

STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF THE CAUSES AND EFFECTS OF ENGLISH SPEAKING ANXIETY

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Abstract

This research aims to identify students' perceptions of the causes and effects of English speaking anxiety as well as teachers' strategies in overcoming it in class IX-C of Rahmat Surabaya Junior High School. The research employs a descriptive qualitative with data collection techniques through observation, and semi-structured interviews. The results showed that speaking anxiety is a common problem experienced by most students, with the main causes being fear of making mistakes, concern about negative feedback, and low self-confidence. Symptoms of anxiety include physical symptoms such as trembling hands, sweating, increased heart rate, cognitive symptoms such as difficulty thinking clearly and forgetting words, and behavioral symptoms such as avoiding eye contact and reluctance to speak in public. This anxiety has a significant impact on students' participation in classroom activities and lowers their self-confidence. Strategies implemented by teachers to reduce anxiety include providing regular speaking opportunities, positive feedback, modifying learning activities to make them more enjoyable, and implementing relaxation techniques before speaking tasks. Peer support was also shown to help reduce students' anxiety levels. The findings confirm the importance of creating a supportive and psychologically safe learning environment to improve students' speaking competence in English, and can serve as a reference for teachers and schools in designing more effective and inclusive learning strategies to address speaking anxiety in English classes.

Keywords: English speaking anxiety, causes, effects, teacher strategies, junior high school

INTRODUCTION

English has evolved significantly, with all the uniqueness and the challenges it present and gained global status. As the primary language across various academic and professional fields, English has become a vital reflection of recent growth and development. It is spoken in numerous countries and recognized as an official language. Notably, English acts as a unifying link among people worldwide. It serves not only as a medium for business, industry, and information but also empowers individuals with confidence, creativity, and the ability to innovate and explore. In India, English is commonly taught as a second language and symbolizes the pursuit of a better life.

English speaking skills is skills that are considered to be very important skills in learning English. In 4 language skills, speaking is considered the most important skill in

learning a foreign or second language. According to Rao (2019), Speaking is one of the most difficult tasks for language learners. Currently, there is a significant rise in the demand for proficiency in spoken English, because of its growing role as a global language for communication (Nazara, 2011). Speaking is regarded to be the most crucial of the four English language skills. Even students who have studied the language for years struggle to communicate when it is required in real-time. There are several reasons for overcoming this. In order to compete in this demanding society, students must first recognize the value of speaking abilities and work to improve them.

Anxiety can motivate individuals to invest in learning and commit to reaching their language goals. Excessive anxiety might negatively impact academic achievement. According to Tercan et al (2015), Anxiety is an emotion that may lead to students learning at lower and less productive levels. Students often experience anxiety about speaking English, even if they have prepared well. They worry about how others perceive them during their English speaking, feel uncertain about their understanding of the topic being discussed, and are concerned about their potential for low achievement. Regardless of the reason behind it or the intensity of the anxiety, one thing is certain: anxiety will impact students' performance (Sutarsyah, 2017). That is why learning a new language can be challenging for them. A student is considered successful in language learning if they can communicate effectively enough to be understood by others. This highlights the importance of speaking skills, which are often prioritized over other skills.

Speaking anxiety is a general problem for students that hinders their abilities to learn and speak English well. Sabila (2019), stated that in everyday life situations, many students struggle because they find it challenging to communicate effectively in English. This difficulty often arises from their struggles to master English speaking skills. It happens because of some reason such as students' background, abilities, afraid of making errors when speaking, fear of negative evaluation and lack of exposure in English, especially when spoken English because this language is not the primary language used in Indonesia.

Khuong & Giang (2024), state that an English classroom can often create an anxious atmosphere, as it pushes learners to confront their own perceptions, beliefs, emotions, and behaviors related to learning the language. Students tend to worry excessively about what others think of them, both peers and instructors. This anxiety makes them doubt themselves and lose confidence. Fearing loss of self-esteem, they become overly cautious and hesitant to communicate, fearing any mistake could damage their image further. As a result, they spend so much time worrying about expressing themselves properly in English that it holds them back from freely sharing their thoughts.

