

EFL Speaking Anxiety in Higher Education: Factors, Impacts, and Interventions

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Abstract

Speaking anxiety remains a persistent affective barrier to oral language development in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) higher education, particularly in Indonesian universities where authentic communication opportunities are limited. Grounded in the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) framework, this systematic literature review synthesizes the contributing factors, learning impacts, and instructional interventions related to speaking anxiety among EFL university students. Following the PRISMA framework, the review searched Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and manual reference tracking. From 110 initial records, a four-stage screening process yielded 50 peer-reviewed studies published between 2015 and 2026. Data were analyzed through thematic analysis using open, axial, and selective coding. Findings show that speaking anxiety emerges from interacting linguistic (e.g., vocabulary limitations, grammatical difficulties, pronunciation issues, and L1 interference), psychological (e.g., low self-confidence, shyness, fear of negative evaluation), and situational factors (e.g., evaluative classrooms, time pressure, and unsupportive social dynamics). These factors reinforce avoidance behaviors that hinder communication, participation, cognitive processing, and long-term language proficiency. Four intervention categories were identified: cognitive-affective strategies, social-collaborative approaches, pedagogical redesign, and technology-assisted learning, including AI-based tools. However, implementation remains constrained by limited learner autonomy, time pressures, and unequal digital access. This review demonstrates that mitigating speaking anxiety in EFL higher education requires pedagogical designs that systematically combine scaffolded speaking tasks, psychologically supportive feedback practices, peer-collaborative interaction, and equitable integration of technology-assisted rehearsal tools. By synthesizing fragmented evidence across linguistic, psychological, and contextual dimensions, the study contributes a comprehensive framework for understanding speaking anxiety as both an individual affective challenge and a structurally mediated educational issue. These findings provide a practical evidence base for EFL educators and curriculum designers to develop context-responsive interventions that enhance learners' oral participation, confidence, and long-term communicative competence.

Keywords: Speaking Anxiety; Higher Education; Speaking Performance



1. Introduction

Speaking is a key indicator of communicative competence in English language learning, as it requires the real-time integration of linguistic knowledge, cognitive processing, and social interaction. In EFL contexts, speaking is particularly important as the most immediate and observable form of language use, yet it remains one of the most difficult skills to master, especially where authentic communication opportunities are limited. Recent studies confirm that this difficulty is compounded by persistent speaking anxiety among Indonesian EFL learners: a meta-synthetic analysis found that fear of negative evaluation and low linguistic confidence create cognitive blockages that impede real-time language production (Mustamir, 2024). Consistent with this, quantitative research at the university level indicates that test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation are the most dominant triggers of speaking anxiety (Fauzi & Asi, 2023), while communication apprehension has been identified as the most significant factor limiting undergraduates' capacity for spoken interaction (Mahardika & Widyanoro, 2024). Anxiety rooted in uncertainty about one's own proficiency has similarly been shown to push learners toward preparation-based coping strategies rather than spontaneous communication (Syifa & Khatimah, 2024).

These patterns are not unique to the Indonesian context: research on Chinese university students has demonstrated that foreign language classroom anxiety undermines academic success, with emotional intelligence and classroom environment moderating this relationship (Han et al., 2022), reinforcing the view that speaking anxiety emerges from the interplay of internal cognition and external social demands. Despite this growing body of evidence, most existing studies isolate either the psychological (cognitive-affective) or the environmental (classroom/contextual) dimensions of speaking anxiety, with few examining how these dimensions interact within a single explanatory model particularly one that accounts for the sociocultural specificity of Indonesian higher education. This systematic review addresses that gap by synthesizing findings across both dimensions to clarify how speaking anxiety operates in Indonesian EFL contexts. This phenomenon is theoretically grounded in foreign language anxiety, conceptualized by (Horwitz et al., 1986) as a situation-specific form of anxiety characterized by tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry in language learning settings. Speaking anxiety emerges prominently in contexts involving performance monitoring and evaluation. (Horwitz et al., 1986) identify three interrelated dimensions of foreign language anxiety communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation which are particularly salient in speaking tasks requiring spontaneous language production under time pressure and public scrutiny. Under such conditions, learners frequently experience cognitive disruption, including mental blocking, forgetfulness, and reduced concentration, which may compromise oral performance.

