

Factors influencing EFL students' speaking anxiety: A pedagogical review

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Abstract

Speaking is a vital skill in English learning, enabling individuals to express ideas, emotions, and information effectively. However, many students experience fear and anxiety when speaking in English, particularly in front of others. Gap in literature of this study is a previous studies have mostly examined linguistic or psychological factors separately, overlooking how these elements interact to influence speaking performance. Purpose of the study is this research aims to identify the intrinsic and extrinsic causes of students' fear of speaking English and to analyze effective pedagogical and psychological strategies for reducing speaking anxiety. Method of this study is using a library research design, this study analyzed theoretical and empirical literature from 2019–2024 related to speaking anxiety, fear of public speaking, and EFL pedagogy. The results indicate that speaking fear is influenced by intrinsic factors, such as low proficiency, low confidence, and fear of negative evaluation and extrinsic factors, including unsupportive classroom environments and peer pressure. Collaborative approaches, like peer teaching and peer feedback, were found to effectively reduce anxiety and increase students' confidence in speaking. Conclusion the study concludes that overcoming speaking anxiety requires integrating psychological and pedagogical approaches. Creating a supportive classroom environment and promoting collaboration can significantly enhance students' confidence and speaking performance in English.

Keywords: *Speaking; anxiety; EFL students; English*

Introduction

Speaking is the ability of an individual to express their ideas, feelings, and thoughts through words orally. According to Setyowati, Qurniawati, Santosa, Widiyono, Aryanto, Rochimansyah & Faizah (2020), speaking means delivering one's intentions, either ideas, thoughts, or feelings, to others using language orally so that others understand those intentions. Speaking can also be understood as an oral skill that enables a person to convey ideas, feelings, and information to others directly through speech; speaking is not just about mastering understanding or structure but also pragmatic skills, persuasion, and social interaction in learning English.

According to Sihotang, Sitanggang, Hasugian and Saragih in journal *The effective way to develop speaking skills* (2022), speaking is the ability to deliver messages in spoken language to meet the

need to communicate with the surrounding environment. In addition, Akhter (2021) raises the issue that speaking holds a "core position" since speaking skills are required in order to communicate effectively in English as an international language. According to Kurniati and Ervina (2019), speaking is among the language skills.

Students fear to speak English in front of the class due to a number of factors, which can roughly be divided into intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic factors include such issues as limited linguistic resources (lack of comprehension, poor pronunciation, weak sentence structure) that make students hesitant to speak. Other factors are low self-confidence or shyness, which makes students avoid speaking altogether, and fear of negative evaluation or fear of being evaluated poorly or criticized, which has been revealed to be one of the major triggers for speaking anxiety. The results

of Alfiani, Asib, and Supriyadi (2022) corroborate these ideas. Among the extrinsic factors are an unsupportive classroom environment, teacher pressure from public correction, a competitive atmosphere, limited speaking practice opportunities that discourage students from public speaking, social pressure from peers, and a school culture that places strong emphasis on perfection.

For example, research conducted at the University of Jambi found that most students experience speaking anxiety, influenced by external factors such as apprehensive communication and test anxiety. As Indriyani, Norawati, and Handayani (2025) show, some students develop anxiety over the consequences of communication with others. Moreover, a systematic literature review also supports that linguistic, social, and instructional factors like classroom or teacher-student relationships together influence speaking anxiety levels. With the interaction of these intrinsic and extrinsic factors, students with linguistic limitations will be further hampered if their learning environment is unsupportive.

To overcome the fear of speaking publicly in English, researchers suggest a combination of both pedagogical and psychological strategies (Zhang, 2019; Zheng et al. 2020). Among the collaborative pedagogical strategies, peer teaching/peer feedback is found to reduce the fear of evaluation. Evaluative studies on EFL contexts reveal that peer teaching/feedback decreases the fear of being laughed at/being taken lightly, increases self-confidence, and enhances the frequency of speaking practice (Wang & Sun, 2020; Ayiz & Tauchid, 2024). Students' fear of speaking publicly before a class is influenced by several interrelated psychological factors. The major factor is communication anxiety, which is considered the nervousness or anxiety persons feel when they have to speak in front of others. This anxiety arises often because students feel they cannot express themselves effectively in English. According to Dewaele and Dewaele (2020), the anxiety and enjoyment of students in speaking a foreign language are influenced by interactions with the teacher and the classroom atmosphere.

