



Do International Students Speak Confidently? Exploring English-Speaking Anxiety Among Thai and Egyptian Students

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Abstract

This study investigates English-speaking anxiety among international students at Jambi University, focusing on two individuals from Thailand and Egypt. Despite assumptions that international students possess high English proficiency, many still experience anxiety, especially in academic and cross-cultural settings. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings revealed stark contrasts: the Thai participant demonstrated high anxiety, primarily due to fear of negative evaluation, limited prior exposure to English, and high academic expectations. Meanwhile, the Egyptian participant exhibited low anxiety, citing early English education and cultural adaptability as key factors. Both participants utilized coping strategies such as preparation, peer support, and relaxation techniques. The study confirms that speaking anxiety is influenced not only by language ability but also by psychological, social, and cultural dynamics. These insights are essential for educators and institutions to create inclusive environments that support international students' emotional and academic success.

Keywords: Speaking Anxiety; International Students; Case Study; Coping Strategy

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INTRODUCTION

Speaking anxiety has become a central concern in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, particularly in oral communication contexts such as presentations and classroom discussions. Speaking, as an active and productive language skill, requires linguistic competence, emotional regulation, confidence, and cultural understanding (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). When learners experience disruption in these affective factors, they often face a psychological barrier known as speaking anxiety, which hinders their ability to communicate effectively. This condition is particularly prevalent among language learners expected to use English in academic and social settings.

While numerous studies have explored speaking anxiety among local students in EFL contexts, research focusing on international students, especially those studying in non-English-speaking countries such as Indonesia, is still limited. Studies by Tiono and Sylvia (2004) and Hidayati (2021) highlight that local learners often experience speaking anxiety due to limited vocabulary, poor grammar mastery, and insufficient exposure to English-speaking environments. However, Findikli and Büyükkarcı (2023) emphasize that even international students, despite being perceived as proficient in English, are not exempt from speaking anxiety. Their anxiety is often rooted in self-perception, performance pressure, and

cultural differences.

Dewaele and Alfawzan (2018) found that students with high speaking anxiety tend to avoid participation and are more vulnerable to language learning failure. In contrast, Andrade (2006) argued that early exposure to English and familiarity with academic expectations contribute to lower anxiety levels among international students. Nevertheless, research conducted in Indonesian universities has primarily focused on domestic learners, thus overlooking the experiences of international students who study in Indonesian higher education institutions.

Furthermore, empirical evidence from Anthoney and Wilang (2023) and Zhou et al. (2023) confirms that language factors and sociocultural adaptation challenges influence international students' speaking anxiety. These include unfamiliar classroom norms, fear of negative evaluation, and limited social support. Arslan and Polat (2022) noted that international students often modify their participation behavior due to different expectations in host classrooms, a factor that can either alleviate or intensify their speaking anxiety. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Afidawati et al. (2024) observed that international students experienced additional stress due to limited interaction and increased reliance on online platforms, exacerbating communication difficulties.

Despite these developments, few studies have explored the real voices of international students in Indonesian EFL contexts using qualitative methods. Most studies rely on quantitative instruments such as the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986), which may overlook individual emotional, cultural, and social dynamics. According to Krashen (1982), affective factors like anxiety, motivation, and self-confidence significantly influence second language acquisition. When anxiety is elevated, the affective filter rises, impeding both language comprehension and production.

Therefore, this study aims to fill the gap by examining the English-speaking anxiety experienced by international students at Jambi University, using a qualitative case study approach. By focusing on two students, one from Thailand and one from Egypt, this research investigates how they perceive, experience, and manage their speaking anxiety. It also explores the internal and external factors contributing to their anxiety and the strategies they employ to overcome it. Through this study, the researcher seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the affective challenges international students face and offer evidence-based recommendations for improving the inclusivity and effectiveness of English language instruction in higher education.

The rationale for this study lies in the lack of in-depth qualitative research exploring the experiences of international students coping with English-speaking anxiety in Indonesia. It aims to extend theoretical frameworks such as the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Theory (Horwitz et al., 1986) and the Affective Filter Hypothesis (Krashen, 1982), offering practical insights for educators, policymakers, and institutional support systems to foster more inclusive academic environments.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative method using a case study approach. The qualitative method was chosen because the primary focus of this research was to gain an in-depth understanding of the subjective experiences of international students in dealing with English-speaking anxiety at Universitas Jambi. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research aims to explore the meaning of phenomena from the participants' perspectives and is highly suitable for investigating complex social phenomena such as speaking anxiety.

