



The Effect of Cognitive, Linguistic, and Social Factors in EFL Students' Speaking Anxiety

Alfina Damayanti¹, Bambang Yudi Cahyono²

^{1,2} Universitas Negri Malang, Malang, Indonesia

Corresponding author email: bambang.yudi.fs@um.ac.id

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Abstract

Speaking anxiety is a persistent challenge for learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and can significantly hinder their oral performance. This study investigates the influence of cognitive, linguistic, and social factors on EFL students' speaking anxiety using a quantitative approach and Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM). The participants consisted of 40 active students and alumni of the English Education Department at a well-known university in Indonesia, who had completed the Speaking course. Data were collected through a Likert-scale questionnaire adapted from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). The findings indicate that the linguistic factor has a significant positive effect on speaking anxiety, while cognitive and social factors do not significantly influence students' anxiety levels. These results highlight that linguistic difficulties are the strongest contributors to speaking anxiety among the participants. Therefore, it is necessary to provide the students with learning strategies that can support the students' linguistic abilities, such as pronunciation practice, vocabulary improvement, and speaking activities.

Keywords: Cognitive Factors; EFL Learners; Linguistic Factors; Social Factors; Speaking Anxiety

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INTRODUCTION

Understanding speaking anxiety among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students is crucial, given its significant impact on oral performance and overall language acquisition (Quvanch et al., 2024). This pervasive phenomenon manifests as tension, apprehension, and worry, significantly impeding effective communication in EFL contexts (Hamdard et al., 2024). Recent research consistently highlights speaking anxiety as a critical barrier to students' success, leading to reduced participation and diminished academic outcomes (Taqwa et al., 2022). For instance, studies in Indonesian EFL settings have revealed varying levels of speaking anxiety among undergraduate students, with some experiencing significant or very significant anxiety (Budayanti et al., 2023). Similarly, investigations in Afghanistan's EFL context indicate that anxiety poses a substantial challenge to oral proficiency (Quvanch et al., 2024). This issue is not isolated to specific regions, as similar concerns have been observed in Kurdish EFL students (Mohammed & Hamad, 2021) and among university students in Bangladesh (Rahman et al., 2024). The consistent identification of speaking anxiety as a detrimental factor underscores the urgency for comprehensive understanding and effective mitigation strategies across diverse EFL learning environments. Given its widespread impact, researchers have increasingly sought to identify the specific factors contributing to EFL speaking anxiety.

The emergence of research into the specific factors contributing to EFL speaking anxiety has gained considerable attention, with scholars investigating the intricate interplay of cognitive, linguistic, and social elements (Wang & Chinokul, 2023). Cognitive factors encompass issues such as fear of negative evaluation, apprehension about making mistakes, and inadequate self-perception of linguistic ability. Linguistic factors often involve concerns related to pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and overall fluency, where students may feel a lack of command over the target language (James et al., 2020). Social factors, on the other hand, include anxieties stemming from peer pressure, teacher expectations, classroom dynamics, and the perceived judgment of others (Jin & Dewaele, 2018). These factors are often intertwined; for example, the fear of making grammatical errors (linguistic) can lead to anxiety when speaking in front of peers (social) (Naudhani et al., 2018). To accurately measure these factors, researchers commonly use standardized instruments such as The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), developed by Horwitz et al. (1986), has been widely adapted and utilized in numerous studies to measure various dimensions of this anxiety (Riyadi et al., 2024). This instrument assesses components like communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation, providing a standardized approach to understanding the multifaceted nature of foreign language anxiety (Zheng & Cheng, 2018).

