
Beyond fear of speaking: Unpacking the factors shaping EFL students' speaking anxiety in Indonesian junior high school

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ABSTRACT

Keywords:

EFL learners, English speaking, speaking anxiety

Speaking is one of the most important skills in English language learning; however, many students experience anxiety when they are required to communicate in English. This study aimed to investigate the factors affecting students' speaking anxiety at SMP Nurul Amal Palembang and to explore the effects of anxiety, coping strategies, and teacher support in reducing anxiety. This research employed a qualitative case study design. The participants were selected using purposive sampling and consisted of six students who experienced speaking anxiety in English classes. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that students' speaking anxiety was influenced by five major factors: fear of negative evaluation, low self-confidence, fear of making mistakes, speaking in front of peers, and limited practice opportunities. Among these factors, fear of negative evaluation emerged as the most dominant factor because students were highly concerned about being laughed at, criticized, or negatively judged by their classmates. The study also found that speaking anxiety affected students' speaking performance, motivation, and emotional well-being. To cope with anxiety, students employed preparation strategies, practice strategies, avoidance strategies, and cognitive strategies. In addition, teacher support played an important role in reducing anxiety through emotional encouragement, supportive classroom environments, instructional strategies, and constructive feedback. These findings suggest that teachers should create supportive learning environments and provide sufficient speaking opportunities to help students reduce anxiety and improve their speaking performance.

1. INTRODUCTION

English has become an international language used for communication in education, business, technology, and global interactions. Consequently, English language learning has become an important component of education in many countries, including Indonesia. Among the four language skills, speaking is often considered particularly challenging for learners because it requires them to formulate and express ideas accurately and fluently in real time. Through speaking activities, students are expected to communicate their ideas, opinions, and feelings effectively. However, fulfilling these expectations can be difficult for learners, particularly when they experience anxiety about speaking English.

Speaking anxiety is a common challenge among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, particularly in classroom situations that require oral communication. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) conceptualize foreign language anxiety as a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors associated with classroom language learning. In speaking activities, this anxiety may be reflected in learners' fear of making mistakes, concerns about negative evaluation, and discomfort when speaking in front of others. These concerns may cause students to hesitate, remain silent, or avoid participating in classroom discussions, thereby limiting their opportunities to practice and develop their speaking skills. MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) further explain that language anxiety can interfere with cognitive processing during language learning, potentially making it more difficult for learners to organize their thoughts and produce language effectively.

Recent studies have continued to demonstrate the relevance of speaking anxiety among adolescent EFL learners. Rahayu (2024), in a study involving eighth-grade junior high school students, identified fear of negative evaluation as a prominent source of speaking anxiety, followed by test anxiety. Similarly, Syahrani et al. (2024) found that speaking anxiety among Indonesian eleventh-grade students was associated with difficulties in grammar, limited vocabulary, and inadequate preparation. Research has also examined how students respond to these challenges. Nugroho and Hapsari (2024) explored strategies used by high school students to reduce speaking anxiety, while Muengnakin and Narathakoon (2025) identified learner characteristics and classroom environments as factors associated with anxiety among Thai high school students. More recently, Permatasari (2025) examined foreign language anxiety among Indonesian eighth-grade students and highlighted the roles of communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, classroom dynamics, and low self-confidence. Prameswari et al. (2025) also investigated speaking anxiety among junior high school students, focusing on anxiety triggers and coping strategies. Collectively, these studies indicate that speaking anxiety among adolescents involves several psychological, linguistic, and classroom-related dimensions rather than a single isolated factor.

Although these studies have expanded understanding of speaking anxiety among secondary-school learners, further investigation is useful into how the different dimensions of anxiety are experienced together in students' everyday learning. Existing studies have examined particular aspects, including anxiety levels, contributing factors, speaking performance, and coping strategies. However, these aspects do not necessarily explain how students interpret anxiety-provoking situations, how anxiety affects their classroom participation and learning experiences, and how their responses relate to the support they perceive from teachers. Understanding these connections is important because students who experience similar speaking difficulties may respond differently depending on their confidence, previous experiences, preparation, and classroom environment. Therefore, a qualitative investigation can complement previous research by examining students' accounts of anxiety, its perceived effects, their coping responses, and the role of teacher support within a specific educational context.