However, speaking anxiety cannot be understood solely as an individual psychological response. It is also shaped by linguistic and contextual conditions that

influence learners' communicative readiness and perceived competence. Limited vocabulary, weak grammatical control, pronunciation difficulties, and insufficient speaking practice may heighten expectations of communicative failure, thereby reducing learners' willingness to participate a pattern consistent with evidence that learners' self-perceived vocabulary deficits directly predict speaking anxiety in out-of-class contexts (Daflizar, 2024). Contextual variables, including classroom climate, peer reactions, instructional practices, and access to authentic communication opportunities, may further intensify this experience: fear of negative evaluation during classroom participation, formal testing situations (Fauzi & Asi, 2023), and continuous peer and instructor scrutiny within specialized academic programs (Mahardika & Widiantoro, 2024) have each been identified as contextual triggers that elevate speaking anxiety independent of learners' underlying linguistic competence. In higher education settings, where learners often navigate academic demands alongside work or other responsibilities, restricted exposure to English and limited interactional opportunities may amplify these affective barriers, as anxiety has also been documented to persist beyond the classroom in authentic, out-of-class communicative encounters (Daflizar, 2024). Speaking anxiety should therefore be understood as a multidimensional and contextually mediated phenomenon rather than a purely individual affective condition. Although speaking anxiety has received substantial scholarly attention, the existing body of research remains conceptually and methodologically fragmented. Many studies examine linguistic, psychological, or pedagogical dimensions in isolation rather than treating speaking anxiety as an interconnected phenomenon shaped by dynamic interactions among multiple contributing factors. Methodological diversity across studies further constrains comparability and synthesis, while inconsistent findings make it difficult to establish clear patterns regarding the relative influence of linguistic, psychological, and contextual variables. Moreover, despite the continued relevance of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety framework, many studies engage only partially with the theoretical propositions advanced by (Horwitz et al., 1986), limiting deeper theoretical integration. Context-specific conditions in higher education also remain insufficiently explored, particularly in constrained EFL environments where institutional structures, limited communicative exposure, and contextual pressures may shape anxiety in distinctive ways.

These limitations indicate the need for a more systematic and theoretically grounded synthesis capable of integrating fragmented evidence and clarifying how multiple dimensions of speaking anxiety interact within EFL higher education contexts. In response to this need, the present Systematic Literature Review (SLR) synthesizes existing scholarship to identify the principal factors contributing to speaking anxiety among EFL learners in higher education, examine its effects on speaking performance and classroom participation, and evaluate the instructional and pedagogical strategies reported for reducing anxiety in EFL speaking contexts. By consolidating evidence

across these interrelated domains, this review seeks to provide a more coherent understanding of speaking anxiety as a complex educational phenomenon and to establish a clearer evidence base for pedagogical intervention and future research.

2. Materials and Methods

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to systematically identify, evaluate, and synthesize research on speaking anxiety in EFL higher education. Compared with narrative reviews, the SLR approach offers greater methodological transparency, replicability, and systematic rigor through predefined procedures for study identification, screening, appraisal, and synthesis. The review addressed three objectives: (1) identifying factors contributing to speaking anxiety among EFL university students, (2) examining its effects on speaking performance and classroom participation, and (3) evaluating strategies and instructional interventions for anxiety reduction. The review followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework, comprising identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion stages, while data were synthesized qualitatively through thematic analysis.

2.1 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The literature search was limited to studies published from 2015 onward to ensure that the review reflects contemporary developments in EFL speaking anxiety research. This period marks a substantial increase in empirical investigations of EFL learning, including growing attention to affective factors, technology-enhanced language learning, and higher education contexts. Furthermore, focusing on recent literature ensures alignment with current standards for systematic review reporting, particularly the principles reflected in the PRISMA 2020 update, which emphasizes methodological transparency and rigor in evidence synthesis (Page et al., 2021). The 2015 cutoff was therefore selected to provide an up-to-date evidence base that captures anxiety-related challenges and interventions within increasingly digital and technology-mediated learning environments.

2.2 Search Strategy

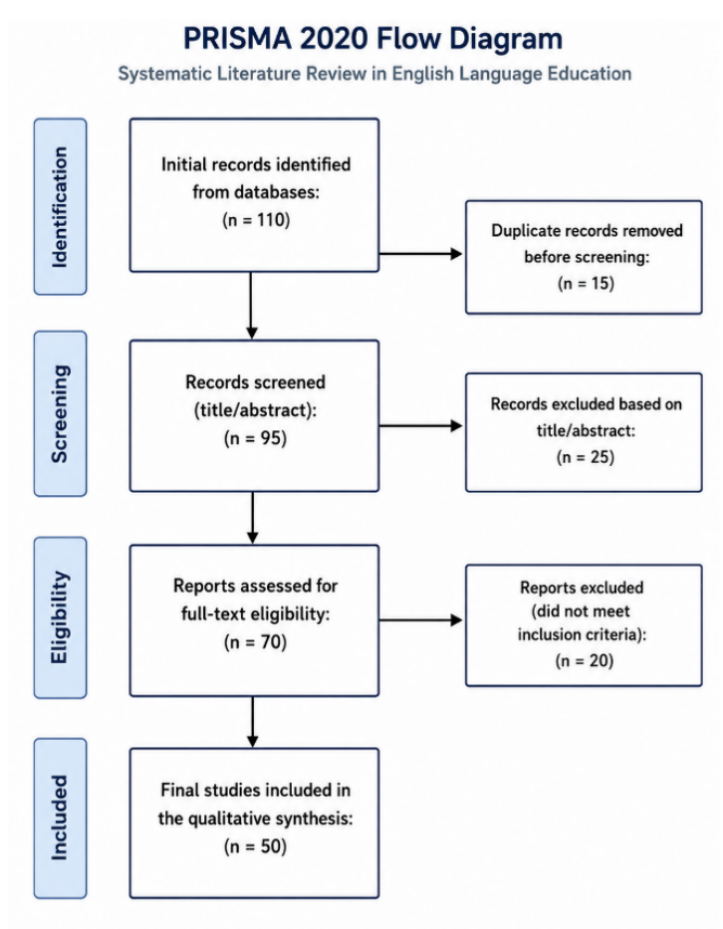
A structured literature search was conducted using Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, and ERIC, and supplemented by manual journal searches. Search terms included “speaking anxiety,” “EFL speaking,” “foreign language anxiety,” “English speaking performance,” “EFL higher education,” and “Indonesian EFL learners,” combined using Boolean operators (AND, OR). The search procedure followed the PRISMA framework: identification of relevant records, screening through duplicate removal and title/abstract review, full-text eligibility assessment, and final inclusion for synthesis.