Certainly, it is not easy for students to use perfect grammar correctly, and having good pronunciation in speaking performance. Reaching fluency in English speaking is a goal that many people aspire to, and it serves as a major motivation for students when they learn a new language (Jaya, Petrus, & Pitaloka, 2022).

Ultimately, the introduction lays a strong groundwork by emphasizing why this topic matters, detailing the specific focus of the research, and clarifying the benefits of the study for both theory and practice. This foundation prepares the way for a thorough investigation of speaking anxiety, its effects, and coping strategies in the context of junior high school English education in Indonesia.

METHOD

This research employed a qualitative descriptive design, which is appropriate for exploring students' natural experiences, feelings, and behaviors related to speaking anxiety in the English classroom. This approach allows the researcher to describe participants' anxiety symptoms, causes, and coping strategies in depth without manipulating the learning environment-making it suitable for affective (Aulia & Dalimunte, 2024; Isnaini, 2019; Suparlan, 2021). Through this method, the researcher was able to investigate how anxiety emerges, how it affects performance, and how teachers respond to it during classroom interaction.

The participants consisted of 30 ninth-grade students from class IX-C at SMP Rahmat Surabaya, comprising 15 male and 15 female students. Their demographic information (age and gender) was collected to contextualize the findings and to understand variations in anxiety manifestations among learners. This class was chosen because the students regularly engaged in speaking activities and were accessible for consistent observation.

Data were collected using three techniques such as structured observations, semi-structured interviews, and a questionnaire. Structured classroom observation were carried out over four speaking sessions, including speaking practices and the final speaking examination. The researcher used a structured rubric adapted from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) (Horwitz et al., 1986) to identify indicators of physical, cognitive, behavioral, and social symptoms of anxiety. Semi-structured interview were conducted with 10 students who showed moderate to high anxiety during observations, along with one English teacher. Each interview lasted 10-15 minutes. With permission, the interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy of the data. A short questionnaire adapted from FLCAS was administered to help identify students' anxiety triggers, such as fear of negative evaluation, communication apprehension, and test-related worries. Triangulation across these instruments strengthened the credibility of the findings (Aulia & Dalimunte 2024; Marlia et al., 2023). The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the procedures commonly used in speaking-anxiety research in Indonesia (Aulia & Dalimunte, 2024; Isnaini, 2019; Suparlan, 2021).

Ethical procedures were maintained throughout the process. Permission was obtained from the school, and informed consent was secured from students and parents. To ensure confidentiality, students' identities were anonymized when reporting findings. Through this systematic method, the research provides an in-depth understanding of junior high school students' speaking anxiety and its impact on their English learning experience.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Table 1. Interview-Based Analysis of Students' Speaking Anxiety

No.	Name	Main Anxiety Cause	Physical/Cognitive/Behavior Symptoms	Anxiety Level	Coping Strategies
1	S2	Fear of negative judgment, low confidence	Avoids public speaking	High	No specific strategy, more avoidance
2	S30	Nervous, fear of ridicule, insecure about pronunciation & grammar	Heart palpitations, nervousness	High-Moderate	Practice at home
3	S1	Fear of being scolded when making mistakes	Sweating, nervous	Moderate	Reading text and practicing more often
4	S29	Fear of being laughed at, pronunciation concerns	Nervous	Moderate	Prayer, reading, relaxation techniques
5	S6	Fear of mistakes, low fluency	Trembling hands	High	Hopes for more teacher support
6	S27	Fear of mistakes, lack of confidence	Sweating, blank mind	High	Practice and relaxation, anxiety still persists
7	S19	Fear of mistakes, pressured by teacher/friends	Palpitations, nervousness	High	Practice and relaxation, expects teacher support

No.	Name	Main Anxiety Cause	Physical/Cognitive/Behavior Symptoms	Anxiety Level	Coping Strategies
8	S11	Fear of making mistakes when presenting	Nervousness	Moderate	Practice, teacher/friend support helps
9	S28	Fear of wrong pronunciation & vocabulary	Palpitations, nervous	Moderate	Supported practice with a friend
10	S3	Low confidence, pressure from teacher & peers	Very anxious speaking in public	High	Teacher support reduces anxiety

In addition to observation data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten students to explore their speaking anxiety experiences in more depth. The results reveal that most students experienced anxiety mainly due to fear of making mistakes, fear of negative evaluation, and low self-confidence when speaking English.