This study analyzes the understanding and skills of speaking in the context of learning English,

as a fundamental skill in expressing one's ideas, feelings, and information orally. This paper also seeks to identify various intrinsic and extrinsic factors that constitute students' fear of speaking in English in front of their class, such as linguistic limitations, low self-confidence, and the influence of the learning and social environment. The psychological factors examined in this study also include apprehensive communication and fear of negative evaluation, which contribute to increasing the speaking anxiety of college students in the EFL context. Furthermore, this study aims at investigating effective pedagogical and psychological strategies reducing students' fear of public speaking, especially with collaborative approaches through peer teaching and peer feedback.

Methods

This study has utilized a library research design method, which involves the analysis, synthesis, and interpretation of available theoretical and empirical literature in terms of fear of public English speaking and its pedagogical interventions within an EFL context. It intends to identify patterns, gaps, and effective strategies from the literature review of prior studies rather than collecting new empirical data. In this regard, this approach allows a researcher to systematically review the relevant academic sources and, thus, propose a comprehensive understanding of the issue at hand and put forward some pedagogical implications based on existing findings.

Secondary materials used in this research were peer-reviewed journal articles, books, theses, conference proceedings, and online academic databases such as Google Scholar, ERIC, ResearchGate, and Sinta-indexed journals. The materials selected ranged from 2019 to 2024 so that the findings and discussions presented are recent and relevant to the evolving trends in the teaching of the English language, specifically on speaking anxiety, fear of public speaking, and EFL pedagogy.

Findings and discussion

Results from this study revealed that speaking is an essential competence in EFL learning. Speaking is not only a language skill but also a communicative ability that enables learners to express meaning, interact socially, and build confidence in real-life communication. This finding reinforces the view that speaking plays a central role in students' success in English learning.

Drawing from previous research, speaking is not limited to knowing vocabulary and grammar. Speaking also involves the ability to deliver meaning, negotiate messages, and adjust to conversational contexts (Setyowati et al., 2020; Akhter, 2021). Therefore, speaking competence requires both linguistic knowledge and interactive skills. This suggests that speaking should be treated as a communicative practice rather than merely a test of language forms.

The findings indicate that speaking is often perceived by students as the most challenging English skill. Unlike reading or writing, speaking requires learners to produce language immediately and publicly. This public nature makes speaking more vulnerable to anxiety and fear. As a result, students tend to experience emotional pressure when they are asked to speak in front of others.

This study found that there are two main causes of students' fear in speaking English in front of the class, namely intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Intrinsic factors refer to internal learner-related issues, while extrinsic factors refer to classroom and environmental conditions. This classification helps clarify that speaking anxiety emerges from multiple sources. It also confirms that fear of speaking cannot be explained by a single variable.

One major intrinsic factor identified is low language proficiency. Many students struggle with limited vocabulary, weak pronunciation, and difficulties in constructing correct sentence structures. These limitations reduce learners' ability to express ideas smoothly, which increases hesitation and fear. Consequently, students often avoid speaking because they feel they cannot perform well (Teimouri et al. 2019; Sultana & Khan, 2019).

However, this study suggests that language proficiency is not the only determinant of fear. Some students with adequate language knowledge still experience high anxiety. This implies that speaking anxiety is not always caused by linguistic weakness alone. Psychological and social pressures often intensify anxiety even among relatively capable learners.

Another intrinsic factor identified is low self-confidence. Students with low confidence tend to doubt their ability to speak correctly and fear being seen as incompetent. This self-doubt makes them less willing to participate in speaking tasks. Over time, avoidance behavior reduces their speaking practice, which further limits their improvement.

The findings also reveal that fear of negative evaluation is a strong intrinsic cause of speaking anxiety. Students worry that their performance will be judged negatively by teachers or peers. This fear becomes stronger when students perceive speaking tasks as tests rather than learning opportunities. Alfiani et al. (2022) confirm that fear of negative evaluation is one of the leading causes of anxiety in speaking.

In addition, the study found that students often experience communication apprehension. Communication apprehension refers to nervousness and discomfort when speaking in front of others. Students may experience physical symptoms such as trembling, sweating, or rapid heartbeat during speaking activities. These emotional reactions can reduce fluency and disrupt students' ability to speak clearly.

Besides intrinsic factors, the study identified several extrinsic factors related to the learning environment. One extrinsic factor is a stiff or tense classroom atmosphere. When the classroom is not supportive, students become more cautious and afraid to participate. This shows that the classroom climate strongly influences students' willingness to speak.

Another extrinsic factor is teachers' tendency to correct students in public. Public correction can make students feel embarrassed and humiliated. As a result, students may associate speaking with fear and punishment rather than learning. This finding implies that error correction strategies should be carefully considered in speaking instruction.

The study also found that inadequate opportunities for speaking practice contribute to students' fear. In some classrooms, speaking tasks are limited and occur only during presentations or oral tests. This makes speaking appear as a high-stakes activity. Consequently, students become more anxious because they have little experience in low-pressure speaking practice.