2.3 Review Process

The PRISMA-guided selection process ensured transparency and replicability. In the identification stage, 110 records were retrieved through database and manual

searches. After removing 15 duplicates, 95 records underwent title and abstract screening, during which 25 studies were excluded for lacking relevance to speaking anxiety, EFL/ESL contexts, or higher education settings. The remaining 70 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility using the predefined criteria. Following full-text evaluation, 20 studies were excluded due to insufficient methodological transparency, lack of relevance, or failure to meet publication requirements. Ultimately, 50 studies were included in the qualitative synthesis. The complete selection process is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram illustrating the systematic selection procedure for studies included in the review (Page et al., 2021)



2.4 Data Extraction and Analysis

A standardized data extraction protocol was employed to ensure consistency across the included studies. Each article was analyzed using a seven-component extraction matrix comprising: (1) research objectives, (2) participant characteristics, (3) research methods, (4) implementation procedures, (5) key findings, (6) reported challenges, and (7) research context, including both local and international EFL higher education settings.

Extracted data were systematically organized into a comparative matrix to facilitate cross-study synthesis and thematic categorization. Data analysis combined narrative synthesis and thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns, conceptual relationships, and contextual variations across the reviewed studies. Thematic analysis was conducted manually, following (Braun & Clarke, 2006) six-phase approach: familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report.

Three major synthesis themes emerged from the analysis: (1) contributing factors to speaking anxiety, (2) impacts of speaking anxiety on learning and speaking performance, and (3) strategies and pedagogical interventions for reducing speaking anxiety. This analytical approach ensured coherence, transparency, and interpretive rigor while providing an integrative understanding of the psychological, linguistic, pedagogical, and contextual dimensions of speaking anxiety in EFL higher education.

3. Results and Discussions

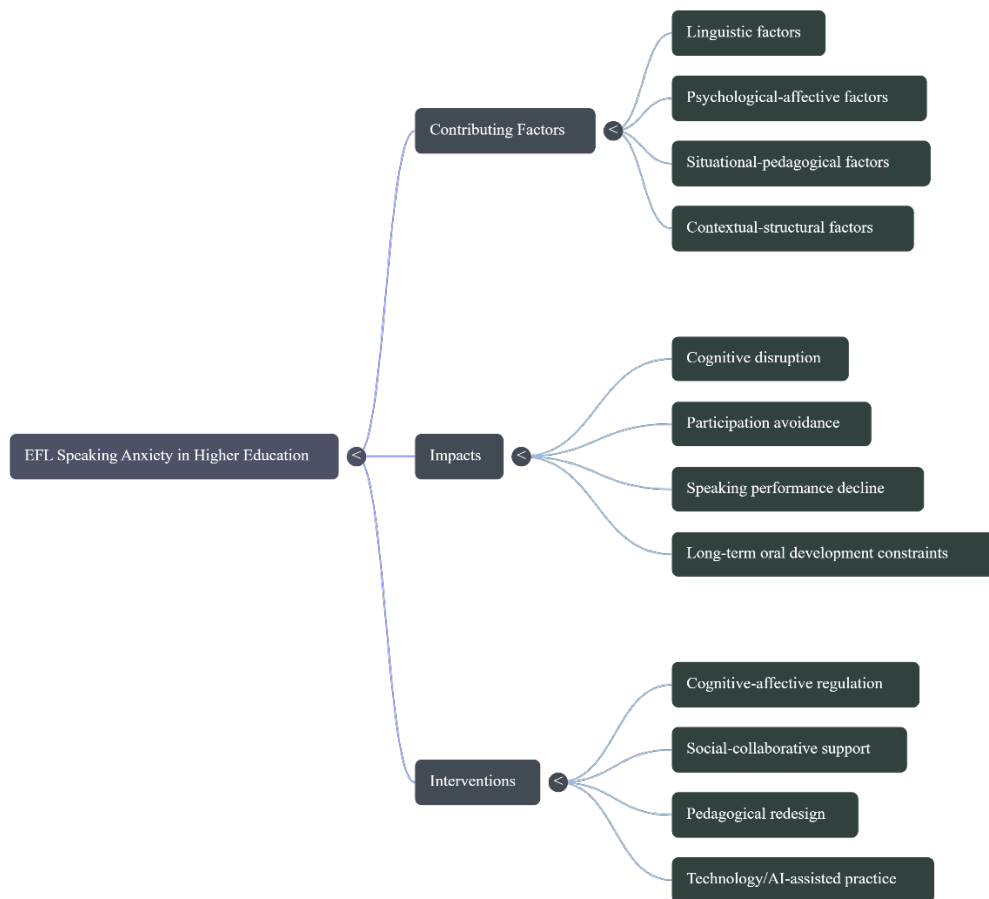
The results of this systematic literature review are presented in accordance with the study's three research objectives and the thematic analysis of the selected studies. The synthesis identified recurring patterns and conceptual relationships across the literature on speaking anxiety in EFL higher education, providing a structured basis for the presentation and discussion of findings.