The case study approach allowed the researcher to conduct a detailed and in-depth investigation of the participants within a real-life academic context. This approach was relevant for this study because it enabled an exploration of how international students experienced, understood, and managed their speaking anxiety at Universitas Jambi.

According to Stake (1995), case studies provide opportunities to understand contextual dynamics and interactions within the studied case. Therefore, this study provided a rich description of the factors that caused speaking anxiety and the coping strategies used by international students, not limited to quantitative data but also narrative and experience-based insights.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews and documentation to generate a holistic and comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. The research was conducted from April to June 2025 at Universitas Jambi. The setting included academic spaces such as classrooms and campus environments where international students commonly used English for formal and informal communication.

Research Target/Subject

The subjects of this study were international students currently enrolled at Universitas Jambi who use English in academic and social settings. Participants were selected using purposive sampling with the following criteria:

1. International students from various countries, currently enrolled in undergraduate or postgraduate programs at Universitas Jambi.
2. Had experience using English in academic and social contexts.
3. Voluntarily agreed to participate and share their personal experiences regarding English-speaking anxiety.

A total of two participants were involved in the study. Although this number may seem limited, it was sufficient to provide detailed and meaningful data by the goals of a qualitative case study design (Creswell, 2014). In qualitative research, the depth of information is often prioritized over quantity. As stated by Creswell and Poth (2018), there is no exact rule regarding the number of participants in qualitative studies; instead, the decision should be based on the specific needs and focus of the research.

Research Procedure

The research was conducted in several stages as follows: (1) Preparation of research instruments and ethical approval, (2) Identification and selection of participants based on the sampling criteria, (3) Conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews with each participant, (4) Recording and transcribing the interviews verbatim, (5) Collecting supporting documentation such as academic policy documents and student handbooks, (6) Conducting thematic analysis of the collected data, and (7) Validating the findings through member checking with the participants.

Instrument and Data Collection Techniques

The primary data in this study were collected through semi-structured interviews, which served as the main instrument to explore the personal experiences of international students in dealing with English-speaking anxiety. This technique was chosen because it allows for in-depth exploration while maintaining a flexible structure, enabling the researcher to adjust follow-up questions based on the participants' responses.

An interview guide was developed containing open-ended questions about the causes of speaking anxiety, situations that trigger it, and the strategies used to overcome it. The guide ensured that all relevant topics were covered while allowing participants to elaborate on their experiences.

The interviews were conducted in April-June 2025 through Zoom meetings and voice notes via WhatsApp, each lasting approximately 30 to 45 minutes. The interviews generated over 3,000 words of transcribed data, providing a rich source of information for thematic analysis. Before the interview began, participants were informed about the purpose of the research and their rights, including confidentiality and the option to withdraw at any time.

All interviews were audio-recorded using a smartphone voice recorder and Zoom's built-in recording feature, with the participants' informed consent. The recordings were then manually transcribed verbatim using a word processing application. The transcription process involved listening to the recordings multiple times to ensure accuracy and to capture non-verbal cues such as pauses, hesitations, and repetitions where relevant. These transcripts formed the core data set for identifying recurring patterns and themes related to English-speaking anxiety. The interview data were essential for gaining rich, narrative insights into the emotional and cognitive experiences of the participants.

Data analysis technique

Thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), was employed to analyze the interview data. The process involved six stages:

1. Familiarization with the data – transcripts were read and reviewed multiple times.
2. Generating initial codes – significant data segments were identified and coded.
3. Searching for themes, related codes were grouped into potential themes.
4. Reviewing themes – themes were refined and checked against the raw data.
5. Defining and naming themes – each theme was clearly labeled and interpreted.
6. Producing the report – the findings were presented narratively and supported by participants' quotes.

Trustworthiness

In this research, trustworthiness is essential to ensure that the findings are credible, accurate, and ethically sound. According to Johnson and Christensen (2008), trustworthiness refers to the quality of research that can be considered credible, dependable, and defensible. Credibility means the research is based on valid data and accurately reflects participants' experiences. Dependability involves consistency in data collection and analysis, while defensibility ensures that the research is supported by strong reasoning and evidence, enabling it to withstand scholarly scrutiny.