This issue is relevant to SMP Nurul Amal Palembang, where preliminary classroom observations and the English teacher's experience indicated that some students rarely participated in English-speaking activities. Limited participation may have several explanations, and anxiety should not automatically be assumed to be the only cause. Nevertheless, this classroom context provides a reason to explore how students understand and experience speaking English, including the situations that make them anxious, the effects they associate

with their anxiety, and the strategies they use to manage it. Examining these experiences may also help clarify how students perceive the role of teacher support in making classroom speaking activities more comfortable and encouraging. The study consequently focuses not only on identifying factors associated with speaking anxiety but also on understanding students' experiences and responses to it.

Based on this rationale, the present study aims to explore speaking anxiety among students at SMP Nurul Amal Palembang through their reported experiences. Specifically, it investigates the factors that contribute to students' speaking anxiety, the perceived effects of anxiety on their English learning experiences, the coping strategies they use, and their perceptions of teacher support in managing anxiety. By examining these dimensions together, the study seeks to provide a contextualized understanding of speaking anxiety among junior high school students and offer insights that may help English teachers create more supportive classroom environments.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What factors contribute to students' speaking anxiety in English at SMP Nurul Amal Palembang?
2. How do students perceive speaking anxiety as affecting their English learning experiences and classroom participation?
3. What strategies do students use to cope with speaking anxiety, and how do they perceive the role of teacher support in managing it?

2. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study design to investigate students' experiences of speaking anxiety in English at SMP Nurul Amal Palembang. A qualitative approach was selected because it enabled the researcher to explore students' experiences, perceptions, and feelings regarding speaking anxiety in depth. Alam (2021) discusses the use of qualitative case study methods to investigate phenomena within a specific context. The case study design was appropriate because the investigation focused on a specific group of students within a particular educational setting. The study was conducted at SMP Nurul Amal Palembang during the 2025/2026 academic year.

The inclusion criteria were as follows: (1) students were enrolled at SMP Nurul Amal Palembang; (2) students rarely participated in English-speaking activities during classroom instruction, based on the English teacher's teaching experience and classroom observations; (3) two students were selected from each grade level to obtain perspectives from different grade levels; and (4) students voluntarily agreed to participate in the interviews. Students who did not meet the inclusion criteria or who were unwilling to participate were excluded from the study. Applying these criteria resulted in the selection of six participants, identified by the initials RDY, YPF, NPA, SAA, FFF, and MA, to protect their identities. The selection criteria were intended to identify students whose experiences could help illuminate speaking anxiety; limited classroom participation was treated as a basis for selection rather than as conclusive proof that a student experienced anxiety.

Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions designed to explore students' experiences of speaking anxiety and related classroom experiences. The semi-structured format allowed the researcher to ask follow-up questions to clarify participants' responses and obtain more detailed descriptions.

Interviews were conducted in Indonesian so that participants could express their thoughts and feelings clearly and comfortably. With participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

The interview guide was organized around four thematic areas: factors contributing to speaking anxiety, the perceived effects of anxiety on students' learning experiences, coping strategies, and perceived teacher support. The first area explored situations and concerns that made students nervous when speaking English, including fear of making mistakes, fear of negative evaluation, and confidence when speaking in front of classmates. The second area examined students' descriptions of how anxiety affected their classroom participation, speaking performance, motivation, and emotional experiences. The third area focused on the strategies students reported using to manage anxiety, including preparation, practice, and avoidance when these were mentioned by participants. The fourth area explored students' perceptions of teacher responses and classroom practices that they considered helpful in making speaking activities more comfortable.

The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis, drawing on Byrne's (2022) discussion of Braun and Clarke's approach to reflexive thematic analysis. The analysis involved six stages: (1) familiarizing the researcher with the data by reading the interview transcripts repeatedly; (2) generating initial codes from relevant statements; (3) searching for potential themes by grouping related codes; (4) reviewing themes against the coded extracts and the overall data; (5) defining and naming themes to clarify their central meanings; and (6) producing the report by presenting the themes and supporting them with relevant interview quotations. This process was used to identify recurring patterns in participants' accounts and organize the findings into themes concerning factors contributing to speaking anxiety, its perceived effects, coping strategies, and teacher support.

