

Students' Perception of Anxiety in Learning Speaking at English Higher Education

Dini Eka Andestina

Universitas Jambi. e-mail: diniekaandestina2@gmail.com

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p>Keywords: <i>Anxiety, Factors of Anxiety, Speaking.</i></p> <p>DOI: https://doi.org/10.22437/langue.v3i1.30683</p> <p>Received: April 22, 2023</p> <p>Reviewed: Maret 28, 2024</p> <p>Accepted: July 31, 2024</p>	<p><i>This study investigates students' anxiety in learning to speak English at State Islamic University Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi. It aimed to identify the factors contributing to students' anxiety in speaking. A case study design was employed, involving five participants—two males and three females—who were selected using purposive sampling based on specific criteria. Data were collected through online interviews and analyzed descriptively to answer the research question. The findings revealed four key factors contributing to students' speaking anxiety: lack of confidence, limited vocabulary, pronunciation difficulties, and fear of making mistakes.</i></p>

1. Introduction

Speaking serves as a means for individuals to convey messages, ideas, and information to others, facilitating communication and interaction between the speaker and the listener. It is a valuable skill in English, offering numerous benefits in contexts such as business, education, and travel. Mastering speaking requires a continuous process for individuals worldwide to achieve fluency and clarity. The use of language in speaking aims to ensure effective communication, allowing speakers to express their ideas and thoughts in ways that can be clearly understood by listeners. According to Harmer (2007), speaking involves fluency and the ability to convey meaning spontaneously and effectively. Similarly, Abrar (2022) described speaking as a tool for individuals to express their opinions and thoughts with confidence. Ultimately, speaking is a dynamic process that involves building communication and sharing information through both verbal and non-verbal means.

Mastering the English language is essential for learners seeking to improve their speaking skills. According to Kayi (2006), speaking is a complex skill that extends beyond merely pronouncing words; it requires structured teaching and consistent practice in the classroom to help students communicate effectively in the target language. Speaking involves conveying meaning, expressing opinions, and sharing ideas during communication or interaction, making it a vital component of English language learning. Therefore, students should focus on developing their speaking abilities as a key aspect of their overall language proficiency.

Learning to speak is a challenging task for novice students, requiring a lengthy process and the application of effective techniques. Beginner learners often face common obstacles,

including hesitation caused by limited proficiency, insufficient vocabulary, and a lack of grammatical understanding. One of the most prevalent issues in the process of learning to speak is anxiety, which can significantly hinder students' progress. Anxiety—characterized by feelings of unease, self-doubt, and worry—can obstruct the development of speaking skills. As Kondo (2009) observed, language learning anxiety poses significant challenges for learners. Self-induced anxiety may discourage students from actively participating in speaking activities, causing them to remain silent in class to avoid making mistakes or experiencing embarrassment in front of their peers.

As outlined in previous definitions, the act of speaking is closely linked to students' anxiety, which can hinder their learning process—particularly when speaking English as a foreign language. This research aims to identify and describe the factors that contribute to students' anxiety in the classroom during speaking activities.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Speaking

The teaching and learning of the English language are essential, as they support the development of all language skills. Among these, the ability to speak English is widely recognized as a vital skill in practical, real-world contexts. According to Abrar (2022) and Tarigan (1981), speaking involves the expression of thoughts, viewpoints, and emotions through verbal or articulatory means. McDonough and Shaw (2003) emphasized that speech is driven by both desire and purpose, highlighting the central role of communication in fulfilling personal and social needs. For many students, speaking may serve as the primary means of conveying ideas and opinions, as well as establishing and maintaining social connections.

2.2 Anxiety

Anxiety is a significant obstacle in learning the English language, particularly in the development of speaking skills. Both teachers and students frequently face challenges that hinder effective speaking performance. Anxiety-related negative emotions—such as worry, fear, and a sense of threat—can make the learning process less engaging and more difficult for students. According to Brown (2007), anxiety plays a crucial role in language acquisition and is a key factor influencing students' performance. Similarly, Liu and Huang (2011) emphasized the impact of anxiety on language learning outcomes. Anxiety is characterized by physical, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral components, often leading to discomfort, distress, and embarrassment. As Dordinejad and Ahmadabad (2014) noted, students' levels of English proficiency are closely linked to the anxiety they experience while learning to speak.