While existing literature has identified various contributors to speaking anxiety, a more granular analysis of how cognitive, linguistic, and social factors individually and collectively influence this phenomenon in EFL students remains a crucial area of inquiry (Naudhani et al., 2018). Despite numerous studies on general foreign language anxiety, research investigating the relative impact of cognitive, linguistic, and social factors on EFL speaking anxiety, particularly within the Indonesian context, is scarce. Previous research has explored general foreign language anxiety (Zhang & Tan, 2024), the impact of technology on anxiety (Liu, 2023), and the role of teacher behavior (Dewaele & Meftah, 2024). But a focused investigation distinguishing the relative impact of these three specific categories within a particular student demographic is less common. For instance, studies have shown that foreign language anxiety can negatively predict willingness to communicate among Chinese struggling EFL learners (Bai, 2023). and that perceived teacher and student emotional support can negatively predict foreign language classroom anxiety (Jin & Dewaele, 2018). However, the precise weighting of cognitive, linguistic, and social factors in shaping speaking anxiety among EFL students necessitates further exploration. Understanding these distinct contributions is vital for developing targeted and effective pedagogical interventions. For example, promoting mutual respect in the classroom can significantly reduce language learning anxiety, as can academic support from teachers (Man et al., 2024). Similarly, engagement in English extracurricular activities has been shown to alleviate anxiety levels (Dieu et al., 2024). This study, therefore, aims to address the following research questions:

- 1) How do cognitive, linguistic, and social factors affect EFL students' speaking anxiety?
- 2) Which factor – cognitive, linguistic, or social – has the most significant influence on EFL students' speaking anxiety?

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative explanatory research design to examine the effects of cognitive, linguistic, and social factors on EFL students' speaking anxiety. To analyze the causal relationships among variables, Structural Equation Modelling–Partial Least Squares (SEM–PLS) was used. This approach was selected due to its suitability for complex models, predictive purposes, and relatively small sample sizes (Hair & Alamer, 2022). Furthermore, in addition, a sample size of 40 participants was considered sufficient

for PLS-SEM analysis, as this method is well-suited for smaller sample sizes and can produce reliable estimates with as few as 30-100 observations, provided the model is not overly complex (Hair & Alamer, 2022).

Setting and Participants of the Research

The study was conducted at a well-known university in Indonesia and involved students from the English Education Department. The participants consisted of 40 respondents, including both active undergraduate students and alumni who had completed the Speaking course. A purposive sampling technique was used, with participants selected based on specific criteria relevant to the research objectives, namely prior experience in speaking-related English learning contexts. This sampling technique ensured that participants had adequate exposure to situations potentially triggering speaking anxiety.

Data Collection

Data were collected using a Likert-scale questionnaire adapted from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz et al. (1986). The instrument measured speaking anxiety across cognitive, linguistic, and social dimensions, including fear of negative evaluation, communication apprehension, and linguistic difficulties. The questionnaire was distributed online via Google Forms. Participants completed the survey either during supervised classroom sessions or remotely. The use of an online platform facilitated efficient data collection while maintaining consistency in responses.

Data analysis technique

The collected data were analyzed using SmartPLS 4.0. The analysis followed two main stages: evaluation of the outer model and the inner model. The outer model evaluation included tests of convergent validity, discriminant validity, and indicator reliability using outer loading and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values. The inner model evaluation involved path coefficient analysis, t-statistics, and p-values obtained through bootstrapping to test the proposed hypotheses. SEM-PLS was considered appropriate due to its robustness in handling non-normal data distributions and small sample sizes, as well as its ability to analyze complex relationships among latent variables (Hair & Alamer, 2022).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESULTS

1. Measurement Model Evaluation

The results of data analysis using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (SEM-PLS) are presented through the measurement model evaluation to assess the validity of the constructs before testing the structural relationships. This step includes testing the convergent validity and discriminant validity.

1.1 Convergent Validity

To test convergent validity, outer loading or factor loading values were used. An indicator is considered to meet convergent validity in the good category if the outer loadings are > 0.40 . The outer loading values of each indicator in the research variables are shown in Table 1. The values are based on the scales covering cognitive anxiety (SAC), linguistic anxiety (SAL), anxiety caused by social factors, (SAS) and speaking activity anxiety (SAA).