Trustworthiness was addressed through the criteria of credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability, as discussed by Ahmed (2024). Credibility was supported through member checking, in which participants were given the opportunity to confirm the accuracy of the interpretations of their responses. Audio recordings and interview transcripts were used to maintain an accurate record of participants' accounts. Dependability was supported by documenting the research procedures and analytical stages, including the process of coding responses and developing themes. Transferability was addressed by describing the research setting, participant-selection criteria, and the context of the investigation so that readers could assess the relevance of the findings to similar educational settings. Confirmability was supported by grounding the analysis in participants' interview responses and presenting direct quotations to demonstrate the relationship between the data and the interpretations. Together, these procedures were intended to make the research process transparent and the findings traceable to the collected data.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Factors Affecting Students' Speaking Anxiety

The findings revealed five interconnected factors contributing to students' speaking anxiety: fear of negative evaluation, variation in self-confidence, fear of making mistakes, fear of speaking in front of peers, and limited opportunities for speaking practice. The interview data suggest that these factors were not experienced independently. Instead, students' concerns about being judged by others were associated with their perceptions of their own English-speaking

abilities, their fear of making linguistic errors, and their limited experience using English orally. Together, these factors shaped how students experienced speaking activities and influenced their willingness to participate in classroom communication.

Fear of negative evaluation and fear of speaking in front of peers emerged as closely related sources of anxiety. RDY reported being afraid that classmates would laugh at him, “I am afraid that my classmates will laugh at me when I make mistakes while speaking English”, while YPF expressed concern about saying something incorrectly in front of others, “When I speak in front of my classmates, I worry that I might say something wrong.” These responses indicate that students’ anxiety was associated not only with the difficulty of speaking English but also with the possibility of receiving negative social reactions. Speaking before the whole class could intensify this concern because students had to communicate while being observed by their peers. This finding is consistent with Alfiani et al. (2022), who identified fear of negative evaluation as an important factor in students’ speaking anxiety. Similarly, Yunus et al. (2024) found that fear of rejection, embarrassment, and comparison with others contributed to EFL students’ public-speaking anxiety. In the present study, these factors appear to reinforce one another: the prospect of speaking in front of classmates may increase students’ concern about being judged, while the fear of negative reactions may make speaking before an audience more intimidating.

Students’ perceptions of their speaking abilities also contributed to this anxiety. NPA reported feeling unconfident when speaking English in front of the class, “I do not feel confident when I speak English in front of the class”. FFF similarly perceived her speaking ability as weaker than that of her classmates, “I feel that my English-speaking ability is not as good as my classmates”. These responses illustrate how students’ self-evaluations may shape their experiences of classroom speaking. When students believe that their abilities are insufficient, they may become more concerned about making errors or failing to communicate their intended meaning. Mardianti et al. (2023) reported a negative relationship between self-efficacy and speaking anxiety, suggesting that lower beliefs in one’s ability may be associated with greater anxiety. Viewed in relation to the present findings, lower perceived confidence may make students more hesitant to participate, particularly when they anticipate comparison with their peers. However, the interview responses should be interpreted as participants’ perceptions of their abilities rather than objective measurements of their English proficiency.

Fear of making mistakes further illustrates the relationship between students’ perceived abilities and their anxiety. SAA explained that grammatical mistakes made her anxious during speaking activities, “I feel anxious when I speak English because I am afraid of making grammatical mistakes”. MA also reported difficulties with pronunciation and vocabulary, “Sometimes I have difficulty pronouncing words and remembering the vocabulary I need when I speak English”. These accounts suggest that concerns about linguistic accuracy and the ability to express ideas may increase the pressure students experience when speaking English. When combined with fear of negative evaluation, these concerns may make mistakes seem not merely like part of language learning but also a potential source of embarrassment. Yunus et al. (2024) similarly identified language-related concerns and fear of negative reactions as factors associated with students’ anxiety when speaking publicly. The findings therefore suggest that students’ fear of mistakes may be intensified when they expect their errors to be noticed or judged by classmates. Such anxiety may also make it more difficult for them to participate comfortably in speaking activities.