Regarding the sources of anxiety, six students (AL, WP, AS, RR, NN, and AI) expressed that they were afraid of producing incorrect pronunciation or grammar, causing them to avoid speaking in front of the class. Some students also mentioned fear of being judged or ridiculed by peers or scolded by teachers if they made errors. These responses support the questionnaire findings which indicated that fear of mistakes and fear of negative evaluation were the most dominant anxiety triggers among students.

In terms of anxiety manifestations, several students—including WP, AF, RR, NN, and SI—reported physical symptoms such as heart palpitations, sweating, nervousness, and trembling, while cognitive symptoms such as going blank, losing words, or difficulty organizing speech were experienced by RR and AI. Meanwhile, students like AL and AS showed more avoidance behavior, preferring not to speak rather than risk making mistakes.

Based on the interview analysis, most students were categorized as having moderate to high levels of anxiety, with four students (SS, JH, SI, and AF) falling into the moderate anxiety category and six (AL, WP, AS, RR, NN, and AI) in the high anxiety category, especially during impromptu speaking or class presentations. Despite this, several students were able to develop coping strategies such as self-practice, relaxation techniques, prayer, and peer support. Students SS and NN practiced relaxation, WP and JH frequently practiced at home, while SI preferred practicing with friends. Meanwhile, AS, RR, and AI expressed that teacher support greatly helped them manage anxiety and feel more confident.

Observation Data

Table 2. Speaking anxiety symptoms table

Speaking Situation	Level of Anxiety			
	Level 1 (Mild)	Level 2 (Moderate)	Level 3 (Severe)	Level 4 (Extreme)
Physical Symptoms	Occasional nervousness or slight trembling of hands. The person is still able to speak comfortably.	Noticeable physical symptoms like sweating, shaking hands, or a slightly faster heart rate, but still able to speak and maintain conversation.	Strong physical symptoms such as visible shaking, sweating profusely, or difficulty breathing. Speaking becomes challenging but can continue with effort.	Overwhelming physical symptoms like dizziness, rapid breathing, or heart palpitations. The person struggles to speak or may avoid speaking altogether.
Mental or Cognitive	Occasional distracting thoughts or slight worry, but can maintain focus on the topic.	Frequent selfdoubt or worry about performance, occasionally losing focus during speaking.	Difficulty thinking clearly, focusing on the conversation, or formulating sentences. Worrying thoughts dominate.	Difficulty speaking at all, with frequent mental blocks or panic. Thoughts may be disjointed, and the person may experience a total inability to speak.
Behavioral Symptoms	Mild fidgeting or shifting weight. The person is	More noticeable fidgeting, avoiding eye contact, or	Speaking very quietly or rapidly, avoiding eye contact, or	Inability to speak or communicate, may withdraw completely

Table 3. *Anxiety symptom levels of students during English speaking tests observation*

No.	Name	Physical Symptoms	Mental/Cognitive Symptoms	Behavioral Symptoms	Social Interaction & Confidence
1	S1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 3	Level 3
2	S2	Level 2	Level 4	Level 3	Level 3
3	S3	Level 2	Level 3	Level 3	Level 3
4	S4	Level 1	Level 1	Level 2	Level 2
5	S5	Level 2	Level 4	Level 3	Level 2
6	S6	Level 1	Level 1	Level 3	Level 2
7	S7	Level 1	Level 1	Level 2	Level 1
8	S8	Level 2	Level 2	Level 2	Level 3
9	S9	Level 2	Level 1	Level 2	Level 2
10	S10	Level 2	Level 3	Level 1	Level 2
11	S11	Level 2	Level 2	Level 3	Level 2
12	S12	Level 1	Level 1	Level 1	Level 2
13	S13	Level 1	Level 1	Level 2	Level 2
14	S14	Level 2	Level 3	Level 3	Level 3
15	S15	Level 2	Level 2	Level 1	Level 3
16	S16	Level 1	Level 3	Level 3	Level 3
17	S17	Level 2	Level 3	Level 3	Level 3
18	S18	Level 2	Level 3	Level 3	Level 3
19	S19	Level 2	Level 3	Level 2	Level 3
20	S20	Level 1	Level 1	Level 2	Level 2

