



Speaking Anxiety in EFL Students and Its Impact on Language Performance

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ABSTRACT

Speaking is one of the most important skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning because it enables students to communicate ideas, opinions, and information effectively. Despite its importance, many EFL students experience difficulties when speaking English due to feelings of anxiety. Speaking anxiety has become a common issue in language classrooms and is often considered a major obstacle to successful communication. This paper aims to discuss students' speaking experiences in EFL contexts, examine the factors that contribute to speaking anxiety, and analyze its impact on language performance. The discussion highlights several causes of speaking anxiety, including psychological factors such as fear of negative evaluation, communication apprehension, and low self-confidence, as well as linguistic limitations and classroom-related factors. Furthermore, the paper explores how anxiety affects students' fluency, confidence, participation, motivation, and overall speaking performance. Previous studies indicate that students who experience high

levels of anxiety are more likely to avoid speaking activities and face difficulties in expressing their ideas effectively. The discussion also emphasizes the importance of supportive classroom environments and appropriate teaching strategies in reducing anxiety and promoting communication. In conclusion, speaking anxiety significantly influences language performance and should be addressed through continuous practice, positive learning experiences, and effective instructional approaches to help students become more confident and successful English speakers.

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INTRODUCTION

English has become an important international language used for communication in various fields, including education, business, technology, science, and international relations. As interactions among people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds continue to increase, the ability to communicate effectively in English has

become an essential skill. Consequently, English language learning has received considerable attention in educational contexts, particularly in countries where English is learned as a foreign language. In English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts, students are generally expected to develop competence in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Among these skills, speaking has a particularly important role because it enables learners to communicate ideas, express opinions, ask questions, and participate in real-time interactions. Therefore, speaking ability is often considered an essential component of successful language learning. However, speaking is also considered one of the most challenging skills for EFL learners. Unlike reading and writing, speaking requires learners to produce language spontaneously and respond immediately during communication. Students need to manage vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and meaning simultaneously while maintaining the continuity of interaction. These demands may create considerable pressure, particularly for learners who have limited opportunities to use English outside the classroom. Since English is not commonly used in their everyday communication, many EFL students depend heavily on classroom activities to practice speaking. Consequently, some learners may feel uncertain and uncomfortable when they are required to communicate in English, especially in front of teachers or classmates.

Within this context, speaking anxiety has become an important issue in foreign language learning. Speaking anxiety can be understood as feelings of nervousness, fear, tension, or worry experienced by learners when they are required to communicate orally in a foreign language. It forms part of the broader concept of foreign language classroom anxiety, which has been identified as a situation-specific form of anxiety associated with language learning (Horwitz et al., 1986). Speaking anxiety may occur even among students who have adequate knowledge of vocabulary and grammar because language performance is influenced not only by linguistic competence but also by emotional and psychological factors. Thus, students' ability to communicate orally cannot always be understood solely from their level of language knowledge. The presence of speaking anxiety may influence how students participate in EFL learning activities. Learners who experience anxiety may hesitate before speaking, avoid classroom discussions, remain silent, or have difficulty expressing their ideas clearly. Anxiety can also interfere with cognitive processes involved in second language use, including attention, retrieval, and language processing (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). As a result, students may experience

difficulties in producing language even when they possess sufficient linguistic knowledge. This condition indicates that anxiety may create a gap between students' actual language competence and their observable speaking performance.