Accordingly, the Results and Discussion section is organized into three thematic areas: (1) factors contributing to speaking anxiety, (2) the impacts of speaking anxiety on learning and speaking performance, and (3) strategies and pedagogical interventions for reducing speaking anxiety. This organization ensures consistency between the study objectives, the analytical framework, and the interpretation of the reviewed evidence.

3.1 Overview of the Thematic Findings

The thematic analysis of the reviewed studies generated three broad domains related to EFL speaking anxiety in higher education: contributing factors, learning and performance impacts, and anxiety-reduction strategies. Within the first domain, speaking anxiety was found to arise from linguistic, psychological, situational, pedagogical, and contextual conditions. The second domain shows that speaking anxiety affects learners cognitively, behaviorally, academically, and developmentally. The third domain highlights a range of intervention strategies, including cognitive-affective regulation, peer-supported interaction, pedagogical redesign, and technology-assisted practice. These themes are presented in Figure 2 to provide a visual overview before each domain is discussed in detail.

Figure 2. Thematic map of EFL speaking anxiety in higher education



3.1 Contributing Factors to Speaking Anxiety

EFL speaking anxiety emerges from the interaction of several types of contributing factors. Four recurring domain's structure the discussion below: linguistic factors, rooted in learners' language proficiency and processing; psychological and affective factors, rooted in learners' self-perceptions and emotional responses to speaking; situational and pedagogical factors, tied to the design of speaking tasks and classroom practices; and contextual and structural factors, shaped by the broader educational and socio-cultural environment in which learning takes place. Each theme is defined below before its supporting evidence is presented.

3.1.1 Linguistic Factors

Linguistic factors refer to anxiety that stems directly from learners' language

proficiency and from the cognitive demands of producing speech in real time.

Deficits in vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, fluency, and overall speaking proficiency are among the most consistently reported predictors of speaking anxiety (Adrefiza, 2023; Eddraoui & Wirza, 2020; Marlia et al., 2023). This pattern recurs across Moroccan, Turkish, Cambodian, Libyan, Malaysian, Pakistani, and Indonesian contexts, suggesting that language-related anxiety is a general feature of EFL learning rather than one specific to a single setting (Eddraoui & Wirza, 2020; Kashinathan & Abdul Aziz, 2021; Radfar & Lengkanawati, 2020). Vocabulary limitations lead to hesitation and avoidance, grammatical concerns intensify anxiety when speaking is evaluated for accuracy, and pronunciation difficulties heighten self-consciousness in anticipation of judgment from others (Fauzan et al., 2024; Kashinathan & Abdul Aziz, 2021). International evidence further indicates that constraints in lexical appropriateness, grammatical control, and syntactic flexibility limit learners' perceived communicative competence, which in turn reinforces anxiety during oral production (Kim & Lu, 2024; Lyu et al., 2022; Yazdani, 2018). Taken together, these findings suggest that linguistic insecurity functions as a direct antecedent of speaking anxiety rather than merely a performance limitation.

Anxiety is also intensified by the cognitive processing demands of real-time speech. Producing spoken language requires learners to coordinate lexical retrieval, grammatical encoding, pronunciation monitoring, idea organization, and attentional control simultaneously, which can result in freezing, hesitation, or mental blocking under communicative pressure (Adrefiza, 2023; Alfiani et al., 2023; Skehan, 2024). Weak listening comprehension adds to this burden by increasing interactional uncertainty, while first-language interference intensifies self-monitoring and feelings of inadequacy (Fauzan et al., 2024; Hussain et al., 2021; Kashinathan & Abdul Aziz, 2021). This points to a recursive mechanism in which linguistic limitations generate anticipatory anxiety even before speaking occurs.

3.1.2 Psychological and Affective Factors

Psychological and affective factors refer to learners' internal emotional responses and self-perceptions, which shape their experience of speaking tasks independently of their actual language proficiency.