Anxiety is a psychological condition that affects a person's emotional state and can significantly impact language learning. It is one of the most prevalent mental health disorders, often associated with disruptions in mood, cognition, behavior, and physiological functioning. According to Scovel (1978), anxiety may be linked to an individual's fear of actual or potential verbal communication with others. Feelings of tension, worry, fear, or apprehension while speaking, listening, reading, or writing in a foreign language are commonly identified as manifestations of language anxiety.

2.3 Types of Anxiety

According to Brown (2007), anxiety is one of the primary affective factors influencing the process of mastering a target language. It plays a significant role in language learning and is considered one of the most powerful predictors of students' performance among affective variables (Liu & Huang, 2011). Anxiety is characterized by somatic, emotional, cognitive, and

behavioral components. Students who experience anxiety often feel discomfort, distress, and embarrassment, which can negatively affect their language learning experience. As noted by Dordinejad and Ahmadabad (2014), the level of anxiety experienced by students is closely related to their success in achieving English language proficiency.

Anxiety can be classified into three types: trait anxiety, state anxiety, and situation-specific anxiety. According to Spielberg (1983, as cited in Kondo, 2009), **trait anxiety** refers to an individual's general tendency to experience anxiety across a wide range of situations, often influenced by personality traits such as shyness, low self-confidence, and fearfulness. In contrast, **state anxiety** is a temporary emotional condition characterized by feelings of tension or unease that arise in response to a specific situation. It represents a momentary reaction to perceived threats or challenges and may vary in intensity depending on the context.

Cicek (2014) proposed two models of anxiety: the interference model and the skills deficit model. The interference model includes two components—worry and emotionality. Worry refers to cognitive concerns about performance, while emotionality relates to the physical and emotional stress students experience. Worry, in particular, has a negative impact on students' academic engagement and expectations of success, as it consists of persistent, uncontrollable negative thoughts focused on fear of future outcomes. Learners frequently face various challenges, especially in speaking, and experience different levels of anxiety during classroom activities. Common causes of this anxiety include worry, lack of confidence, shyness, fear, insecurity, and reticence. These issues must be addressed by educators to support learners effectively. Students often choose to remain silent when prompted to share their ideas or opinions, due to fear of making mistakes, speaking unclearly or without fluency, and concerns that their peers may not understand them. This anxiety not only hinders students' participation but also prevents them from enjoying the learning process, often leading to negative perceptions about using a foreign language.

2.4 Factors of Anxiety

There are several reasons why learners may experience anxiety when learning to speak English. One key factor is a lack of confidence, which often arises when students compare themselves to peers who are more proficient, articulate, and comfortable speaking in front of others. This lack of confidence may also stem from limited knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. As a result, students with low self-confidence may experience communication apprehension, making it difficult for them to participate in speaking activities. This underscores the importance of building students' confidence—an aspect that teachers should prioritize. The teacher plays a vital role in this process, as the success of teaching and learning largely depends on the teacher's ability to support and motivate students. Teachers must help learners develop confidence and understand its critical role in improving speaking skills. Ultimately, students' speaking abilities are influenced by how effectively the teacher facilitates speaking practice and creates a supportive learning environment.

The second factor contributing to students' anxiety is a lack of motivation. Anxiety may arise when students feel hesitant to speak and choose to remain silent during speaking activities. This lack of motivation is often reinforced by an unsupportive learning environment—particularly when students are discouraged from speaking English or are surrounded by peers who predominantly use their native language. According to Zua (2008), motivation originates from internal energy and plays a crucial role in the development of students' speaking skills. Students must feel motivated before they can effectively communicate and convey meaning. A lack of motivation is also linked to uninspiring teaching methods, such as monotonous or repetitive lessons, which can result in boredom and disengagement. To address this issue,

teachers must adopt creative and engaging approaches to foster students' motivation and encourage active participation in speaking activities.

The third factor contributing to students' anxiety in learning to speak is shyness. Shyness is a significant factor that causes students to avoid speaking because they fear making mistakes and appearing foolish in front of their peers. It is an emotional response that arises from within the students themselves. Shyness is a common experience not only for learners but also for some adults when speaking in front of a group. Baldwin (2011) further explains that speaking in front of a group is a common fear for students, and feelings of shyness can cause their minds to go blank or make them forget what to say. In other words, shyness has a significant impact on students' speaking abilities, and teachers must address this factor. Teachers play a crucial role in helping students reduce their shyness when speaking a foreign language. Students need to be aware of their shyness and learn to control their performance to avoid feeling shy when speaking a foreign language.