In addition, previous research has demonstrated a relationship between speaking anxiety and oral language performance. Woodrow (2006), for example, found that second-language speaking anxiety was a significant predictor of oral achievement among English language learners. Learners experiencing higher levels of speaking anxiety may therefore face greater difficulties when performing oral tasks. Such difficulties can appear in classroom presentations, conversations, role plays, discussions, and other communicative activities. Consequently, speaking anxiety should not be viewed merely as a temporary feeling of nervousness, but as a factor that may influence students' participation and performance in EFL learning. Furthermore, speaking anxiety may be influenced by various personal, interpersonal, and classroom-related factors. Students may become anxious because they are afraid of making grammatical or pronunciation mistakes, being negatively evaluated by others, forgetting vocabulary, or being unable to express their ideas appropriately. Classroom interactions may also contribute to students' emotional experiences. Teacher behavior, peer responses, classroom procedures, and assessment practices can shape how comfortable students feel when using English. Young (1991) identified several potential sources of language anxiety, including learner beliefs, teacher-learner interactions, classroom procedures, and language testing. Therefore, speaking anxiety cannot be separated from the learning environment in which language communication takes place.

The increasing emphasis on communicative language teaching has further highlighted the importance of speaking activities in EFL classrooms. Contemporary language instruction encourages learners to participate actively through discussions, presentations, pair work, group activities, role plays, and other forms of communicative practice. These activities provide valuable opportunities for students to develop their speaking ability. However, learners who experience high levels of anxiety may find such activities challenging and may participate less actively. Consequently, there is a need to create classroom conditions that encourage students to communicate without excessive fear of making mistakes or receiving negative responses. A supportive learning environment may play an important role in reducing the negative effects of speaking

anxiety. Teachers can provide students with opportunities to practice gradually, offer constructive feedback, encourage peer support, and create classroom interactions in which mistakes are treated as a natural part of language learning. A low-anxiety classroom environment can help learners become more comfortable with communicating in the target language and may encourage greater participation (Young, 1991). This suggests that addressing speaking anxiety requires attention not only to students' linguistic abilities but also to the emotional and social conditions surrounding language learning.

Despite the considerable attention given to foreign language anxiety, the relationship between speaking anxiety and students' language performance remains an important issue for EFL education. Existing research has demonstrated that anxiety can influence oral performance and participation, but students may experience anxiety in different ways depending on their linguistic background, learning experiences, classroom environment, and perceived sources of pressure. Therefore, understanding speaking anxiety requires consideration of both its causes and its consequences. A more comprehensive understanding can help educators identify the difficulties experienced by anxious learners and develop classroom practices that support more effective oral communication. Therefore, this article aims to discuss speaking anxiety among EFL students and its impact on language performance. Specifically, it examines the concept of speaking anxiety, the factors that contribute to its development, and its effects on students' participation and speaking performance in EFL contexts. It also discusses the role of the classroom environment and possible strategies for reducing the negative effects of anxiety. By examining these issues, this article seeks to provide a clearer understanding of speaking anxiety as an important affective factor in English language learning and to highlight the importance of supportive learning environments in helping EFL students develop greater confidence and effective speaking performance.

METHOD

This article uses a narrative literature review approach to discuss speaking anxiety among EFL students and its impact on language performance. The method focuses on reviewing and synthesizing relevant literature related to speaking in EFL contexts,

factors contributing to speaking anxiety, the effects of anxiety on language performance, and strategies for reducing speaking anxiety.

The literature used in this article consists of books, journal articles, and previous studies related to foreign language anxiety, speaking anxiety, oral English classrooms, language learning, and speaking instruction. The references include works by Horwitz (1986), Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), MacIntyre and Gardner (1994), Liu (2007), Woodrow (2006), and Young (1991).

The literature was reviewed and organized according to several main topics. These topics include students' speaking experiences in EFL contexts, causes of speaking anxiety, the impact of speaking anxiety on language performance, and strategies that may help reduce speaking anxiety. The information obtained from the literature was then synthesized and presented descriptively to provide an understanding of speaking anxiety in EFL learning.

Because this article is a literature review, no primary data were collected directly from students or teachers. Therefore, the Results section presents the main findings and themes identified from the reviewed literature rather than statistical results from an empirical study.