No.	Name	Physical Symptoms	Mental/Cognitive Symptoms	Behavioral Symptoms	Social Interaction & Confidence
21	S21	Level 2	Level 1	Level 1	Level 3
22	S22	Level 2	Level 1	Level 1	Level 1
23	S23	Level 3	Level 2	Level 2	Level 2
24	S24	Level 2	Level 2	Level 2	Level 2
25	S25	Level 2	Level 2	Level 3	Level 2
26	S26	Level 1	Level 1	Level 1	Level 2
27	S27	Level 2	Level 3	Level 3	Level 2
28	S28	Level 2	Level 3	Level 3	Level 3
29	S29	Level 2	Level 3	Level 2	Level 2
30	S30	Level 2	Level 4	Level 3	Level 3

To categorize the severity of students' speaking anxiety, the researcher used a structured observation rubric adapted from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (Horwitz et al., 1986). The rubric measured four domains—physical symptoms, mental or cognitive symptoms, behavioral symptoms, and social interaction or confidence—across four levels of severity such as:

- a. Level 1 = Mild (minimal anxiety, manageable discomfort)
- b. Level 2 = Moderate (clear signs of anxiety but still functional)
- c. Level 3 = Severe (strong anxiety affecting performance)
- d. Level 4 = Extreme (highly disruptive anxiety, noticeable breakdown)

For ethical purposes, students' identities are anonymized as S1-S30. The summary of their anxiety levels across the four domains is presented in Table 1.

Across 30 students, the observation data showed the following patterns:

a. Physical symptoms:

Most students ((≈28/30) showed moderate physical anxiety (level 2) such as sweating, trembling hands, and tense posture during speaking tasks.

b. Mental/Cognitive Symptoms:

Around half of the students displayed Level 3–4 cognitive anxiety, characterized by difficulty concentrating, fear of making mistakes, and frequent self-doubt.

c. Behavioral Symptoms:

Many students (≈25/30) showed Level 3 behavioral symptoms, including avoiding eye contact, long pauses, hesitation, and limited verbal output.

d. Social Interaction & Confidence:

Most students ($\approx 27/30$) demonstrated low to moderate confidence (Level 3), often appearing reluctant, shy, or overly cautious in interactive speaking tasks.

Overall, the observation results show that mental and behavioral symptoms were the most severe, indicating that speaking anxiety in this class is not only physical but significantly affects students' cognitive processing and interactive communication.

Discussion

Causes and Effects of Speaking Anxiety on Students

The findings of this study show that students' speaking anxiety is primarily triggered by fear of making mistakes, fear of negative evaluation, and low self-confidence. These causes are strongly aligned with patterns observed in previous EFL anxiety research. Similar to Aulia and Dalimunte (2024), who found that fear of errors and teacher judgment were the dominant anxiety triggers among Indonesian learners, the students in this study also expressed worry about producing incorrect grammar, mispronouncing words, and being criticized for their performance. This reinforces the notion that linguistic insecurity remains a central component of speaking anxiety in EFL contexts.

The influence of negative evaluation, especially from peers and teachers, was also consistent with the findings of AbuSahyon et al. (2023), who reported that Saudi EFL learners experienced heightened anxiety when they anticipated judgment or ridicule from others. In the present study, students frequently mentioned discomfort when being watched by classmates, as well as fear of disappointing their teacher. These similarities suggest that evaluative pressure is a cross-cultural phenomenon affecting learners in multiple educational contexts.

The role of self-confidence as a major contributing factor echoes the conclusions of Marlia et al. (2023) and Khafidhoh et al. (2023), who identified low self-confidence as a strong predictor of anxiety in Indonesian EFL classrooms. Many students in this study avoided participation or produced minimal speech due to feelings of inadequacy, confirming that psychological self-perception plays an essential role in shaping willingness to speak. This also aligns with research by Suparlan (2021), which emphasizes the interconnected nature of cognitive and affective domains in speaking anxiety.