The fourth factor is the fear of making mistakes, which is a common challenge for students when learning to speak. This fear affects the process of improving speaking skills. Students experience fear of making mistakes when they are asked to speak English orally, leading to hesitation and lack of interest. This fear may stem from not knowing what to do, a lack of knowledge, or a perceived inability to perform. Middleton (2009) noted that most EFL students are afraid to speak English, indicating a lack of confidence before attempting to speak. This fear of making mistakes hinders their ability to enhance and improve their speaking skills. Therefore, teachers must address this fear by employing effective strategies and techniques to help students overcome their fear of making mistakes and improve their speaking abilities.

According to the previous explanation, students experience anxiety when learning to speak, which presents challenges. Strategies are necessary to address these difficulties and help students improve their speaking skills in foreign languages. Therefore, teachers play a crucial role in addressing these challenges and need effective strategies to help students overcome speaking difficulties.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This research utilized a qualitative approach to collect data, with a focus on identifying the factors contributing to students' anxiety in learning to speak English. Qualitative methodology involves exploring and understanding the subjective meanings individuals or groups assign to social or human issues. It is a comprehensive, discovery-oriented approach. According to Flick (2007), qualitative research emphasizes the analysis of subjective meanings and the social construction of events or practices by collecting non-standardized data, such as texts and images, rather than numerical data. This study employed a case study design—a qualitative strategy aimed at gaining an in-depth understanding of an issue by examining a specific case, such as a phenomenon, process, program, or group. The researcher investigated the issue in detail and collected data from multiple sources, including interviews, observations, documents, and reports.

3.2 Participants

The research was conducted in a speaking class at State Islamic University Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi and involved five participants in the fourth semester of a bachelor's degree program. The group consisted of two male and three female students, selected through purposive sampling based on specific criteria: they were English department students in their fourth semester and had studied speaking for more than three semesters. The researcher

intentionally selected participants who demonstrated a lack of interest in learning to speak English in order to explore the factors contributing to students' anxiety in this area. These criteria guided the selection process, as the participants were considered to have firsthand experience with the challenges commonly encountered in learning to speak English.

3.3 Instruments

Semi-structured interviews were used to gather detailed and in-depth information from participants regarding the factors contributing to students' anxiety in speaking. This type of interview is particularly effective in qualitative research, as it allows for follow-up questions and deeper exploration of participants' responses (Kvale, 2007). In this study, the researcher served as the primary instrument for both collecting and analyzing qualitative data (Ary et al., 2010). As such, the researcher was directly involved in conducting interviews and observations, playing a central role in the data collection process.

3.4 Data Analysis Procedures

Data analysis involves systematically identifying patterns and organizing information to make it meaningful and comprehensible. According to Miles and Huberman (1992), data analysis consists of four concurrent flows of activity: data collection, data reduction, data display, and drawing conclusions and verification. The first step in this study was collecting data through interviews with students. The recorded interviews were transcribed and then analyzed by the researcher. Data reduction involved refining, focusing, discarding irrelevant information, and organizing the data to facilitate meaningful interpretation. The selected data were those most relevant to the research questions. Following this, the data display stage involved presenting the data in a descriptive form to illustrate what was occurring in the natural context, thus aiding in interpretation. Finally, drawing conclusions involved reflecting on the participants' words and actions, identifying recurring patterns, and abstracting key insights, which led to generalizations based on connections and commonalities across the data categories.

4. Findings and Discussions

4.1. Lack of Confident

Based on the findings of this study, a lack of confidence was identified as a key factor contributing to students' anxiety when learning to speak English. This lack of confidence often stems from feelings of embarrassment or inadequacy, which arise due to limited language skills. According to Brown (2001) and Eli (1986, as cited in Keramida, 2009), students' insufficient language knowledge results in low self-confidence and a lack of trust in their ability to speak English proficiently. This is supported by the response from Student 1, who stated:

"I feel unconfident during discussions using English because I do not believe in my ability. Am I able or not to give comments and express my opinion using English well and producing English fluently? And I am more comfortable being silent to avoid foolishness in front of friends and lectures" (S1)

According to the participants, a lack of confidence is a significant obstacle for students when learning to speak English. This issue cannot be overlooked by English teachers, as it contributes to students feeling uneasy and hesitant to speak. Han (2010) highlights the importance of

teachers understanding the specific challenges students face in learning, as these challenges directly affect their performance and level of engagement. Similarly, Kubo (2009) emphasizes that teachers can play a crucial role in building students' confidence by providing frequent opportunities for speaking practice and focusing on key aspects such as pronunciation and intonation. Ultimately, a lack of confidence causes students to doubt their ability to express their thoughts and opinions verbally, which in turn hinders their speaking development.

