issues.

However, interventions such as expressive writing and instructional interventions have not consistently shown effectiveness in reducing test anxiety in all classroom settings, so more research is needed on tailored approaches to reduce anxiety in the context of Education. Various studies have explored the effectiveness of various teaching methods in reducing anxiety, finding that cooperative learning is effective in reducing anxiety-related English speaking in school students.

Highlighting the effectiveness of group counseling in reducing communication-related anxiety in school students, communicative methods are effective in improving speaking skills and reducing anxiety in high school students. The study of this study as a whole shows that interactive and collaborative teaching methods, such as cooperative learning and group counseling, are effective in reducing anxiety in students.

Research shows that foreign language anxiety is common among students, caused by a variety of factors. Fear of negative evaluation, communication anxiety, and exam anxiety are the main components. Other factors include a lack of self-confidence, poor grammar and pronunciation, fear of making mistakes, and lack of preparation. Many students feel anxious in English class and have a negative attitude towards it. Language limitations, excessive use of mother tongues, and lack of vocabulary also contribute. To address this, educators must create a supportive learning environment,

encourage relaxed use of language, and incorporate collaborative activities. Empowering students to manage their language use and non-verbal communication also helps reduce anxiety.

3. Interviews with Students and Lecturers

This interview revealed that English speaking anxiety in EFL classes is influenced by a variety of factors, including fear of negative evaluation, linguistic limitations, and exam pressure. A supportive learning environment and collaborative teaching methods are proven to help students cope with this anxiety. Both educators and institutions have an important role to play in creating conducive conditions, such as providing emotional support, interactive activities, and training programs to boost students' confidence.

a. Interview with Amira Rizky

Sources:

- **My name is** Amira Rizky.
- **Profession:** Lecturer and researcher in the field of English language teaching

Interviewer: Based on your research, what are the main factors that cause students' anxiety about speaking English in the classroom?"

Amira: "There are several main factors that are often the cause of anxiety. First, fear of negative evaluation, both from teachers and classmates. This makes students hesitant to try to speak because they are afraid of being wrong. Second, lack of confidence and limited vocabulary or grammar that make them feel incompetent. Third, the pressure from exams and presentation assignments often makes them feel depressed. In addition, a less supportive classroom atmosphere can also increase this anxiety."

Interviewer: "How does the learning environment affect students' anxiety levels?"

Amira: "A positive learning environment is very important. When students feel comfortable and supported, they are more likely to speak without fear. I always

encourage the use of methods such as group work, discussions, and conversation simulations in a relaxed atmosphere. This method helps students feel that they are not alone, so the psychological burden is reduced. In addition, teachers need to provide constructive feedback and encourage students to see mistakes as learning opportunities."

Interviewer: "What about anxiety related to exams and negative evaluations? What strategies do you think are effective to overcome them?"

Amira: "Exam anxiety often dominates. One way to overcome this is to provide exercises or simulations before the exam, so students know what to expect. Teachers should also explain that exams are not the only indicator of their abilities. In addition, approaches such as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) can help students manage their emotions and overcome their fear of failure. Equally important is the emotional support from the teacher, so that students feel they are heard and understood."

Interviewer: "What is your message to educators who want to help students cope with anxiety about speaking English?"

Amira: "Educators must create an inclusive learning environment, where students feel supported and valued. Use collaborative approaches such as group discussions, project-based activities, or games that involve communication in English. Additionally, make sure students understand that mistakes are a natural part of the learning process. This can help them build confidence and slowly overcome anxiety."

b. Interview with Sarah Putri, Semester 5 Student

Student:

- **Name:** Sarah Putri
- **Status:** 5th semester student

Interviewer: "Sarah, do you often feel anxious when speaking English in class? If so, what is the cause?"

Sarah Putri: "Yes, I often feel anxious, especially when I have to speak in front of the class. I was afraid that my grammar or pronunciation would be wrong and that my friends would make fun of me. In addition, I feel that my vocabulary is still lacking, so I am often hesitant to express my opinions. Presentations or exams are also a scourge because I'm worried about getting bad grades."

Interviewer: "How does your classroom environment affect your anxiety levels?"

Sarah Putri: "The classroom environment is very influential. When the atmosphere is tense, I find it harder to speak. But if the teacher is friendly and my friends are supportive, I will be more daring to try. I also feel more comfortable when there are group activities because I don't feel alone and can share ideas with friends."

Interviewer: "Are there any strategies you use to deal with that anxiety?"

Sarah Putri: "Usually I try to prepare well before public speaking, for example by practicing at home or taking notes on important points. I also learned not to think too much about small mistakes and focus on the message I want to convey. In addition, I feel more confident if the teacher provides support and positive feedback."

Interviewer: "What are your expectations for teachers or institutions regarding this anxiety problem?"

Sarah Putri: "I hope teachers use more relaxed methods, such as games or small discussions, so that students are not too tense. I also hope that institutions can provide training or workshops to help students cope with anxiety, for example on how to speak in public or stress management."

Interviews with Amira Rizky and Sarah Putri revealed that anxiety in speaking English in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classes is caused by various factors. According to Amira, this anxiety is often triggered by fear of negative evaluation, lack of confidence, limited vocabulary, and pressure from assignments or exams. Sarah, as a student, confirms this by mentioning that she often feels anxious because she is afraid of making grammatical or

pronunciation mistakes, and feels less competent than her peers. The pressure of presentation assignments and the tense classroom atmosphere also exacerbated the anxiety.

The learning environment has a great influence on students' anxiety levels. Amira emphasized that a positive environment, where students feel supported and comfortable, can help reduce their fears. He recommends collaborative learning methods such as group work, discussions, or conversation simulations to create a relaxed learning atmosphere. Sarah also revealed that she feels more confident when she is in a supportive environment, especially when the teachers are friendly and her friends are positive. Group activities allow students to share ideas without feeling isolated, resulting in reduced anxiety levels.

To address this anxiety, both Amira and Sarah suggest strategies that involve preparation, emotional support, and a flexible approach to teaching. Amira mentioned the importance of providing practice before exams and teaching students that mistakes are part of the learning process. Sarah added that careful preparation and positive feedback from teachers are very helpful in building confidence. They also hope that institutions provide specialized training, such as stress management or public speaking skills, so that students can cope with anxiety more effectively.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

Anxiety in speaking English is a significant challenge faced by students, especially in the context of learning a foreign language. The main factors that cause anxiety include fear of communicating, anxiety about negative evaluations, and anxiety during exams. In addition, a lack of self-confidence, limited grammar and vocabulary, and fear of mistakes further exacerbate students' anxiety levels.

The learning environment plays an important role in supporting the development of students' English language skills. A supportive and welcoming environment, both at school and outside, can reduce stress and create a safe space for students to practice their language skills. Education-based interventions, such as cooperative learning methods and group counseling, have been shown to be effective in suppressing communication anxiety.

Teachers also play a crucial role in creating a supportive classroom atmosphere, providing clear direction, and encouraging students to be more confident in speaking. Communication-based instructional methods, such as group and couple work, can help improve speaking skills while reducing students' anxiety.

Overall, managing students' anxiety in speaking English requires a holistic approach, which includes strengthening the learning environment, implementing interactive teaching strategies, as well as emotional support through appropriate mental health approaches. Further research is needed to explore more specific methods of addressing these challenges.

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