Low self-confidence, poor self-esteem, shyness, fear of embarrassment, and negative self-perceptions consistently emerge as strong predictors of speaking anxiety (Kartika Wienanda & Widiati, 2017; Lalu Azizan Bohari, 2024; Sahiruddin, 2025; Sjaifullah, 2019). Some studies suggest that learners' perceived communicative competence may influence anxiety more strongly than their objectively measured proficiency, supporting theoretical accounts that treat language anxiety as both a cognitive and an affective phenomenon rather than a purely skill-based one.

Fear of negative evaluation is one of the most stable contributors to speaking anxiety, with learners repeatedly reporting concern about criticism from peers and teachers (Abin & Syam, 2019; Yaniafari & Rihardini, 2022). Indonesian evidence

identifies peer embarrassment and teacher correction as particularly salient triggers (Alauddin Nur et al., 2021), supporting the view that speaking anxiety is socially co-constructed through classroom interaction rather than purely internally generated. Communication apprehension remains similarly prominent in spontaneous speaking contexts, where learners perceive limited opportunity to prepare or manage errors in advance.

3.1.3 Situational and Pedagogical Factors

Situational and pedagogical factors refer to features of specific speaking tasks and classroom practices that trigger or intensify anxiety at the moment of performance.

Public speaking, presentations, examinations, and unprepared responses consistently provoke anxiety due to performance pressure, social exposure, and heightened evaluative expectations (Juita, 2021; Nurilahi & Suhartono, 2022; Sumirna, 2025). However, anxiety is not generated by isolated speaking tasks alone; broader instructional practices also contribute. Teacher-centered instruction, accuracy-focused assessment, restrictive speaking tasks, and formal correction practices often frame speaking as performance surveillance rather than communicative engagement, increasing self-monitoring and apprehension (Juita, 2021; Nurilahi & Suhartono, 2022; Sjaifullah, 2019; Sukmojati & Rahmat, 2024). Conversely, restricted classroom interaction and insufficient opportunities for spontaneous communication may heighten anxiety by limiting learners' familiarity with speaking, oral automatization, and communicative confidence. Together, these findings suggest that both excessive evaluative pressure and inadequate communicative exposure function as structurally mediated triggers of anxiety within the classroom.

3.1.4 Contextual and Structural Factors

Contextual and structural factors refer to broader, relatively stable conditions of the educational and socio-cultural environment that shape the backdrop against which speaking anxiety develops.

Speaking anxiety is globally recognized but remains contextually shaped across EFL environments. Indonesian higher education studies consistently report anxiety linked to fear of mistakes, fear of negative evaluation, low confidence, and communication apprehension, aligning with broader international findings and reinforcing the cross-contextual relevance of foreign language anxiety theory (Abin & Syam, 2019; Abrar, 2022; AlKandari, 2020; Horwitz et al., 1986; Sebayang & Daging, 2024). However, Indonesian EFL contexts also appear to involve distinctive structural, socio-cultural, and pedagogical conditions that intensify these dimensions of anxiety.

A major contextual contributor is limited exposure to English beyond formal instruction. Unlike ESL environments, many EFL learners, particularly in Indonesia, encounter English primarily within the classroom, which restricts spontaneous communicative practice, vocabulary development, interactional fluency, and oral automatization (AbuSahyon et al., 2023; Harahap et al., 2024; Sri Widyarti Ali et al.,

2025). Similar constraints are reported in broader EFL contexts (Radfar & Lengkanawati, 2020), although the limitation appears especially pronounced where classroom interaction serves as the primary, and often insufficient, site of oral language use (Kurniati et al., 2025). Broader socio-academic constraints, including limited practice time, a lack of authentic speaking communities, and minimal communicative input, further intensify learners' dependence on constrained instructional environments (Sari & Junaidi, 2024; Zega, 2025).

Socio-cultural dynamics also intensify anxiety. Indonesian learners frequently show heightened sensitivity to peer judgment, embarrassment, ridicule, and negative social comparison, all of which suppress speaking participation (Abdurahman & Rizqi, 2020; Marlia et al., 2023). Fear of negative evaluation is widely recognized as a universal anxiety construct (Horwitz et al., 1986), but collectivist social orientations may amplify its classroom manifestations, as similarly observed in other Asian EFL settings (Eddraoui & Wirza, 2020).

Post-pandemic evidence adds a further, digital dimension to these contextual factors. Although online learning may reduce some forms of direct social pressure, it also introduces new stressors related to visibility, surveillance, constrained spontaneous interaction, and technology-mediated self-presentation (Afidawati et al., 2024; Nur & Baa, 2022; Wahyuddin et al., 2022; Yaniafari & Rihardini, 2022). Reports of camera avoidance suggest that digital visibility itself can function as an evaluative trigger.