4.2. Unclear Pronunciation

The individual mentioned that pronunciation is a significant factor that causes students to experience anxiety when learning to speak. The difference between written and spoken patterns of pronunciation makes it challenging for students learning to speak, leading to feelings of difficulty and anxiety. Two students expressed that pronunciation contributes to their anxiety when speaking.

“When I have to speak English I always find difficult to pronounce word by word because it needs improvement and training regularly. And we know that English is different how to pronounce and how to write” (S1).

Student 3 also revealed the difficulty in speaking English:

“I learned English in elementary school. The first time learned to speak, I always need a dictionary to know how to pronounce it and need a long time to master speaking well” (S3).

According to the students, pronunciation is a major source of anxiety in speaking English. This anxiety often stems from a lack of understanding of correct pronunciation, leading students to rely on tools such as dictionaries to support their speaking skills. Developing proficiency in speaking requires not only time but also consistent and deliberate practice. Riadi (2013) emphasized that accurate pronunciation is essential, as mispronunciation can result in misunderstandings and hinder effective communication. Similarly, Koca et al. (2014) noted that dictionaries provide valuable linguistic and cultural knowledge, especially in situations where teachers are not available and learners must take responsibility for their own learning.

4.3. Fear of Making Mistakes

Students may experience a fear of making mistakes when they speak English in front of their peers and teachers. Having fear of making mistakes hinders the students from speaking English in front of many people rather than trying to be confident in speaking and learning. It is quoted below:

“The reason why I feel hesitant to speak English because afraid of making mistakes. I do not believe in myself to speak clearly and obviously. I wonder if my friend will give negative comments. So, I prefer to be a listener rather than a speaker” (S4)

Saurik (2011) points out that students often feel hesitant to speak in front of a large audience due to their fear of making mistakes while speaking. This fear of making mistakes is a common anxiety, as confirmed by Abrar (2022), Kurtus (2001) and Frank Middleton (2009), and stems from the negative feeling students have about potentially being laughed at or

receiving negative evaluations from their peers. This fear of making mistakes leads students to doubt their ability to speak effectively and appropriately, ultimately causing them to prefer listening over speaking when learning to speak.

4.4. Lack of Vocabulary

Mastering a wide range of vocabulary is essential for the development of speaking skills. Vocabulary functions as a fundamental tool that enables students to communicate their ideas clearly and effectively, particularly when speaking in English. A strong vocabulary also plays a crucial role in reducing anxiety and enhancing confidence during speaking activities. In this study, two students reported that their anxiety and the feeling of being "stuck" while speaking English were primarily due to their limited vocabulary, which made it difficult for them to express themselves fluently.

“Not knowing the meaning of words or sentences made me feel anxiety. I know what have to say but I do not know how to translate it into English. Then, I said each sentence or word in the Indonesian language” (S3).

The vocabulary that students possess can significantly impact their ability to speak and may lead to feelings of anxiety. When students attempt to speak English, they often struggle with knowing what to say and how to translate it, which is often due to their limited vocabulary. Student 5 expressed that:

“Sometimes I feel worried about vocabulary because I realize that my vocabulary is less. When the lecture engaged me to speak English I always needed guidance and clue to speak the words or sentence that I do not know in English” (S5)

According to the interview findings, students require assistance and support in speaking due to their limited vocabulary. This is consistent with the research of Abrar (2018) and Liu (2007), who found that a lack of vocabulary is one of the primary challenges faced by students in learning to speak English. The participants expressed concern about their speaking abilities, attributing much of their anxiety to difficulties in finding the appropriate words. As a result, when they struggle to express themselves in English, they often resort to using their native language to communicate.

5. Conclusion

According to the findings of this study, it can be inferred that students' speaking abilities are influenced by anxiety. Anxiety arises when students feel uncertain or insecure about aspects of speaking in which they lack proficiency, leading to negative emotions. Several factors contribute to this anxiety and hinder students' speaking performance, including lack of confidence, limited vocabulary, fear of making mistakes, and unclear pronunciation. A lack of confidence significantly affects students' ability to speak, as they often doubt their own speaking skills. Limited vocabulary also increases anxiety, as students struggle to find appropriate words to express their thoughts. The fear of making mistakes is often driven by concerns about receiving negative feedback from peers or instructors. Additionally, unclear pronunciation poses a major challenge, as spoken language often differs from its written form, making it more difficult for students to communicate effectively.

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