Limited opportunities to practice English constituted another factor in the participants' accounts. YPF explained that she rarely practiced English because she did not have speaking partners, "I rarely practice speaking English because I do not have anyone to practice with". MA added that she used English only during classroom activities, explaining, "I usually use English only when we have speaking activities in class". These responses indicate that the participants had limited opportunities to become familiar with oral communication beyond formal classroom situations. Limited practice may leave students feeling less prepared to speak, particularly when they are expected to respond in front of their classmates. Hanafiah et al. (2022), in their study of Indonesian EFL learners, examined the relationship between English-learning activities, speaking skills, and foreign-language speaking anxiety. In the context of the present study, the participants' accounts suggest that restricted opportunities to use English may coexist with concerns about confidence, linguistic accuracy, and peer evaluation. This relationship should not be interpreted as proof that limited practice directly caused anxiety. Rather, the findings indicate that students' limited speaking experience and their reported anxiety were related aspects of their learning experiences.

Taken together, the findings suggest that students' speaking anxiety arose from the interaction of psychological, linguistic, and classroom-related factors. Fear of negative evaluation and speaking before peers concerned the social context of communication, whereas low perceived self-confidence and fear of mistakes concerned students' evaluations of their own abilities. Limited practice opportunities formed an additional contextual concern that may have made speaking situations feel less familiar. These factors provide a basis for understanding students' reported hesitation and reluctance to participate in English-speaking activities. They also indicate the importance of examining students' responses to anxiety, the strategies they use to manage it, and the classroom practices they perceive as supportive. Accordingly, the findings on contributing factors should be considered alongside the subsequent findings on the effects of speaking anxiety, students' coping strategies, and teacher support to develop a more comprehensive understanding of their experiences.

3.2. Effects of Speaking Anxiety

The findings showed that speaking anxiety affected students' performance, motivation, and emotional well-being. Anxiety influenced not only how students communicated but also how they perceived themselves and participated in classroom activities.

One significant effect of speaking anxiety was the disruption of speaking performance. Participants reported experiencing hesitation, frequent pauses, and difficulty expressing their ideas during speaking activities. Several students explained that nervousness caused them to forget vocabulary or lose track of what they wanted to say. NPA reported that her mind often became blank when speaking in front of the class, "When I speak in front of the class, sometimes my mind goes blank and I forget what I want to say". MA explained that anxiety reduced her ability to focus on her speech, noting, "When I feel anxious, it is difficult for me to concentrate on what I am saying". These findings are consistent with Masrul and Erliana (2024), who examined the influence of language-learning anxiety on speaking and reading performance in a foreign-language context. Hanafiah et al. (2022) also investigated speaking anxiety alongside speaking skills among Indonesian EFL learners. In the present study, the participants' accounts suggest that nervousness and concerns about making mistakes made it more difficult for them to organize and express their ideas during speaking activities. However, because this

study relied on interview accounts rather than objective speaking-performance measurements, the reported effects should be understood as the students' perceived experiences.

The findings also indicated that anxiety affected students' motivation in different ways. Some participants reported decreased motivation because they felt discouraged and preferred to avoid speaking situations. Others, however, viewed anxiety as a challenge and became more motivated to improve their speaking ability. RDY stated that anxiety encouraged him to practice more frequently, "Even though I feel nervous when speaking English, I want to practice more so that I can improve". SAA expressed a desire to become more fluent to reduce her nervousness, "I want to speak English more fluently because I hope that I will feel less nervous". This finding supports Gregersen and MacIntyre (2014), who suggested that anxiety can produce both facilitating and debilitating effects depending on how learners interpret their experiences. Therefore, anxiety does not always lead to negative outcomes but may also encourage self-improvement.

3.3 Coping Strategies and Teacher Support

The findings revealed that students employed various strategies to manage their speaking anxiety. These strategies included avoidance, preparation, practice, and cognitive strategies. In addition, teacher support played a significant role in helping students feel more comfortable during speaking activities.