Overall, EFL speaking anxiety emerges as a socially situated and structurally mediated phenomenon, produced through the interaction of linguistic limitations, affective vulnerability, pedagogical conditions, and contextual constraints. Across diverse EFL settings, anxiety appears to be sustained not only by individual learner factors but also by educational environments that limit authentic communicative engagement while intensifying evaluative pressure

3.2 Impacts of Speaking Anxiety on Learning and Performance

Consistent with the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety framework (Horwitz et al., 1986), speaking anxiety functions as a multidimensional psychological constraint that shapes EFL learners' oral performance in several interrelated ways. The literature reviewed here points to four such impacts: cognitive impacts, disrupting real-time language processing; behavioural and participation impacts, reducing learners' willingness to speak; impacts on speaking performance and academic achievement, reflected in measurable outcomes; and long-term developmental impacts, slowing the growth of speaking proficiency over time. Across Indonesian and international contexts, higher anxiety is consistently associated with poorer speaking performance, reduced participation, lower confidence, weaker communicative competence, and diminished opportunities for oral development (AbuSahyon et al., 2023; Bai, 2023; Hamamorad, 2020; Hasibuan & Irzawati, 2020; Kodri, 2018). Each of these four impacts is discussed

in turn below.

3.2.1 Cognitive Impacts

Cognitive impacts refer to the ways anxiety interferes with learners' real-time mental processing while speaking, independent of their underlying language knowledge.

Anxiety disrupts real-time language processing through mental blocking, forgetfulness, concentration loss, impaired attentional control, and difficulty organizing ideas during spontaneous communication (Skehan, 2024; Yaniafari & Rihardini, 2022). This supports (Horwitz et al., 1986), suggesting that fear of evaluation and excessive self-monitoring consume cognitive resources that would otherwise be available for oral production. Indonesian studies report hesitation, reduced readiness, and impaired idea expression among anxious learners (Dewa et al., 2023; Habiburrahim et al., 2020; Taqwa et al., 2022), while international evidence identifies negative effects on fluency, vocabulary access, pronunciation, grammatical accuracy, and oral test performance (AbuSahyon et al., 2023; Bai, 2023; Hamamrad, 2020). Although (Chen et al., 2022) found no statistically significant relationship in computer-based assessment, the broader evidence suggests that technological mediation may moderate, but does not eliminate, anxiety-related cognitive interference. These cognitive demands may intensify further in online learning environments, where learners must simultaneously manage linguistic, technological, and social pressures (Kartika Wienanda & Widiati, 2017; Nur & Baa, 2022; Nurilahi & Suhartono, 2022).

3.2.2 Behavioural and Participation Impacts

Behavioural and participation impacts refer to the observable actions learners take to manage anxiety, and to the reduced classroom participation that often results.

In online contexts specifically, coping responses such as camera avoidance, reduced speaking, disengagement, and reliance on translation may temporarily ease emotional discomfort, but they restrict authentic communicative engagement and limit opportunities for oral practice (Wahyuddin et al., 2022). More broadly, anxiety manifests behaviourally in hesitation, silence, shortened responses, excessive pausing, fragmented speech, and physiological tension (Amaliah, 2019; Amengual-Pizarro, 2019; Hamamrad, 2020; Hasibuan & Irzawati, 2020). Learners frequently prioritize error avoidance over communication, resulting in reduced interactional risk-taking and diminished communicative spontaneity. Indonesian studies consistently report passivity and communicative withdrawal despite otherwise adequate linguistic knowledge (Abin & Syam, 2019; Abrar, 2022; Dewa et al., 2023; Habiburrahim et al., 2020), and comparable patterns are reported in Bangladeshi and Turkish contexts (Das, 2020; Okyar, 2023), indicating that this behavioural inhibition recurs across contexts rather than being locally isolated. A particularly significant consequence is reduced

willingness to communicate: learners avoid presentations, discussions, questioning, and interactive tasks to minimize embarrassment or evaluative exposure (Alnahidh & Altalhab, 2020; Amengual-Pizarro, 2019; Das, 2020; Taqwa et al., 2022).

3.2.3 Speaking Performance and Academic Achievement Impacts

This theme refers to the measurable relationship between anxiety and learners' actual speaking outcomes and academic results.

Significant negative relationships between anxiety and speaking performance are consistently reported across Indonesian and international studies (AbuSahyon et al., 2023; Bai, 2023; Habiburrahim et al., 2020; Hamamorad, 2020; Hasibuan & Irzawati, 2020; Kodri, 2018). Limited evidence suggests that moderate anxiety may occasionally function as a facilitative motivational force in specific high-stakes contexts (Amaliah, 2019; Marlia et al., 2023; Wei, 2024); however, this does not alter the broader consensus that excessive anxiety undermines performance quality, participation, and oral achievement overall.

3.2.4 Long-Term Developmental Impacts

Long-term developmental impacts refer to the cumulative effect of anxiety-driven avoidance on learners' speaking proficiency over time, beyond any single classroom episode.