Table 1. Outer Loading

Variables	Indicators	Outer Loading	Description
Cognitive (X1)	SAC 1	0.582	Valid
	SAC 2	0.828	Valid
	SAC 4	0.655	Valid
Linguistic (X2)	SAL 1	0.574	Valid
	SAL 2	0.767	Valid
	SAL 3	0.741	Valid
	SAL 4	0.721	Valid
	SAL 5	0.738	Valid
	SAL 6	0.860	Valid
Social Factors (X3)	SAS 1	0.825	Valid
	SAS 2	0.910	Valid
	SAS 3	0.832	Valid
	SAS 4	0.915	Valid
Speaking Anxiety (Y)	SAA 1	0.734	Valid
	SAA 2	0.904	Valid
	SAA 3	0.838	Valid
	SAA 4	0.836	Valid
	SAA 5	0.881	Valid
	SAA 6	0.635	valid

The results of processing using SmartPLS can be seen in the table above. The outer model values or correlations between constructs and variables show that several indicators can be considered valid. However, indicator values between >0.40 and <0.70 still need to be considered as to whether their removal can increase the AVE and composite reliability values (Wuryaningsih & Dzulhasni, 2022). If the value is less than 0.40, it must be removed from the construct (Hair & Alamer, 2022).

1.2 Discriminant Validity and Construct Reliability

Discriminant validity can be determined using the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) method, with a criterion of > 0.50 for each construct. Construct reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's Alpha (α) and Composite Reliability (CR), with acceptable thresholds of > 0.70 (Hair & Alamer, 2022). The full reliability and validity statistics are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Average Variance Extracted

Construct	Cronbach's α	CR (rho_a)	CR (rho_c)	AVE	Note
Cognitive (X1)	0.464	0.482	0.734	0.484	See note*
Linguistic (X2)	0.830	0.843	0.876	0.545	Valid
Social Factors (X3)	0.894	0.900	0.927	0.760	Valid
Speaking Anxiety (Y)	0.892	0.906	0.919	0.656	Valid

* Note: Although the AVE value for the Cognitive construct ($X1 = 0.484$) is slightly below the recommended threshold of 0.50, this construct is retained in the model. The methodological literature indicates that an AVE slightly below 0.50 is still acceptable if the Composite Reliability (rho_c) exceeds 0.70, as CR is

considered a stronger indicator of construct reliability (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The CR value for the Cognitive construct ($\rho c = 0.734$) meets this criterion and can therefore be retained.

Based on the data in the table above, the AVE value of the Cognitive variable is slightly below the threshold at 0.484, while the Linguistic variable (0.545), Social Factor variable (0.760), and Speaking Anxiety variable (0.656) all exceed the minimum AVE threshold of 0.50. These results indicate that Linguistic, Social Factors, and Speaking Anxiety demonstrate good convergent validity. Although the Cognitive construct falls marginally below the AVE threshold, it still demonstrates sufficient reliability as indicated by its composite reliability (CR) value which exceeds 0.70.

2. Structural Model Evaluation

Research Question 1

How do cognitive, linguistic, and social factors affect EFL students' speaking anxiety?

Based on the data analysis, the results can be used to answer the hypotheses in this study by examining the path coefficients, T Statistics, and P Values. A hypothesis is supported when $P < 0.05$ and $T > 1.96$. The coefficient of determination (R^2) for Speaking Anxiety (Y) is 0.778, indicating that the three predictor variables explain 77.8% of the variance in speaking anxiety, which represents a substantial explanatory power. The results of hypothesis testing are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Path Coefficients and Hypothesis Testing Results

H	Path	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	STDEV	T Statistics	P Values	Decision
H1	Cognitive → Speaking Anxiety	0.153	0.174	0.182	0.842	0.402	Rejected
H2	Linguistic → Speaking Anxiety	0.530	0.512	0.201	2.633	0.010	Supported
H3	Social Factors → Speaking Anxiety	0.274	0.276	0.191	1.433	0.155	Rejected

Note: R^2 (Speaking Anxiety) = 0.778. Effect sizes (f^2): Cognitive = 0.027 (small), Linguistic = 0.340 (large), Social Factors = 0.091 (small-medium). Effect size interpretation follows Cohen (1988): $f^2 \geq 0.02$ small, ≥ 0.15 medium, ≥ 0.35 large.