RESULTS

Student Speaking in EFL Context

Speaking is one of the most essential skills in English language learning because it enables students to communicate ideas, opinions, feelings, and information directly. In EFL contexts, speaking is often considered the primary indicator of language proficiency since it demonstrates learners' ability to use English actively in real communication. While students may achieve good results in reading, writing, or listening activities, their ability to speak effectively is frequently viewed as the ultimate goal of language learning. As a productive skill, speaking requires learners to generate language rather than simply receive information. This process involves the simultaneous use of various linguistic components, including vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and fluency. Students must organize their thoughts, choose appropriate words, construct meaningful sentences, and deliver their messages clearly within a short period of time. Because of these demands, speaking is often regarded as one of the most complex language skills to master.

In many EFL settings, students have limited exposure to English outside the classroom. Unlike learners in English-speaking countries, EFL students rarely use English in their daily interactions. Consequently, the classroom becomes the primary environment where they can practice speaking. Classroom activities such as discussions, presentations, debates, role plays, and question-and-answer sessions provide important opportunities for students to develop oral communication skills. However, speaking activities often present unique challenges. Many students feel uncomfortable when they are required to speak in front of their classmates or teachers. Although they may understand grammatical rules and possess sufficient vocabulary, they frequently struggle to express their ideas orally. This situation occurs because speaking involves not only linguistic knowledge but also psychological readiness and confidence.

Another important aspect of speaking is its spontaneous nature. During oral communication, students are expected to respond immediately without having much time to think or revise their answers. This differs significantly from writing activities, where learners have more opportunities to plan, edit, and correct their work. The pressure to produce language instantly often causes students to become nervous and uncertain about their performance. Moreover, communicative language teaching has increased the importance of active participation in language classrooms. Students are encouraged to engage in meaningful communication rather than simply memorize vocabulary and grammar rules. While this approach supports language development, it also requires learners to take risks and communicate despite possible mistakes. For many students, this expectation creates feelings of pressure and nervousness. The social nature of speaking further contributes to its difficulty because students may become concerned about how others perceive their performance and worry about making errors in front of an audience. As a result, speaking often becomes the language skill most closely associated with anxiety. For these reasons, speaking remains one of the most challenging aspects of EFL learning and provides an important foundation for understanding speaking anxiety among EFL students.

Causes of Speaking Anxiety Among EFL Students

Speaking anxiety is influenced by various factors that interact with one another. In most cases, anxiety develops as a result of psychological concerns, linguistic limitations,

and classroom-related experiences. These factors affect students' confidence, willingness to communicate, and overall speaking performance. One of the most significant causes of speaking anxiety is fear of negative evaluation. Students often worry that their mistakes will be noticed and judged by teachers or classmates. They may fear criticism, embarrassment, or negative reactions from others when they speak English. This concern frequently causes learners to become overly cautious during communication activities. Fear of negative evaluation becomes particularly strong during public speaking tasks such as presentations or classroom discussions. In these situations, students are aware that many people are paying attention to their performance. Consequently, they tend to focus more on avoiding mistakes than on expressing their ideas effectively. This excessive concern often increases nervousness and reduces communication quality.

Another major factor is communication apprehension, which refers to feelings of fear or discomfort associated with interacting with others. Students who experience this type of anxiety may become nervous whenever they are asked to speak English, regardless of their preparation. Even when they know the answer to a question, they may hesitate to respond because they feel uncomfortable communicating in front of others. Communication apprehension is often related to a lack of speaking experience. Students who rarely use English outside the classroom may feel uncertain about their ability to communicate successfully. Because they are unfamiliar with real communication situations, speaking activities appear intimidating and stressful. This lack of experience often reinforces anxiety and reduces confidence.

Low self-confidence is another important factor contributing to speaking anxiety. Many students underestimate their language abilities and believe that they are not capable of speaking English effectively. Such beliefs often cause learners to doubt themselves before they even begin speaking. As a result, they become more sensitive to mistakes and more fearful of communication. Students with low self-confidence tend to compare themselves with classmates who appear more proficient. These comparisons may lead them to perceive themselves as weaker language learners, which further increases anxiety. Over time, this negative self-perception can discourage participation and reduce opportunities for improvement.