Reduced speaking opportunities, driven by the withdrawal behaviours discussed above, weaken fluency development, oral automatization, communicative adaptability, and broader speaking proficiency growth (Bulté & Roothoof, 2020; Saito et al., 2021; Van Moere, 2012). (Tsiplakides & Keramida, 2009) indirectly support this interpretation by demonstrating improved participation and oral performance once anxiety is reduced. The literature strongly indicates a recursive anxiety–proficiency cycle: linguistic insecurity contributes to communication avoidance, while reduced participation simultaneously restricts the practice required for vocabulary development, grammatical control, pronunciation refinement, and interactional fluency (Abrar, 2022; Habiburrahim et al., 2020; Horwitz et al., 1986; Lalu Azizan Bohari, 2024). In this cycle, anxiety functions not only as an immediate performance barrier but also as a developmental inhibitor that slows long-term communicative progress. This pattern appears particularly pronounced in structurally constrained EFL environments, where learners have limited access to authentic speaking communities, restricted spontaneous interaction, and insufficient opportunities for sustained oral engagement (Sari & Junaidi, 2024; Sri Widyarti Ali et al., 2025; Zega, 2025). In Indonesian contexts, where communicative exposure is often heavily classroom-dependent, anxiety-related participation avoidance appears especially detrimental: when learners already operate within environments offering limited authentic interaction, withdrawal behaviours further reduce communicative input and output, compounding developmental stagnation (Lalu Azizan Bohari, 2024; Sahiruddin, 2025). Similar concerns emerge internationally, where communication apprehension, linguistic insecurity, and fear of public speaking constrain performance and oral growth

(AlKandari, 2020).

Overall, speaking anxiety constitutes a substantial barrier to effective EFL learning, producing immediate cognitive and behavioural disruption while also constraining sustained communicative development. Its effects extend beyond transient classroom discomfort, contributing to weakened speaking proficiency growth, long-term communicative inhibition, and persistent underperformance.

3.3 Strategies for Reducing Speaking Anxiety

The reviewed literature indicates that effective strategies for reducing EFL speaking anxiety are multidimensional, addressing both learners' internal psychological responses and the external instructional conditions that shape speaking experiences. Consistent with the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety framework (Horwitz et al., 1986), anxiety reduction is most effective when interventions move beyond isolated coping techniques toward integrated pedagogical and communicative support. Four interrelated strategic domains emerge from the reviewed studies: cognitive-affective regulation, which targets learners' internal emotional responses; social-collaborative strategies, which lower evaluative pressure through peer support; pedagogical and classroom-based interventions, which reshape the instructional environment itself; and technology-assisted and AI-supported practice, which extends low-pressure rehearsal opportunities beyond the classroom. Each theme is discussed below in terms of its meaning, supporting evidence, and pedagogical implications.

3.3.1 Cognitive-Affective Regulation Strategies

This theme refers to techniques learners use to manage their own internal emotional and cognitive responses to speaking, independent of external support.

Preparation is among the most consistently reported anxiety-reduction mechanisms: learners who rehearse, organize notes, prepare vocabulary, or anticipate speaking content generally report lower anxiety and increased confidence ((Abin & Syam, 2019; Bodie, 2010; Nur & Baa, 2022; Sumirna, 2025). However, preparation alone does not fully address anxiety's affective dimension. Complementary techniques such as positive self-talk, visualization, relaxation, deep breathing, and self-calming strategies reduce physiological arousal and help reframe speaking tasks as manageable communicative events rather than threatening evaluations ((Bodie, 2010; Hopf & Ayres, 1992; Theriana, 2023). International evidence further suggests that interventions should account for differences in self-efficacy, perceived competence, and proficiency level, as anxiety management needs may vary across learner profiles ((Habiburrahim et al., 2020; Okyar, 2023). Pedagogically, this implies that anxiety-reduction training should be built into speaking instruction as an explicit skill (e.g., structured preparation time, guided relaxation routines) rather than left to individual learners to develop unassisted, and should be calibrated to learners' differing self-efficacy levels rather than applied uniformly.

3.3.2 Social-Collaborative Strategies

This theme refers to anxiety reduction achieved through interaction with peers

rather than through solitary regulation or teacher-mediated correction.

Learners frequently report greater comfort in peer-based interaction than in teacher-dominated speaking contexts, with peer collaboration functioning as both emotional reassurance and authentic speaking practice (Afidawati et al., 2024; Marlia et al., 2023). International evidence similarly demonstrates that supportive classroom climates reduce fear of embarrassment, inferiority, and negative evaluation (Tsiplakides & Keramida, 2009). (Kodri, 2018) found learner-learner interaction more effective than learner-lecturer interaction for speaking performance, suggesting that collaborative structures function not merely as engagement strategies but as meaningful anxiety-reduction interventions that promote communicative confidence. The pedagogical implication is that speaking tasks should be deliberately designed around peer interaction (pair and small-group work) rather than defaulting to teacher-fronted performance formats, since the interactional structure itself appears to carry anxiety-reducing value.

3.3.3 Pedagogical and Classroom-Based Interventions

This theme refers to instructor- and institution-level changes to classroom climate, feedback practices, and task design that reduce anxiety at a structural level.