Based on the analysis results, the effect of Cognitive factors on Speaking Anxiety produced an Original Sample (O) value of 0.153 and a P Value of 0.402, which exceeds the significance threshold of 0.05. These values indicate that the effect of Cognitive factors on Speaking Anxiety is not statistically significant. Therefore, H1 is rejected, and it is concluded that there is no significant influence between the Cognitive variable (X1) and Speaking Anxiety (Y).

The influence of Linguistic factors on Speaking Anxiety produced an Original Sample (O) value of 0.530 and a P Value of 0.010, which is below the significance threshold of 0.05. This indicates a statistically significant positive influence of Linguistic factors on Speaking Anxiety. Accordingly, H2 is supported, confirming that there is a significant effect between the Linguistic variable (X2) and Speaking Anxiety (Y).

The influence of Social Factors on Speaking Anxiety resulted in an Original Sample (O) value of 0.274 and a P Value of 0.155, which exceeds the significance threshold of 0.05. These values indicate that the effect of Social Factors on Speaking Anxiety is not statistically significant. Therefore, H3 is rejected, and it is concluded that there is no significant influence between the Social Factors variable (X3) and Speaking Anxiety (Y).

Research Question 2

Which factor has the most significant influence on EFL students' speaking anxiety?

Among the three independent variables examined in this study, linguistic factors emerged as the most influential predictor of EFL students' speaking anxiety, as indicated by the highest path coefficient ($O = 0.530$), the largest effect size ($f^2 = 0.340$), and a statistically significant p-value ($p = 0.010$). This finding demonstrates that linguistic challenges exert a stronger impact on students' anxiety levels than cognitive or social factors. This result indicates that speaking anxiety among EFL learners is closely linked to performance-based linguistic demands, where students become anxious not merely because they fear evaluation, but because they struggle to encode and articulate their thoughts in the target language.

DISCUSSION

How do cognitive, linguistic, and social factors affect EFL students' speaking anxiety?

The findings indicate that cognitive factors do not significantly influence EFL students' speaking anxiety. This result suggests that internal psychological aspects, such as fear of negative evaluation or self-doubt, were not the primary sources of anxiety among the participants. This finding contrasts with earlier studies that identified cognitive anxiety as a dominant contributor to foreign language anxiety (Wang & Chinokul, 2023; Zheng & Cheng, 2018). One possible explanation is that the participants particularly those who had completed the Speaking course may have developed sufficient metacognitive awareness and confidence to regulate their anxiety. Thus, cognitive concerns may diminish as learners gain increased exposure to communicative tasks.

Linguistic factors were found to significantly influence speaking anxiety, indicating that difficulties related to pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and fluency are central sources of anxiety for EFL learners. This finding aligns strongly with previous studies that emphasize linguistic competence as a key determinant of speaking anxiety (James et al., 2020; Quvanch et al., 2024). When students perceive gaps in their linguistic ability, anxiety increases due to fear of making errors and being unable to convey meaning effectively. This supports Horwitz et al.'s (1986) theory that linguistic inadequacy is a core component of foreign language anxiety, particularly in speaking contexts.

The results show that social factors do not significantly affect speaking anxiety. This finding contrasts with studies highlighting the importance of classroom climate and peer support (Jin & Dewaele, 2018; Man et al., 2024). A possible explanation is that the participants were accustomed to collaborative learning environments and had developed resilience toward social evaluation. Additionally, the inclusion of alumni participants may have reduced sensitivity to classroom-based social pressures, as they had already experienced various speaking situations beyond the academic context.