Linguistic limitations also play a significant role in speaking anxiety. One common problem is limited vocabulary knowledge. Students often know what they want to say but

cannot find the appropriate words to express their ideas. This difficulty may cause hesitation, frustration, and nervousness during communication. Grammar-related concerns represent another source of anxiety because many students are afraid of producing grammatically incorrect sentences. Consequently, they focus excessively on accuracy while speaking. Instead of communicating naturally, they continuously monitor their grammar, which disrupts the flow of conversation and increases anxiety. Pronunciation difficulties further contribute to speaking anxiety, as students who lack confidence in their pronunciation often worry about being misunderstood or judged by others.

In addition to psychological and linguistic factors, the classroom environment can strongly influence students' anxiety levels. A classroom atmosphere characterized by criticism, excessive correction, or competition may increase students' fear of making mistakes. When learners feel that errors will result in embarrassment, they become less willing to take part in speaking activities. Teaching practices also affect students' emotional experiences. Teachers who focus primarily on correcting mistakes may unintentionally create pressure for learners. On the other hand, teachers who provide encouragement, support, and constructive feedback can help students feel more comfortable during communication activities. Therefore, both psychological and environmental factors play important roles in shaping students' speaking anxiety.

Impact of Speaking Anxiety on Language Performance

Speaking anxiety has a significant influence on students' language performance. Although many learners possess adequate language knowledge, anxiety often prevents them from demonstrating their actual abilities. The effects of speaking anxiety can be observed in fluency, cognitive processing, confidence, participation, motivation, and overall language development. One of the most noticeable effects of speaking anxiety is reduced fluency. Students who feel anxious often speak more slowly and pause frequently while communicating. They may repeat words, stop in the middle of sentences, or struggle to organize their thoughts effectively. These disruptions negatively affect the flow of communication and make it difficult for listeners to understand their intended message. Furthermore, anxious students often focus excessively on avoiding mistakes rather than expressing ideas. They constantly monitor their grammar, vocabulary, and

pronunciation while speaking. This excessive self-monitoring interrupts natural communication and reduces spontaneity. As a result, their speech may appear less fluent even when they possess sufficient language knowledge.

Speaking anxiety also affects cognitive processes involved in language production. During communication activities, students must retrieve vocabulary, organize ideas, and construct sentences simultaneously. However, anxiety consumes mental resources that would normally support these processes. Consequently, students may experience difficulty concentrating and processing information effectively. Many anxious learners experience what is commonly referred to as a “blank mind” situation. Although they may have prepared their answers beforehand, they suddenly forget important vocabulary or ideas when asked to speak. This phenomenon occurs because anxiety interferes with memory retrieval and cognitive functioning. As a result, students may produce incomplete responses or remain silent despite knowing the correct answer.

Another important impact of speaking anxiety is decreased self-confidence. Repeated experiences of nervousness and communication difficulties often lead students to develop negative beliefs about their language abilities. They may begin to perceive themselves as poor speakers, even when their actual proficiency is adequate. This negative self-perception further reinforces anxiety and creates a cycle that is difficult to break. Speaking anxiety also reduces students’ willingness to participate in classroom activities. Learners who fear making mistakes frequently avoid volunteering answers, asking questions, or participating in discussions. Some students choose to remain silent throughout lessons even when they understand the material being discussed. This avoidance behavior significantly limits opportunities for language practice and improvement. The reduction in participation has long-term consequences for language development because speaking proficiency can only improve through regular use and practice. When students avoid communication activities because of anxiety, they miss valuable opportunities to develop fluency, vocabulary, pronunciation, and confidence. Consequently, their progress may be slower than that of students who participate actively.