Some participants relied on avoidance strategies to reduce immediate anxiety. For example, students reported avoiding eye contact or looking down while speaking. One participant described this behavior by explaining, "When I feel nervous, I sometimes look down and avoid looking at my classmates while speaking". Although these strategies helped reduce nervousness temporarily, they did not necessarily address the underlying concerns that made speaking difficult. Yunus et al. (2024) identified several strategies that students reported using to manage public-speaking anxiety, including positive thinking, calming the mind, and practicing before speaking. Compared with these strategies, the avoidance behaviors reported in the present study appear to represent ways of managing immediate discomfort rather than directly preparing students for oral communication. However, the available interview accounts do not establish whether these behaviors affected the participants' long-term speaking development.

Preparation strategies were commonly used by students before speaking activities. Participants reported memorizing vocabulary, reviewing materials, and preparing notes to increase their confidence. FFF and MA explained that preparation helped them feel more ready to speak and reduced their fear of making mistakes. FFF stated, "Before speaking in class, I prepare what I want to say so that I feel more ready", while MA explained, "I review the material and remember useful vocabulary before I have to speak". These accounts suggest that preparation helped participants feel more familiar with the content and language required for speaking tasks. Nugroho and Hapsari (2024), in their study of EFL high school students, examined strategies students used to reduce speaking anxiety in classroom settings. Yunus et al. (2024) also identified preparation as one of the strategies reported by students experiencing public-speaking anxiety. In the present study, preparation appeared to help participants manage uncertainty before speaking, although its effectiveness was described through students' perceptions rather than measured experimentally.

Practice strategies also emerged as an important way of managing anxiety. Several participants reported practicing English independently at home or speaking in front of a mirror. One participant explained, "I practice speaking English by myself at home, sometimes in front

of a mirror, so I can get used to speaking”. Students believed that regular practice helped improve pronunciation, vocabulary recall, and overall confidence. These accounts indicate that students viewed practice as a way to become more familiar with speaking English and to prepare for classroom communication. Similar strategies were reported by Yunus et al. (2024), whose participants described practicing in front of a mirror and talking with others as ways of managing public-speaking anxiety. The similarity suggests that individual practice may be a useful strategy for students who feel uncomfortable speaking in front of an audience. In the present study, however, the findings reflect participants’ reported experiences and do not establish the comparative effectiveness of different practice strategies.

The participants also employed cognitive strategies to manage their anxiety. Students reported using positive thinking and self-encouragement before speaking activities. SAA explained that she tried to focus on positive thoughts rather than her fear of making mistakes. “I try to think positively and remind myself that making mistakes is a normal part of learning English”. This response suggests that she attempted to redirect her attention away from anticipated negative outcomes and toward a more encouraging view of the speaking task. Yunus et al. (2024) similarly reported positive thinking and calming the mind among the strategies used by students experiencing public-speaking anxiety. These findings suggest that students may use cognitive strategies to manage their immediate emotional responses before speaking. Nevertheless, the present data do not establish whether these strategies consistently reduced anxiety across different classroom situations.

Teacher support was another important factor identified in this study. Participants reported that encouragement, motivation, and constructive feedback from teachers helped them feel more confident when speaking English. One participant explained, “When my teacher encourages me and gives feedback kindly, I feel more comfortable speaking English even if I make mistakes”. Several students explained that supportive classroom environments reduced their fear of making mistakes and encouraged greater participation. Group discussions, teacher modeling, and positive feedback were particularly helpful in reducing anxiety. Zarei et al. (2024) identified creating a safe learning environment, using learners’ first language when appropriate, and engaging learners in classroom activities among the strategies EFL teachers used to address classroom anxiety. Khoudri (2024) also discussed the potential value of positive feedback, collaborative work, and classroom activities for addressing speaking anxiety among EFL secondary school students. These studies provide a relevant context for interpreting the participants’ accounts. In the present study, teacher encouragement and supportive classroom practices were perceived as helpful because they made speaking activities feel more comfortable. However, the findings represent students’ perceptions of teacher support and do not independently demonstrate the effectiveness of each instructional strategy.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that students’ speaking anxiety is influenced by multiple psychological and environmental factors. The effects of anxiety extend beyond speaking performance to include motivation and emotional well-being. However, students can reduce anxiety through various coping strategies, particularly when supported by positive instructional practices and encouraging teachers. These findings suggest that reducing speaking anxiety requires collaborative efforts from both students and teachers to create a supportive and confidence-building learning environment.

