

The Impact of Speaking Anxiety on Third-Semester English Education Students' Oral Performance at Tadulako University

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Article Info

Article history:

Received 2026-03-01

Revised 2026-04-09

Accepted 2026-04-15

Keywords:

Classroom Interaction

EFL students

Oral Performance

Qualitative Study

Speaking Anxiety

ABSTRACT

Speaking anxiety is a common psychological barrier that affects students' ability to communicate effectively in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, where many students experience nervousness, lack of confidence, and fear of making mistakes during speaking activities, which may influence their oral performance. This study aims to explore how speaking anxiety affects the oral performance of third-semester English Education students at Tadulako University. This study employed a qualitative case study design involving five participants selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, reflection sheets, and document analysis, and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal that speaking anxiety manifests in emotional responses such as nervousness and fear, as well as behavioral signs such as hesitation, avoidance, and limited participation, and it also affects students' fluency, coherence, and clarity of expression. Despite achieving high academic scores, students still experienced anxiety, indicating that psychological factors are not always reflected in performance outcomes. This study concludes that speaking anxiety significantly influences students' oral performance and highlights the importance of supportive classroom practices to reduce its impact.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Speaking is a fundamental component of communicative competence, as it enables learners to express ideas, share opinions, and engage in meaningful interaction. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, speaking is often considered the most challenging skill because learners must process language in real time while maintaining fluency, accuracy, and coherence [1]. Despite its importance, many students struggle to perform

effectively in speaking activities due to various challenges, particularly psychological barriers such as anxiety.

Speaking anxiety refers to feelings of nervousness, fear, and tension experienced when learners are required to communicate orally in a foreign language [2], [3], [4], [5]. This condition is widely recognized as a situation-specific form of anxiety that includes communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety [6]. These factors can interfere with learners' cognitive processing, making it difficult to organize ideas, retrieve vocabulary, and deliver coherent speech. As a result, students with high levels of anxiety tend to hesitate, avoid participation, and produce less effective oral performance [7], [8].

Previous studies have consistently shown that speaking anxiety negatively affects students' speaking performance [9], [10], [11]. Research indicates that anxious learners demonstrate lower fluency, reduced confidence, and limited participation during speaking activities [12]. In the Indonesian EFL context, students often experience fear of making mistakes, limited opportunities for speaking practice, and concern about peer evaluation, all of which contribute to increased anxiety and decreased oral performance [13]. These findings highlight that speaking anxiety remains a persistent issue that requires attention in language learning environments.

However, despite the extensive research on speaking anxiety, there is still limited evidence focusing specifically on English Education students at Tadulako University. In addition, previous studies tend to emphasize quantitative approaches, while fewer studies explore how speaking anxiety is experienced in real classroom situations through a qualitative perspective. Moreover, limited attention has been given to how anxiety manifests across different speaking activities and how it affects observable aspects of oral performance, such as fluency, coherence, and confidence. This gap indicates the need for a more context-specific and in-depth investigation.

Therefore, this study aims to explore how speaking anxiety influences the oral performance of third-semester English Education students at Tadulako University. By examining students' emotional responses, behavioral signs, contributing factors, and coping strategies, this study is expected to provide new insights into the role of psychological factors in speaking performance and offer practical implications for developing supportive classroom environments in EFL learning.

2. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore how speaking anxiety affected students' oral performance in a natural classroom context. According to Creswell [14], a case study is appropriate for examining a bounded system in depth using multiple sources of data. The participants were five third-semester students from the 2024 cohort of the English Education Study Program at Tadulako University, selected through purposive sampling based on criteria such as active participation in speaking activities, indications of speaking anxiety, and willingness to participate. As Patton [8] suggests, purposive sampling enables researchers to obtain rich, meaningful data from individuals with direct experience of the phenomenon under investigation.

Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, open-ended reflection sheets, and document analysis of students' speaking scores. Observation was conducted using field notes to record behavioral indicators of anxiety, such as hesitation, avoidance, pauses, and participation levels. Interviews were conducted to explore students' emotional experiences, personal triggers, and coping strategies, while reflection sheets provided additional written insights into their internal feelings. Document analysis was used to support the interpretation of students' oral performance without applying statistical analysis. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke [15], including data familiarization, coding, theme development, and interpretation. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, this study applied triangulation by combining multiple data sources, member checking to confirm participants' responses, and peer debriefing to maintain analytical consistency, as recommended by Lincoln and Guba [16] and Denzin [17]. This approach enabled the researcher to develop a comprehensive understanding of how speaking anxiety influenced students' oral performance.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the study's findings and provides a comprehensive discussion based on semi-structured interviews, reflection sheets, classroom observations, and document analysis. The results are organized into several themes reflecting students' experiences of speaking anxiety, followed by an in-depth discussion supported by relevant theories and previous studies.