Supportive classroom climates, constructive feedback, empathetic teacher behavior, and reduced punitive correction consistently increase learners' willingness to communicate while lowering anxiety (Afidawati et al., 2024; Harahap et al., 2024; Nurilahi & Suhartono, 2022; Sjaifullah, 2019). Task design also plays a critical role: structured, scaffolded, and progressively sequenced speaking activities can reduce perceived threat by increasing preparation time and reducing abrupt performance pressure. Collaborative pedagogical models such as Think-Pair-Share have demonstrated effectiveness in lowering anxiety through graduated participation and peer-supported engagement (Doyman & Yumru, 2015). Evidence from online learning contexts further indicates that anxiety reduction depends heavily on instructional management, including how interaction, visibility, and feedback are structured in technology-mediated environments (Nur & Baa, 2022; Wahyuddin et al., 2022). Pedagogically, this points to teacher feedback style and task sequencing as levers instructors can directly control, making this theme the most immediately actionable for classroom-level intervention. At the same time, not all coping responses that emerge within these classroom conditions are beneficial: avoidance-based behaviors, such as minimizing interaction, reducing speaking participation, or disengaging from visible communication tasks, may ease short-term discomfort but risk reinforcing anxiety by restricting authentic communicative practice (Nur & Baa, 2022). This distinction underscores the need for instructors to differentiate adaptive anxiety management from maladaptive avoidance when designing supportive classroom conditions.

3.3.4 Technology-Assisted and AI-Supported Practice

This theme refers to anxiety reduction achieved through independent, low-pressure rehearsal, increasingly extended and supported by digital tools.

Independent practice provides an additional mechanism for anxiety reduction by increasing familiarity, self-monitoring, and communicative control in low-pressure environments. Learners commonly report reduced anxiety through rehearsal, self-recording, mirror practice, and repeated private speaking practice ((Sahiruddin, 2025; Theriana, 2023; Wahyuddin et al., 2022). Technology substantially expands these opportunities: AI-supported speaking tools, pronunciation platforms, immersive virtual environments, and digital speaking applications offer low-risk rehearsal spaces with immediate feedback and increased autonomous speaking exposure, with emerging evidence indicating measurable anxiety reduction (Indrayani et al., 2025; Mahazan & Ismail, 2025; Nguyen et al., 2025; Tang, 2025; Yadav et al., 2022). However, the pedagogical value of such tools depends on accessibility, learner autonomy, and meaningful integration into instructional practice rather than technology use alone implying that institutions should treat AI-supported tools as a complement to, rather than a replacement for, structured classroom intervention.

Cross-context comparison suggests that effective anxiety reduction cannot rely on universally applied intervention models without contextual adaptation. Although communicative, collaborative, and technology-assisted strategies demonstrate broad effectiveness across settings, implementation is shaped by local instructional realities, including access to communicative environments, pedagogical flexibility, and technological readiness. In structurally constrained EFL contexts, particularly where authentic English exposure is limited, anxiety reduction may require deliberate pedagogical redesign to expand low-risk speaking opportunities and reposition speaking as communicative engagement rather than evaluative performance.

Overall, the literature indicates that effective speaking anxiety reduction requires integrated, context-sensitive intervention combining emotional regulation, collaborative support, supportive pedagogy, sustained communicative practice, and purposeful technology use.

4. Conclusion

This systematic review set out to examine speaking anxiety in EFL higher education by identifying its contributing factors, impacts, and associated intervention strategies. Across the studies reviewed, speaking anxiety emerges not as an isolated affective response but as a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by the interaction of linguistic, psychological, and pedagogical dimensions of classroom life. This reframing carries conceptual significance: it repositions speaking anxiety as an emergent property of the language classroom as an instructional and social system, rather than a fixed trait residing solely within the learner.

Understood in this way, the consequences of speaking anxiety extend well beyond their immediate manifestations, compounding over time to constrain learners' oral development and long-term communicative confidence. This points to the pedagogical importance of treating anxiety not as an incidental barrier to be addressed only when

visibly disruptive, but as a structural condition of L2 speaking classrooms that can meaningfully inform instructional design from the outset.

The review's findings on intervention strategies point toward a parallel conceptual shift: away from isolated, technique-based responses and toward integrated, learner-centered pedagogical approaches that address the affective, communicative, and evaluative dimensions of the classroom in combination rather than in isolation. Within this shift, technology-assisted and AI-supported tools represent a promising avenue, though their pedagogical value lies not in the technology itself but in the meaningfulness of its integration into a broader instructional framework.

Future research would benefit from longitudinal and mixed-methods designs capable of tracing how speaking anxiety evolves across proficiency levels, and how interventions influence both immediate participation and sustained speaking development over time. Particular attention should also be given to evaluating the long-term pedagogical value of emerging technology-assisted interventions, rather than their short-term or novelty effects alone.

Taken together, these findings suggest that addressing speaking anxiety in EFL higher education requires a context-sensitive, pedagogically integrated response one that treats learner participation, confidence, and communicative development as interconnected outcomes of a supportive instructional environment, rather than as separable targets for isolated intervention

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