In addition, speaking anxiety can negatively affect students’ motivation to learn English. Constant feelings of nervousness and discomfort may reduce enjoyment of language learning. Students who repeatedly experience anxiety during speaking

activities may begin to associate English learning with stress rather than achievement. Over time, this negative association can decrease motivation and interest in language learning. Academic performance may also be affected by speaking anxiety because many educational settings require students to participate in presentations, oral examinations, discussions, and classroom interactions. Students who experience anxiety often perform below their actual potential during these assessments, meaning their academic results may not accurately reflect their language competence. The impact of speaking anxiety also extends beyond the classroom. Students who fail to overcome their anxiety may continue experiencing communication difficulties in higher education and professional environments, avoiding situations such as interviews, seminars, conferences, or international interactions. Consequently, speaking anxiety can influence not only academic achievement but also future educational and career opportunities. Because of these wide-ranging effects, speaking anxiety should be considered an important issue in EFL learning. Addressing anxiety is essential not only for improving speaking performance but also for supporting students' overall language development and long-term success.

Strategies to Reduce Speaking Anxiety

Although speaking anxiety is a common challenge among EFL students, it can be reduced through appropriate teaching strategies and supportive learning environments. Since anxiety is influenced by psychological, linguistic, and environmental factors, efforts to reduce it should address these aspects simultaneously. Teachers play a crucial role in helping students develop confidence and create positive speaking experiences in the classroom. Therefore, reducing speaking anxiety requires not only improving students' language skills but also creating conditions that support their emotional well-being during communication activities.

One of the most effective strategies is creating a supportive classroom environment. Students are more willing to participate when they feel safe, respected, and accepted by their teachers and classmates. A positive learning atmosphere encourages learners to express their ideas without excessive fear of criticism or embarrassment. Teachers can foster such an environment by encouraging mutual respect and emphasizing that making mistakes is a natural part of language learning. Instead of viewing errors as failures,

students should be encouraged to see them as opportunities for improvement. In addition, providing regular opportunities for speaking practice can help students become more familiar with using English orally and gradually reduce feelings of nervousness.

Speaking activities should be designed progressively, beginning with simple tasks and gradually increasing in complexity. For example, students may start with short pair conversations before moving to group discussions and formal presentations. This gradual approach enables learners to build confidence step by step and prevents them from feeling overwhelmed. Interactive learning activities such as pair work, group discussions, role plays, simulations, and collaborative projects can also help reduce anxiety. Speaking in small groups is generally less intimidating than speaking in front of an entire class, allowing students to practice communication in a more relaxed atmosphere. Furthermore, collaborative activities encourage peer support and provide valuable opportunities for meaningful communication.

Another important strategy is providing constructive feedback. Feedback should focus not only on students' mistakes but also on their strengths and progress. Positive feedback helps learners recognize their achievements and develop greater confidence in their speaking abilities. Teachers should also maintain a balance between accuracy and communication, as excessive correction may increase anxiety and interrupt the flow of interaction. In addition, technology can support anxiety reduction through language-learning applications, online discussion platforms, and video-recording activities that provide alternative opportunities for speaking practice. Students should also be encouraged to develop positive learning habits, set realistic goals, and appreciate their progress. Ultimately, through supportive teaching practices, regular speaking opportunities, constructive feedback, and positive learning experiences, students can gradually overcome anxiety and become more effective English speakers.

DISCUSSIONS

The results of the literature review show that speaking anxiety is closely related to the nature of speaking itself. Speaking requires students to produce language spontaneously, respond immediately, and communicate in front of other people. These demands can create pressure, particularly for EFL learners who have limited opportunities to use English outside the classroom. The findings also indicate that

speaking anxiety is not caused by one single factor. Psychological factors, linguistic limitations, and classroom conditions can interact with one another. Fear of negative evaluation, communication apprehension, and low self-confidence can make students more worried about making mistakes. At the same time, limited vocabulary, grammar difficulties, and pronunciation problems can make students less confident when expressing their ideas. The findings concerning fear of negative evaluation are particularly important because speaking is a visible form of language performance. When students believe that their teachers or classmates will judge their mistakes, they may focus more on avoiding errors than on communicating meaning. This can result in hesitation, excessive self-monitoring, and reduced fluency.