3.1. Results

The findings of this study reveal that speaking anxiety is experienced by all five participants, although with varying intensity. Based on the analysis, six major themes emerged: (1) emotional responses toward speaking English, (2) behavioral signs of speaking anxiety, (3) factors influencing speaking anxiety, (4) the impact of anxiety on oral performance, (5) document analysis of students' speaking scores, and (6) coping strategies to reduce anxiety.

First, in terms of emotional responses, all participants reported feelings of nervousness when speaking in front of the class. In addition to nervousness, students also experienced panic, fear of making mistakes, and low confidence. Some participants expressed mixed emotions, such as feeling both nervous and excited. These findings were consistently supported by both interview data and reflection sheets, indicating that emotional discomfort occurs before and during speaking activities.

Second, behavioral signs of anxiety were clearly observed during classroom interaction. Students tended to avoid eye contact, hesitate before speaking, produce long pauses, and speak with a lower voice. In some cases, students refused to participate unless directly called upon. These observable behaviors confirm that anxiety is not only internal but also visible through students' actions in classroom settings.

Third, the study identified several factors influencing speaking anxiety, categorized into internal and external factors. Internal factors include limited vocabulary, fear of grammatical and pronunciation errors, overthinking, and low self-confidence. External

factors include classroom dynamics, such as lecturer questioning strategies and peer presence, which increase students' fear of negative evaluation.

Fourth, speaking anxiety was found to affect students' oral performance directly. Students often experienced difficulty in organizing ideas, maintaining fluency, and expressing thoughts clearly. As a result, their responses tended to be shorter, less coherent, and sometimes incomplete, even when they understood the topic.

Fifth, the document analysis revealed that four participants received grade A and one received grade B in the speaking assessments. However, despite these high scores, students still reported experiencing anxiety during speaking activities, indicating that academic performance does not necessarily eliminate anxiety.

Finally, students applied various coping strategies to reduce anxiety, such as practicing before presentations, preparing vocabulary, and calming themselves. In addition, lecturer support, including providing preparation time and constructive feedback, contributed to creating a more supportive learning environment.

3.2. Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that speaking anxiety remains a significant issue among third-semester students in the English Education Study Program, even among those who demonstrate high academic performance. Although most participants achieved satisfactory speaking scores, they still reported experiencing nervousness, fear of making mistakes, and low confidence during classroom speaking activities. This suggests that speaking anxiety is not solely determined by students' linguistic competence but is also strongly influenced by psychological and situational factors. In this context, students are required to process language in real time while simultaneously managing social expectations, which increases their cognitive and emotional burden. Therefore, speaking anxiety should be understood as a complex interaction between internal emotions and external classroom demands.

The dominant feeling of nervousness identified in this study reflects the concept of communication apprehension proposed by Horwitz et al. [6], which refers to anxiety associated with real or anticipated communication. Classroom speaking activities, such as presentations and spontaneous questioning, create high-pressure situations where students must respond immediately in front of others. This condition increases students' awareness of being observed, which in turn intensifies their anxiety. This finding is consistent with Derakhshan and Fathi [18], who argue that speaking tasks often generate psychological tension due to real-time language processing and social evaluation. However, this study further suggests that even when students are familiar with the topic, anxiety can still emerge due to fear of performing imperfectly. This indicates that communication apprehension is not only related to language ability but also to students' perception of performance expectations.

Furthermore, students' fear of making grammatical and pronunciation errors indicates a fear of negative evaluation, another key component of foreign language anxiety, as proposed by Horwitz et al. [6]. Participants expressed concern about being judged by both peers and lecturers, which influenced their willingness to participate in speaking

activities. This fear was not only reported in interviews but also observed through behaviors such as avoiding eye contact, hesitating, and speaking in a low voice. These findings are consistent with previous studies in Indonesian EFL contexts, which highlight that fear of negative evaluation is a major source of speaking anxiety. However, the current study extends these findings by showing that such fear directly affects both emotional responses and observable classroom behavior. This suggests that anxiety operates simultaneously at psychological and behavioral levels, limiting students' active engagement in speaking tasks.