Which factor has the most significant influence on EFL students' speaking anxiety?

The finding that linguistic factors constitute the most significant predictor of speaking anxiety reinforces theoretical perspectives that position linguistic competence as a central determinant of oral

communication confidence in EFL contexts. According to Horwitz et al. (1986), foreign language anxiety is closely associated with learners' perceptions of their linguistic inadequacy, particularly in speaking tasks that demand real-time language processing. This is further supported by the large effect size observed for linguistic factors ($f^2 = 0.340$), indicating a practically meaningful contribution to speaking anxiety beyond statistical significance alone.

This result aligns with previous empirical studies showing that learners with limited control over pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary are more likely to experience heightened anxiety when speaking English (James et al., 2020; Quvanch et al., 2024; Rahman et al., 2024). When learners are uncertain about linguistic accuracy, the cognitive load required to monitor language form increases, which can disrupt fluency and amplify anxiety.

Furthermore, the prominence of linguistic factors over cognitive and social factors suggests that anxiety in this context is skill-driven rather than emotion-driven. While cognitive concerns such as fear of negative evaluation and social pressures from peers have been widely reported in previous studies (Jin & Dewaele, 2018; Zheng & Cheng, 2018), the present findings indicate that these factors may become secondary when learners perceive their linguistic resources as insufficient. In other words, even in supportive social environments, students may still experience anxiety if they lack confidence in their linguistic competence.

Pedagogically, this finding implies that efforts to reduce speaking anxiety should prioritize linguistic scaffolding and skill development, rather than focusing solely on affective or motivational interventions. Activities that enhance pronunciation accuracy, lexical retrieval, and fluency, such as guided speaking tasks, rehearsal opportunities, and form-focused feedback may be more effective in alleviating anxiety than strategies aimed only at boosting confidence or reducing classroom pressure.

CONCLUSION

This study analyzed the influence of cognitive, linguistic, and social factors on speaking anxiety in EFL students using a quantitative approach and PLS-SEM analysis. Based on the evaluation of the outer and inner models, each factor contributed differently to the level of speaking anxiety.

Cognitive factors did not have a significant effect on speaking anxiety ($p = 0.402$). Although several cognitive indicators met the validity criteria, the AVE value (0.484) was marginally below the standard threshold. Nevertheless, the construct was retained due to its satisfactory composite reliability ($\rho_c = 0.734$), consistent with the methodological guidance of Fornell and Larcker (1981) and Hair and Alamer (2022). This suggests that aspects such as fear of negative evaluation or excessive worry are not the main triggers of speaking anxiety among the participants.

The linguistic factor was found to have a statistically significant positive effect on speaking anxiety ($p = 0.010$), with the largest effect size among all predictors ($f^2 = 0.340$). This finding confirms that language barriers such as pronunciation, vocabulary mastery, fluency, and grammatical accuracy are the most dominant factors causing students to feel anxious when speaking English.

Social factors were also found to have no significant effect on speaking anxiety ($p = 0.155$). Although social pressure, classroom dynamics, and peer evaluation can theoretically affect anxiety, these factors were not proven to be the main causes of speaking anxiety in this sample.

The model explained 77.8% of the variance in speaking anxiety ($R^2 = 0.778$), indicating strong predictive power. These findings have practical implications for EFL teaching, namely the need for learning strategies that emphasize strengthening students' linguistic abilities, such as pronunciation practice, vocabulary improvement, and speaking activities that encourage fluency.

This study is not without limitations. First, the sample consisted of both active undergraduate students and alumni, which may introduce variability in anxiety levels given their differing levels of speaking experience and academic exposure. Future studies are encouraged to use more homogeneous samples or to distinguish between these two groups for more precise findings. Second, the relatively small sample size of 40 participants, while appropriate for PLS-SEM, may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research is recommended to involve larger samples, use a mixed-methods design, and consider moderator or mediator variables to gain a more comprehensive understanding of speaking anxiety in EFL contexts.

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