Peer pressure was identified as another strong extrinsic factor. Students fear being laughed at, mocked, or judged by classmates. This fear often becomes stronger in large classes where students feel exposed (Lee, 2016; Ong et al. 2019). Indriyani et al. (2025) highlight that peer-related pressure can significantly influence speaking anxiety.

Importantly, the findings show that intrinsic and extrinsic factors are interconnected (Sato and Loewen, 2019). Students with low confidence and limited vocabulary tend to feel more nervous when the classroom environment is unsupportive. In other words, linguistic limitations become more problematic when combined with negative classroom conditions. This confirms that speaking anxiety is shaped by interaction between personal and contextual factors. This finding corresponds with a systematic review by Tania, Danim, and Yensy (2025). Their review confirms that language factors, social factors, and teacher-learner relationships all influence levels of speaking anxiety. Therefore, anxiety should not be addressed through a single approach. Instead, it requires both pedagogical and psychological considerations.

The study also demonstrated that collaborative learning strategies can reduce speaking anxiety. Strategies such as peer teaching and peer feedback help students feel more comfortable because they learn with peers rather than speaking alone in front of the teacher. This reduces fear of evaluation and increases participation. Collaboration also provides students with more frequent speaking opportunities.

Ayiz and Tauchid (2024) support this finding by showing that peer teaching can increase self-confidence and encourage students to practice speaking more frequently. This suggests that collaboration creates a safer learning environment.

Students may feel less pressured because they share responsibility with peers. As a result, speaking becomes a shared learning process rather than an individual performance.

Peer feedback was also found to be beneficial for anxiety reduction. When feedback is provided by classmates, students may perceive it as less threatening than teacher correction. Peer feedback can also create a sense of mutual support. However, this strategy requires clear guidance to ensure that feedback remains constructive rather than judgmental.

In addition, this study found that psychological perspectives such as enjoyment and comfort play a significant role in speaking ability. Students who enjoy the learning process tend to be more willing to speak. Enjoyment reduces emotional tension and increases motivation to participate. Therefore, positive classroom emotions contribute to better speaking development.

Dewaele et al. (2018) and Saito et al. (2018) confirm that students' enjoyment and anxiety are influenced by teacher interaction and classroom atmosphere. This supports the idea that teachers have a crucial role in shaping students' emotional experiences. A supportive teacher-student relationship can reduce anxiety and increase enjoyment. Consequently, students become more confident and more engaged in speaking activities.

Overall, the findings emphasize that overcoming speaking anxiety requires combining psychological and pedagogical approaches. This is because anxiety is influenced by both learners' internal conditions and classroom practices. Therefore, teachers should not only focus on improving vocabulary and grammar. They should also build supportive learning environments and use collaborative strategies to reduce fear.

In conclusion, the results of this study indicate that speaking fear in EFL classrooms is multidimensional. It involves intrinsic factors such as low proficiency, low confidence, fear of evaluation, and communication apprehension, as well as extrinsic factors such as classroom atmosphere, teacher correction practices, limited speaking opportunities, and peer pressure. These factors interact and reinforce one another. Therefore, the findings suggest that speaking

instruction should integrate linguistic support, psychological sensitivity, and collaborative pedagogy to effectively reduce students' fear of speaking (Botes et al., 2020).

The findings of this study indicate that speaking anxiety in English learning is not solely caused by limited linguistic competence such as insufficient vocabulary, weak grammar mastery, or pronunciation problems. Instead, the results confirm that speaking anxiety is a complex phenomenon shaped by the interaction of linguistic, psychological, and social factors. Therefore, understanding students' fear of speaking requires more than assessing language skills; it also demands attention to students' emotional conditions and the social dynamics of the classroom.

One of the most prominent factors identified in this study is shyness. Students who tend to be shy experience greater difficulty when they are required to speak in front of the class. They often avoid situations that demand oral performance because they feel uncomfortable becoming the center of attention. This shyness is not always a fixed personal trait; rather, it can be influenced by previous learning experiences, especially when students have been laughed at, criticized harshly, or compared with others.

In addition to shyness, fear of making mistakes is another major contributor to speaking anxiety. Many students perceive mistakes as something embarrassing rather than as a natural part of language learning. They often interpret errors as proof of incompetence, which leads them to remain silent instead of taking the risk of speaking. In reality, mistakes play an essential role in language development because they reflect active learning and gradual improvement through practice.

The results also highlight that fear of being evaluated significantly increases students' anxiety. Classroom speaking activities are frequently perceived as tests or formal assessments, even when teachers do not explicitly assign grades. When students believe that every sentence they produce will be judged as right or wrong, they become tense and lose focus. As a consequence, their fluency decreases, and they struggle to express ideas naturally, which further reinforces their fear of speaking.