Although formal assessments were not identified as the primary source of anxiety, performance-based speaking tasks contributed to elements of test anxiety. Students reported feeling pressure when their speaking performance was evaluated, especially during presentations conducted in front of the class. This supports Dewaele [19], who argues that emotional variables such as anxiety can persist even among high-achieving learners. Similarly, Zhang and Dong [20] found that anxiety negatively influences oral performance, particularly in terms of fluency and coherence. In this study, anxious students tended to produce shorter responses, hesitate more frequently, and struggle to organize their ideas effectively. This suggests that anxiety interferes with students' cognitive processing, reducing their ability to express ideas clearly and completely. Therefore, speaking anxiety not only affects how students feel but also directly impacts the quality of their oral performance.

The findings also reveal that speaking anxiety is influenced by a combination of internal and external factors. Internal factors include limited vocabulary, low self-confidence, and the tendency to overthink before speaking, while external factors involve classroom conditions such as lecturer questioning strategies and peer presence. These factors interact to create a learning environment that may either increase or reduce anxiety levels. For example, being called on unexpectedly by the lecturer often increased students' tension, while peer observation heightened their fear of making mistakes. This indicates that speaking anxiety is not an isolated phenomenon but is shaped by the broader social and instructional context. Therefore, understanding both internal and external influences is essential for addressing anxiety effectively in classroom settings.

In response to these challenges, students employed various coping strategies, including practicing before presentations, preparing vocabulary, and using self-regulation techniques such as calming themselves. These strategies reflect learners' active efforts to manage their emotional responses and maintain their performance during speaking tasks. This finding is in line with Derakhshan et al. [21], who emphasize the importance of emotional regulation in language learning. In addition, lecturer support was found to play a crucial role in reducing anxiety by fostering a more supportive, less threatening classroom environment. Providing preparation time, offering vocabulary assistance, and giving constructive feedback helped students feel more confident and willing to participate. This suggests that effective teaching practices can significantly reduce anxiety and improve students' speaking experiences.

Overall, the findings confirm that speaking anxiety is a multidimensional phenomenon influenced by communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and

performance-related pressure, as proposed by Horwitz et al. [6]. However, this study also highlights that anxiety can persist regardless of students' academic achievement, indicating that psychological factors may be more influential than previously assumed. The results suggest that addressing speaking anxiety requires not only improving students' language proficiency but also fostering supportive classroom environments that reduce fear and encourage participation. In addition, this study contributes to the existing literature by providing evidence from a small-scale qualitative context, offering deeper insight into students' lived experiences of anxiety. Therefore, future teaching practices should integrate both cognitive and emotional support to help students develop confidence in speaking English.

4. CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore how speaking anxiety influences the oral performance of third-semester English Education students at Tadulako University, as outlined in the introduction. The findings confirm that speaking anxiety significantly affects students' oral performance, not only in terms of fluency, coherence, and clarity of expression but also through emotional and behavioral dimensions. The results demonstrate that speaking anxiety is manifested through nervousness, fear of negative evaluation, hesitation, and avoidance, which ultimately limit students' ability to communicate effectively during classroom speaking activities. These findings are consistent with the initial assumption that psychological factors play a crucial role in shaping students' speaking performance in EFL contexts.

Furthermore, this study highlights that speaking anxiety persists even among students with good academic performance, indicating that oral proficiency alone does not eliminate psychological barriers. This suggests that addressing speaking anxiety requires not only improving linguistic competence but also creating supportive and low-anxiety learning environments.

In terms of prospects, the findings of this study provide a foundation for developing classroom strategies to reduce speaking anxiety, such as interactive speaking activities, constructive feedback, and a supportive classroom atmosphere. Future research is recommended to involve a larger number of participants and explore the effectiveness of specific pedagogical interventions or digital learning tools in reducing speaking anxiety. Additionally, further studies may examine other related factors, such as motivation, self-efficacy, and classroom climate, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of students' speaking performance in EFL settings.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisors for their valuable guidance, support, and encouragement throughout the completion of this research. I would also like to extend my appreciation to the reviewer for the constructive feedback, which has greatly contributed to improving this study. My sincere thanks are also addressed to the lecturers and staff of the English Education Study Program at Tadulako University for their

academic support during this research. I am especially grateful to the third-semester students who participated in this study as respondents for their willingness, cooperation, and openness in sharing their experiences throughout the data collection process. Lastly, I would like to extend my sincere appreciation to my friends and my family for their unwavering support, encouragement, and prayers throughout the completion of this research.

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