To ensure the credibility of the data, several strategies were employed. First, all interviews were audio-recorded using a digital voice recorder and a smartphone to ensure completeness and accuracy during data collection. Second, the interview recordings were fully transcribed, resulting in over 3,000 words of textual data. Third, a member checking procedure was carried out, in which the transcriptions were sent back to each participant for review and validation. Participants were asked to confirm the accuracy of the transcription and were allowed to correct or clarify any part that did not reflect their intended meaning.

In addition to member checking, peer debriefing was conducted by sharing the coded data and emerging themes with academic supervisors. This step helped verify the consistency of interpretation and reduce researcher bias during analysis. Although triangulation was not applied in the form of multiple data sources, the combination of member checking and peer debriefing contributed significantly to maintaining the trustworthiness of the findings.

By following these procedures, the researcher ensured that the study met ethical research standards and produced findings that accurately represent the participants' lived experiences. These measures strengthen the research's overall credibility, dependability, and confirmability.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study investigated the speaking anxiety of two international students at Jambi University through in-depth interviews. Participant 1 is a master's student from Thailand with limited English-speaking experience before studying in Indonesia. Participant 2 is an undergraduate student from Egypt with substantial exposure to English since childhood. Their experiences were analyzed thematically and interpreted in light of existing theories and prior research.

RESULTS

This section elaborates on the key findings from in-depth interviews with two international students at Jambi University: Participant 1 from Thailand and Participant 2 from Egypt. The results were thematically analyzed and revealed four major dimensions associated with English-speaking anxiety in academic settings: (1) linguistic background and self-perception, (2) fear of negative evaluation, (3) cultural and classroom adaptation, and (4) coping strategies. Each theme is discussed below, with supporting excerpts from the participants to provide rich and contextual insights.

Linguistic Background and Self-Perception

Participant 1 reported experiencing a high level of anxiety rooted in her perceived inadequacy in English proficiency, especially concerning grammar and pronunciation. Her limited exposure to English before attending university in Indonesia significantly affected her self-confidence. She explained:

“Soalnya bahasa Inggris saya juga belum begitu bagus. Jadi kalau ngomong depan orang rame atau depan umum agak kagok.”

“Because my English is not that good yet. So when I speak in front of a crowd or public, I feel awkward.”

This response suggests that her anxiety was not merely performance-based but deeply tied to her language learning history. The lack of immersive English instruction in her earlier education contributed to her hesitation and fear of making mistakes in public academic spaces.

In contrast, Participant 2 demonstrated a markedly different experience. He reported high confidence in speaking English, which he attributed to his continuous and consistent exposure to the language from early childhood:

“Aku belajar itu bahasa Inggris di sekolah saya. Dari kindergarten level sampai mungkin high school. Ya, so it was quite confident for me.”

This long-term exposure gave him a sense of linguistic ease and familiarity, allowing him to communicate academically without hesitation or fear.

Fear of Negative Evaluation

Another central theme that emerged was the fear of negative evaluation. Participant 1 shared that her anxiety escalated due to a negative experience in a classroom presentation where a lecturer publicly reprimanded her. This event left a lasting impression on her and made her overly cautious in subsequent speaking situations:

“Pernah tuh waktu presentasi pas semester 1... salah, terus dimarahin sampai habisin waktu mata kuliah.”

This statement indicates how a critical incident can shape a learner's long-term attitude toward speaking in public, reinforcing their fear of making mistakes and being judged harshly.

In contrast, Participant 2 reported no such fear when interacting with lecturers. He described his academic environment as supportive and motivating:

“I feel good, to be honest. I feel like not only good, but I feel comfortable because I came here to learn English, not to learn other languages.”

Nonetheless, he did express some caution in peer interactions. He was mindful of how his words might be perceived, particularly by local students:

"Sometimes I might say one word that they might misunderstand... especially like my classmates... I try to think about the word I will choose."

Although he did not view this as anxiety-inducing, it reveals his cultural sensitivity and effort to maintain smooth communication in an intercultural setting.

Cultural and Classroom Adaptation

The interviews also revealed significant insights into how each participant adapted or struggled to adapt to Indonesia's cultural and academic norms. Participant 2, who was accustomed to more interactive classroom participation in Egypt, adjusted to Indonesia's more passive classroom environment. This change led him to reduce his participation to match the behavior of his peers:

"Before, I was participating in the classes in Egypt, but since I came here, I do not participate much unless the lecture asks me."

This reflects an adaptive response to local norms and an effort to integrate smoothly into the classroom culture. His experience illustrates how international students may modify their behavior not due to language difficulty, but out of respect for perceived local expectations.