The results further show that limited speaking experience can strengthen communication apprehension. In EFL contexts, students may not have many opportunities to communicate in English outside the classroom. Therefore, classroom activities become their main opportunity to practice. However, if students are rarely exposed to speaking activities, they may feel more nervous when required to speak in front of others. Regular and gradual practice can therefore help students become more familiar with oral communication. Low self-confidence is also closely connected with students' participation. Students who believe that their English ability is weaker than that of their classmates may avoid speaking activities. This avoidance reduces their opportunities to practice, which may further reduce their confidence. Therefore, speaking anxiety and low participation can create a cycle that affects students' language development. The impact of speaking anxiety on fluency and cognitive processing is another important finding. Students may pause frequently, repeat words, forget vocabulary, or experience difficulty organizing their ideas. These problems do not necessarily mean that students lack language knowledge. Instead, anxiety may interfere with their ability to access and use the knowledge they already possess during real-time communication.

The results also show that speaking anxiety can affect motivation. When students repeatedly experience nervousness and discomfort during speaking activities, they may begin to associate English learning with stress. If this continues, students may become less willing to participate and may avoid communication opportunities. Therefore, reducing anxiety is important not only for speaking performance but also for maintaining

students' motivation to learn English. The findings concerning classroom strategies suggest that teachers have an important role in reducing speaking anxiety. A supportive classroom environment can make students feel safer when expressing their ideas. Teachers can encourage students to understand that mistakes are a natural part of learning rather than something that should cause embarrassment. Gradual speaking activities are also important. Students can begin with pair conversations, continue with group discussions, and then move to larger presentations. This approach allows learners to develop confidence progressively. Interactive activities such as role plays, simulations, and collaborative projects can also provide meaningful opportunities for students to communicate without immediately placing them under the pressure of speaking in front of the whole class.

Constructive feedback is another important consideration. Teachers should provide feedback that helps students recognize their weaknesses while also acknowledging their strengths and progress. Excessive correction during communication may increase anxiety and interrupt fluency. Therefore, teachers need to balance language accuracy with the purpose of communication. Overall, the results and discussion indicate that speaking anxiety should be addressed through a combination of linguistic practice and emotional support. Improving students' English knowledge alone may not completely solve the problem if learners continue to fear negative evaluation or lack confidence. Supportive classroom environments, gradual speaking practice, interactive activities, constructive feedback, and additional opportunities for communication can help students manage anxiety and develop their speaking abilities.

CONCLUSIONS

Speaking is a fundamental skill in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning because it enables students to communicate ideas, share information, and participate actively in social and academic interactions. However, speaking is also one of the most challenging language skills, as it requires learners to use vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and fluency simultaneously during real-time communication. These demands often make students vulnerable to feelings of anxiety when speaking English. The discussion has shown that speaking anxiety is influenced by various factors,

including psychological factors, linguistic limitations, and classroom-related conditions. Fear of negative evaluation, communication apprehension, low self-confidence, limited vocabulary, grammar difficulties, pronunciation problems, and unsupportive classroom environments all contribute to students' anxiety during speaking activities.

Furthermore, speaking anxiety has a considerable impact on language performance. It can reduce fluency, interfere with cognitive processing, lower self-confidence, decrease classroom participation, and weaken students' motivation to learn English. As a result, anxiety often prevents learners from demonstrating their actual language abilities and limits opportunities for language development. Therefore, addressing speaking anxiety should be an important priority in EFL education. Teachers need to create supportive classroom environments, provide regular opportunities for speaking practice, implement interactive learning activities, and offer constructive feedback that encourages rather than discourages learners. Through these efforts, students can gradually develop greater confidence and improve their speaking abilities.

In conclusion, although speaking anxiety remains a significant challenge in EFL learning, its negative effects can be reduced through appropriate instructional strategies and positive learning experiences. By helping students overcome anxiety, educators can support the development of more confident, competent, and effective English speakers, ultimately contributing to better language performance and more meaningful learning outcomes.

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