Another important factor is peer pressure. In classroom contexts, students do not only speak in front of the teacher, but also in front of their classmates. For some learners, judgment from peers is even more threatening than teacher evaluation. Students may worry about being mocked, seen as less intelligent, or treated as a source of humor. This social pressure is particularly strong for learners with low self-confidence or negative social experiences.

Interestingly, the findings show that speaking anxiety does not always correlate directly with low language proficiency. Some students with relatively good English competence still experience high anxiety due to psychological pressure and social fear. This suggests that speaking anxiety is not purely a linguistic problem, but is also closely related to self-perception and students' beliefs about their own abilities. When learners doubt themselves, they may perform poorly even if they have sufficient language knowledge.

Conversely, students with limited language skills can sometimes speak more actively when they learn in a supportive environment. This confirms that the classroom atmosphere plays a crucial role in either increasing or reducing anxiety. In other words, speaking anxiety can be situational, meaning it may appear or disappear depending on the learning context, the teacher's approach, and the overall classroom culture.

The study further implies that fear of speaking is often driven more by social pressure and fear of judgment than by the lack of vocabulary or grammar. When students feel anxious, they tend to focus excessively on accuracy rather than meaning. They become overly concerned about producing perfect sentences, which reduces spontaneity and interrupts communication. This condition prevents learners from speaking naturally and restricts their ability to develop fluency through continuous practice.

Therefore, the findings strongly emphasize the role of teachers in establishing a comfortable, friendly, and non-threatening learning environment. Teachers need to communicate that the classroom is a space for practice, not a place for punishment or

humiliation. When students feel safe, they become more willing to take risks in speaking, even if they make errors. A supportive environment reduces psychological tension and encourages learners to participate more actively.

In this context, mistakes should be treated as a normal and valuable part of the learning process. Teachers should shift students' perspectives by presenting errors as opportunities for improvement rather than signs of failure. For instance, teachers may provide gentle correction, use techniques such as recasting, or give feedback after students finish speaking rather than interrupting them. These strategies help learners maintain confidence and avoid feeling discouraged during oral activities.

The findings also support the view that effective language learning should not focus solely on final outcomes, but also on the learning process and classroom interaction. Language acquisition develops gradually through repeated exposure, practice, and meaningful communication. When learning is overly centered on grades, tests, and performance outcomes, students may experience higher anxiety because they view speaking tasks as high-risk activities.

One approach that appears effective in reducing speaking anxiety is peer teaching. Through peer teaching, students learn with and from their classmates in a more relaxed atmosphere. They can ask questions more freely without fearing that they will be seen as incompetent. Furthermore, students often accept correction more easily from peers because it feels less intimidating than teacher feedback. This collaborative learning environment strengthens students' comfort and reduces anxiety. Peer feedback is also important in improving students' confidence. When peer feedback is guided properly, students not only receive support but also learn to provide constructive responses to others. This process creates a culture of encouragement in the classroom, where learners understand that everyone makes mistakes. As a result, students feel less awkward and less fearful when they speak, which helps them develop confidence over time.

The novelty of this study lies in integrating psychological and pedagogical aspects within a single analytical framework. While previous research often discussed anxiety factors or teaching

strategies separately, this study demonstrates that they are interconnected and should be addressed simultaneously. Psychological conditions influence how students respond to teaching strategies, while appropriate teaching strategies can improve students' emotional readiness to speak.

In conclusion, this study implies that students' success in English speaking depends not only on language proficiency but also on emotional states and the learning environment. Teachers should consider both linguistic development and psychological comfort when designing speaking activities. Collaborative strategies, supportive classroom interaction, and a friendly learning atmosphere can be highly effective in helping students overcome fear, reduce anxiety, and gradually build stronger confidence in speaking English.

Conclusion

The study successfully achieved its aims, revealing that English-speaking ability depends not only on vocabulary and grammar mastery but also on self-confidence, emotional readiness, and social interaction skills. Its novelty lies in integrating psychological and pedagogical perspectives to examine students' fear of speaking, demonstrating that anxiety factors and teaching methods are interconnected and should be addressed simultaneously. The findings highlight that collaborative learning strategies, such as peer teaching and feedback, help reduce speaking anxiety by fostering confidence and minimizing fear of judgment. The research emphasizes the importance of a safe, supportive classroom environment where students feel accepted and unafraid of making mistakes. It recommends future classroom-based studies across diverse contexts to further test collaborative and psychological approaches, including emotional intelligence training, in reducing speaking anxiety. Overall, students' success in English speaking is shaped by a combination of language competence, emotional and social support, and a positive learning atmosphere.

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