In contrast, Participant 1 felt pressure rooted in the assumptions that international students should be highly proficient in English. She reflected on the expectations placed upon her:

"Seringkali itu para dosen atau teman-teman anggap dari mahasiswa internasional itu pintar bahasa Inggris, tapi ternyata tidak sepintar yang mereka pikirkan."

Her response indicates how perceived academic stereotypes can become a source of stress and inhibit participation. Instead of feeling supported, she felt compared and judged, which compounded her anxiety.

Coping Strategies

Both participants developed personal strategies to manage their experiences with English-speaking anxiety. Participant 1 relied on intensive preparation and support from classmates. She described how she engaged in repeated reading and independent study to boost her confidence before speaking tasks:

"Ulang kali berulang kali membaca dan memahami materinya juga... kalau gak paham ya cari dulu."

"Repeatedly read and understand the material too... if you do not understand, then look it up first." In addition, she emphasized the value of peer assistance:

"Kadang kalau nggak paham, saya tanya teman. Mereka bantu jelaskan, jadi saya merasa lebih tenang."

"Sometimes when I do not understand, I ask my friends. They help me explain, so I feel calmer."

These strategies highlight how both academic preparation and emotional reassurance from peers can alleviate anxiety. Her case suggests that social support is helpful both academically and emotionally in building a learner's sense of belonging and confidence.

Participant 2, though reporting low anxiety overall, also demonstrated a level of emotional awareness and self-monitoring. He used small physical techniques to keep himself grounded during presentations:

"I just hold my fingers, like press on my fingers... or I just play with a pen... so I can reduce anxiety."

These methods, though minor, were effective for him and indicate that even students with high confidence may benefit from simple grounding techniques to maintain focus and composure in public speaking situations.

In summary, the findings of this study reflect the contrasting yet insightful experiences of two international students in navigating English-speaking anxiety. While their backgrounds and coping strategies differ, both cases underscore the role of language exposure, academic culture, peer support, and personal resilience in shaping their engagement with spoken English in academic contexts.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide a nuanced understanding of English-speaking anxiety as experienced by international students in an EFL context, specifically at Jambi University. To facilitate a clear comparison between the two participants' experiences, the following table summarizes the core differences based on the main themes identified in the findings:

Table 1: The Core Differences Based on the Main Themes Identified in the Findings

Themes	Sub Themes	Participant 1 (Thailand)	Participant 2 (Egypt)
Factors	Language background and Self-Perception	Limited, bilingual instruction, non-fluent	Long-term exposure, fluent
	Fear of Evaluation	Strong, linked to a negative experience	Minimal, especially with lecturers
	Cultural Adaptation	Pressure with expectations, perceived judgment	Adjusted behavior to fit classroom norms
Coping Strategies		Intensive preparation, peer assistance	Physical relaxation, cultural awareness

Source: Primary data from semi-structured interviews with Participant 1 and Participant 2, conducted by the researcher (April-June 2025).

This table serves not only as a synthesis of the core themes but also as a visual representation of how individual differences influence speaking anxiety. Each row encapsulates factors and responses consistently reflected in the participants' narratives and interview statements.

First, the linguistic background and self-perception of the participants played a central role in shaping their confidence. Participant 1's limited exposure to English and her own belief in her inadequacy reveal that anxiety often stems not solely from actual competence, but from how students perceive their language abilities. She admitted, "I feel afraid, nervous, and unsure whether the sentences I say are correct." This illustrates what Horwitz et al. (1986) describe as self-perceived communicative incompetence, a core factor in Foreign Language Anxiety. Her anxiety was not purely linguistic but rooted in self-evaluation and past experiences, such as when she recalled, "Once, during a group presentation in the first semester, I made several mistakes and was scolded for taking up the class time."

These accounts exemplify Horwitz's framework's Fear of Negative Evaluation component and reflect Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis, in which a learner's anxiety raises the affective filter, preventing successful language acquisition. When students are under psychological pressure, especially due to fear of correction or judgment, their ability to process input and produce output is impaired. Conversely, Participant 2 benefited from sustained English exposure and higher self-perceived competence. He said confidently, "I feel good, to be honest. I feel comfortable because I came here to learn English." His response demonstrates a low affective filter, which enabled him to engage fluently in academic settings. This aligns with Andrade's (2006) findings that long-term familiarity with the language reduces anxiety and increases fluency.