The physical and behavioral symptoms observed—such as trembling, sweating, hesitation, and avoidance behaviors—mirror the multidimensional conceptualization of speaking anxiety described by Isnaini (2019) and Tercan and Dikilitaş (2015). These researchers argue that anxiety manifests simultaneously across physical, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral domains, which is consistent with the Level 2–4 symptom patterns found in the current study. The significant presence of behavioral symptoms, particularly avoidance and reluctance to speak, further supports findings by Riadil (2020), who highlighted that anxious learners tend to withdraw from communicative activities.

Interestingly, the present study also identifies peer support and teacher encouragement as factors that help reduce anxiety. This finding aligns with research by Jaya, Petrus, and Pitaloka (2022), who emphasized the positive impact of supportive learning environments on EFL speaking performance. It also resonates with Agustin, Melani, and Nashir (2021), who showed that teacher performance and emotional support strongly influence student engagement and comfort in English classrooms. These parallels suggest that social and instructional factors play an essential buffering role in mitigating speaking anxiety.

Overall, the results confirm that speaking anxiety among junior high school students is not caused by a single factor but is instead shaped by a combination of linguistic, psychological, and social influences. The consistency between the present findings and previous research demonstrates that the patterns observed in this study reflect broader trends in EFL anxiety across different contexts—while also highlighting the importance of supportive classroom environments in helping students manage their anxiety.

The Level of Anxiety Symptoms in Students

The findings indicate that most students experience moderate to severe speaking anxiety, particularly in the mental/cognitive and behavioral domains. This supports previous studies showing that EFL learners' anxiety often manifests through fear of negative evaluation, strong self-doubt, and avoidance behaviors (Aulia & Dalimunte, 2024; Isnaini, 2019; Suparlan, 2021).

The high number of students with Level 3–4 cognitive symptoms aligns with studies by AbuSahyon et al. (2023) and Marlia et al. (2023), which highlighted that EFL learners often struggle with intrusive thoughts, worry, and difficulty concentrating during speaking tasks. Similarly, the prevalence of behavioral symptoms such as hesitation and avoidance reflects findings by Riadil (2020) and Tercan & Dikilitaş (2015), who reported that anxiety commonly reduces students' verbal output and fluency.

The observation that many students showed low confidence corresponds with Khafidhoh et al. (2023), who found that lack of self-confidence is a major factor contributing to speaking anxiety among Indonesian EFL learners. These consistencies across studies reinforce that the students' anxiety in this research does not occur in isolation but reflects broader patterns observed in EFL contexts internationally

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

This study found that speaking anxiety is a prevalent issue among ninth-grade students in class IX-C at Rahmat Junior High School, Surabaya. The main causes of this anxiety are fear of making mistakes, fear of negative evaluation, and low self-confidence. These factors often lead to both physical and psychological symptoms such as trembling, sweating, increased heart rate, mental blocks, and avoidance of speaking situations which significantly hinder students' participation in class activities.

Most students showed anxiety levels ranging from mild to moderate, though a few exhibited severe symptoms that greatly affected their ability to speak. Students attempted to manage their anxiety through self-practice, relaxation techniques, and peer support. However, their progress was strongly influenced by the classroom environment and teacher behavior.

The findings clearly highlight the crucial role of teachers in mitigating speaking anxiety. Effective strategies observed in this study include: providing frequent speaking opportunities, offering constructive and positive feedback, modifying classroom activities to be more engaging, and implementing relaxation exercises. These approaches not only reduce anxiety but also foster a more supportive and confidence-building atmosphere for students.

Practically, this study suggests that schools and teachers must actively foster a classroom culture that encourages speaking without fear of negative evaluation. Structured support such as daily English practice, peer collaboration, and positive feedback can empower students to engage more confidently in speaking activities. Ultimately, creating a psychologically safe environment in English classes is key to reducing speaking anxiety and enhancing students' communicative competence.

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