4. CONCLUSION

This study investigated the factors affecting students' speaking anxiety in English at SMP Nurul Amal Palembang through a qualitative case study involving six participants. The findings revealed that students' speaking anxiety was influenced by several interconnected factors, namely fear of negative evaluation, variation in self-confidence, fear of making mistakes, fear of speaking in front of peers, and limited practice opportunities. Among these factors, fear of negative evaluation emerged as one of the most prominent causes of anxiety, as students were concerned about being judged, criticized, or laughed at by their classmates during speaking activities.

The study also found that speaking anxiety affected students' speaking performance, motivation, and emotional well-being. Anxiety disrupted students' fluency, reduced their ability to organize ideas, and sometimes caused them to forget vocabulary or lose concentration while speaking. In addition, anxiety generated feelings of nervousness, fear, embarrassment, and discomfort, which influenced students' confidence and participation in classroom communication. However, the findings indicated that anxiety did not always have negative effects, as some students viewed it as motivation to improve their speaking ability.

Furthermore, the study revealed that students employed various coping strategies to manage their speaking anxiety, including avoidance strategies, preparation strategies, practice strategies, and cognitive strategies. Teacher support was also found to play an important role in students' experiences of speaking anxiety. Emotional encouragement, supportive classroom environments, appropriate instructional strategies, and constructive feedback helped students feel more confident and comfortable when participating in speaking activities.

These findings have several practical implications for English language teaching, particularly in junior high school contexts. English teachers should pay attention not only to students' speaking performance but also to the emotional and social challenges they experience during oral activities. Teachers can provide gradual speaking opportunities, beginning with pair or small-group discussions before asking students to speak in front of the whole class. They can also encourage students to view mistakes as a natural part of language learning, provide constructive feedback without embarrassing learners, and establish classroom interactions that discourage ridicule and negative peer judgment. In addition, offering opportunities for regular speaking practice and helping students prepare for oral tasks may support their confidence and willingness to participate. These practices may help teachers respond more effectively to students' individual needs and create a classroom environment that supports both language development and emotional comfort.

Nevertheless, this study has several limitations. First, it involved only six students from one private junior high school in Palembang. Therefore, the findings provide an in-depth understanding of these participants' experiences but cannot be generalized to all junior high school students or other educational contexts. Second, the study relied primarily on semi-structured interviews, meaning that the findings reflected participants' reported experiences and perceptions. These accounts may not capture every aspect of students' anxiety during actual classroom interactions. Third, the study focused on students' perspectives regarding speaking anxiety and teacher support within a specific educational setting; consequently, the findings do not establish causal relationships between the identified factors and students' speaking performance.

Future research could address these limitations by involving a larger and more diverse group of students from several schools with different educational contexts. Researchers could also

combine interviews with classroom observations, student reflection journals, or other relevant data sources to develop a more comprehensive understanding of how speaking anxiety occurs during English lessons. Further studies could examine how speaking anxiety and coping strategies differ across grade levels or among students with different levels of English-speaking confidence. In addition, future research could investigate the implementation of specific teaching practices, such as small-group speaking activities, supportive feedback, or structured speaking preparation, to explore how these practices may influence students' anxiety and classroom participation over time.

In conclusion, students' speaking anxiety is a multifaceted experience shaped by psychological, linguistic, and classroom-related factors. Understanding these factors, their effects on students' learning experiences, and the strategies students use to manage anxiety can help teachers provide more responsive and supportive English instruction. By creating a classroom environment in which students feel safe to practice, make mistakes, and express their ideas, teachers may help students develop greater confidence and participate more actively in English-speaking activities.

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