Second, the theme of fear of negative evaluation underscores how classroom experiences and feedback styles can have lasting psychological impacts. Participant 1's anxiety intensified following a negative classroom experience, which she described as "very embarrassing and discouraging", reinforcing Horwitz et al.'s (1986) claim that anxiety often stems from fear of being judged in performance-based tasks. This experience also illustrates Krashen's (1982) notion of a high affective filter, as the participant mentioned she became more hesitant to volunteer answers or speak spontaneously in class. "After that

moment, I did not want to speak in class unless I had to," she admitted. In contrast, Participant 2 felt supported by his instructors. "The lecturer told everyone to speak English with me, not Bahasa Indonesia," he recalled, suggesting that a safe and inclusive classroom climate reduced his fear of being evaluated, a key element for lowering the affective filter and boosting participation.

Third, cultural and classroom adaptation emerged as a dynamic but personal process. Participant 2 adjusted his behavior to align with Indonesian classroom norms: "I observe how other students behave, and I try to follow. It helps me feel more accepted." This behavior reflects Arslan and Polat's (2022) model of sociocultural adaptation, where learners actively shape their identity to fit the host environment. On the other hand, Participant 1 struggled with these expectations, especially regarding the assumption that all international students are fluent English speakers. She said, "People expect us to be good, but I still feel like a learner." This mismatch between expectations and personal readiness led to anxiety, which, as Horwitz (2001) points out, can be magnified when students are placed in unrealistic or mismatched communicative situations.

Fourth, the coping strategies used by the participants differed in form but shared the goal of managing emotional discomfort. Participant 1 relied on academic preparation and peer support, saying: "I always read again and again before class, and my friends help explain if I do not understand." This aligns with Oxford's (1990) classification of cognitive and social-affective strategies, which are essential for anxiety regulation. In contrast, Participant 2 used physical and behavioral techniques to manage pressure, such as "I just move my legs up and down or press my fingers to release anxiety." These strategies are supported by Gregersen and MacIntyre's (2020) finding that physical actions can calm the nervous system and ease tension during public speaking. His use of environmental awareness, such as seeking support from lecturers and English-speaking peers, further showcases an adaptive, context-aware strategy.

Furthermore, these findings carry several theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, this study contributes to expanding the Foreign Language Anxiety framework by Horwitz et al. (1986) by integrating cultural and institutional expectations as additional layers influencing learners' affective states. Similarly, this research strengthens the application of Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis in multicultural settings by demonstrating how high anxiety, social judgment, and feedback styles are barriers to language input processing. By examining academic and social aspects, this research broadens the scope of anxiety studies from purely linguistic concerns to emotional, social, and cultural dimensions.

In conclusion, the discussion of these findings reveals that speaking anxiety among international students is a multifaceted experience shaped by individual history, emotional perception, academic culture, and intercultural dynamics. While some students may navigate these challenges smoothly, others may internalize them as emotional burdens that hinder participation and progress. Therefore, a multidimensional, linguistic, psychological, social, and cultural support system is essential to ensure that all learners, regardless of background, have equitable opportunities to succeed in English-speaking academic environments.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to explore how international students at Jambi University experience and cope with English-speaking anxiety in academic contexts by comparing two cases from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, Thailand and Egypt. The findings indicate that English-speaking anxiety is a multifaceted issue influenced by personal language history, self-perception, intercultural expectations, and coping behaviors.

Theoretically, the study contributes to the existing literature by emphasizing that language anxiety cannot be fully understood through linguistic competence alone. It explains how emotional resilience, sociocultural adaptation, and classroom interaction norms shape students' speaking experiences. These findings reinforce the importance of integrating affective variables into models of second language acquisition and encourage further exploration of anxiety within multicultural academic contexts.

Practically, the research underscores the need for targeted support interventions such as peer mentoring programs, preparatory speaking workshops, and teacher training in affective feedback strategies. For example, Binus University in Jakarta has implemented "English Speaking Zones"—designated areas on campus where students are encouraged to speak only English. Facilitated by trained mentors, these zones offer a low-pressure space for practicing English in informal settings. This approach helps build confidence and fluency, especially for students with performance anxiety. Adopting similar programs could help other institutions cultivate inclusive environments supporting linguistic development and emotional well-being.

Given the limited number of participants and the qualitative nature of the study, the findings are not meant to be generalized to all international students. Instead, they offer context-rich insights that can guide future research and institutional practices. Further studies could broaden the participant base, apply mixed methods approaches, or examine the long-term impact of specific interventions to understand better the evolving nature of language anxiety in international education.

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