

The Level of Students' Anxiety in Speaking English at SMA Negeri 1 Pinrang

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ABSTRACT

Keywords:
speaking anxiety, psychological factors.

Speaking anxiety remains one of the most pervasive affective variables influencing the performance of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. This study examines the level and dimensions of speaking anxiety among second-grade students at SMA Negeri 1 Pinrang, South Sulawesi, Indonesia. A quantitative descriptive design was employed, utilizing the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986). Thirty students participated voluntarily in the study. The findings indicate that 60% of participants experienced moderate to high levels of anxiety ($M = 116.4$, $SD = 9.2$), predominantly characterized by fear of negative evaluation and communication apprehension. Factors contributing to these levels include linguistic limitations, peer pressure, and teachers' corrective feedback styles. The study suggests the importance of fostering supportive classroom environments, implementing communicative learning strategies, and emphasizing fluency to reduce students' anxiety. Pedagogical implications are discussed in relation to the Affective Filter Hypothesis and Control-Value Theory of Achievement Emotions, providing insights for English educators to cultivate emotionally safe and encouraging learning atmospheres

Article Info:

Submitted:

03/04/2025

Revised:

29/04/2025

Published:

07/05/2025



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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, foreign language speaking anxiety has become one of the most frequently researched psychological constructs in applied linguistics. It is now widely acknowledged that affective variables, particularly anxiety, motivation, and self-confidence, exert profound effects on learners' ability to communicate effectively in a

foreign language (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991; Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). In the Indonesian EFL context, students often perceive English as an academic subject rather than a communicative tool, which leads to hesitation and fear of failure when required to speak (Arifin, 2017; Akbar et al., 2020).

Speaking is not only the most essential skill for real communication but also the most anxiety-inducing one. As Horwitz et al. (1986) describe, speaking anxiety arises when students experience tension and apprehension specifically related to second-language oral communication. This anxiety manifests in several ways—ranging from visible nervousness, avoidance of speech, to reduced willingness to communicate. Krashen's (1985) Affective Filter Hypothesis further explains that such emotional barriers can “block” language input from being processed effectively, thus hindering acquisition.

The social and educational context of Indonesia may exacerbate this phenomenon. In collectivist cultures such as Indonesia, students are often highly sensitive to external judgment and reluctant to “lose face” (Brown, 2001). Making mistakes publicly is considered embarrassing, especially in front of peers. Consequently, even students with adequate linguistic competence may choose silence over risking grammatical or pronunciation errors (Permana et al., 2023).

Research in the past five years has reaffirmed that speaking anxiety continues to hinder students' participation and performance. Lee and Lee (2021) found that Korean EFL learners' anxiety was significantly correlated with their fear of negative evaluation, while Zhao (2022) discovered that Chinese university students with high speaking anxiety performed significantly lower in oral assessments. Similarly, Nguyen and Pham (2023) observed that Vietnamese learners with stronger self-efficacy reported lower speaking anxiety and greater oral fluency.

Despite these extensive findings, few studies have explored the specific case of Indonesian senior high school students—a population facing increasing curricular emphasis on oral communication through *Kurikulum Merdeka* but still constrained by exam-oriented instruction. Thus, this study focuses on SMA Negeri 1 Pinrang, one of the leading public schools in South Sulawesi, where English is a core subject but opportunities for authentic speaking practice remain limited. By exploring these

dimensions, the research provides an empirical foundation for understanding how anxiety operates within Indonesian high school classrooms and how teachers can mitigate its effects through pedagogical interventions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Speaking anxiety is one of the most extensively examined emotional constructs in second language acquisition (SLA) research. According to Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), foreign language anxiety is a distinct and situation-specific anxiety that arises from the unique challenges of language learning, particularly in oral communication. It is “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning” (p. 128).

The nature of speaking anxiety lies primarily in the communication context. McCroskey (1977) defined *communication apprehension* as “an individual’s level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person.” In classroom contexts, learners experience apprehension because of their limited linguistic resources, fear of failure, or fear of being negatively evaluated by others.

Anxious students often display both physiological and behavioral symptoms — trembling, avoiding eye contact, forgetting words, or laughing nervously (Juhana, 2012; Lee & Lee, 2021). Moreover, psychological symptoms such as worry, self-doubt, and perfectionism further compound their anxiety (MacIntyre et al., 2019). These patterns highlight the multifaceted nature of language anxiety: it involves emotional, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions simultaneously.

Krashen’s (1985) *Affective Filter Hypothesis* remains the cornerstone for explaining the role of emotions in second language acquisition. According to this model, learners with high anxiety, low motivation, or low self-confidence have a raised “affective filter” that prevents comprehensible input from being internalized. In speaking tasks, this means that even when students understand linguistic input, anxiety can obstruct output production (Gkonou, Daubney, & Dewaele, 2020). Thus, speaking anxiety functions as a psychological barrier between knowledge and performance.

Pekrun’s *Control-Value Theory* (Pekrun et al., 2007) provides another lens through which language anxiety can be understood. The theory posits that learners’

emotional experiences stem from their perceived control over learning activities and the subjective value they attach to them. In the context of speaking English, students who perceive low control (e.g., “I don’t have enough vocabulary”) but high value (e.g., “I really want to sound fluent”) are prone to anxiety. Conversely, when control increases—through preparation, practice, and positive teacher feedback—anxiety tends to decrease (Mercer & Gregersen, 2020).

Recent research adopts a Complex Dynamic Systems Theory (CDST) approach (Larsen-Freeman, 2016; Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2022), viewing anxiety as a fluctuating construct rather than a static trait. Within this framework, students’ anxiety varies depending on contextual, interpersonal, and temporal factors. For instance, a student may feel relaxed during small group discussions but anxious during presentations. This dynamic understanding reflects the need for longitudinal and contextualized studies, such as the present one focusing on a specific Indonesian school environment.

Numerous studies have identified linguistic, psychological, and environmental factors that contribute to speaking anxiety. Linguistic limitations — insufficient vocabulary, grammatical uncertainty, and pronunciation difficulties — often make students feel unprepared and self-conscious (Ariyanti, 2016; Wu, 2020). Psychological factors such as perfectionism, low self-esteem, and past negative experiences also play a role (MacIntyre et al., 2019).

Environmental factors, including classroom atmosphere, peer reactions, and teacher behavior, significantly influence anxiety levels (Dewaele & Dewaele, 2020). Harsh corrective feedback or public criticism increases anxiety, whereas supportive, low-pressure speaking activities reduce it (Gkonou et al., 2020). In Indonesia, cultural emphasis on social harmony and respect can intensify students’ reluctance to speak, especially when they fear being judged by teachers or classmates (Arifin, 2017).

More recently, Hamidah, Rahman, and Hidayat (2024) demonstrated that integrating peer support and mindfulness activities into English classes effectively reduced anxiety levels. Their findings highlight the emerging trend of addressing emotional dimensions within communicative language teaching (CLT).

From the reviewed literature, it can be concluded that speaking anxiety is a complex and multifactorial phenomenon that affects learners’ communicative competence. It

interacts with individual psychological traits and contextual classroom variables. Although numerous studies have explored this issue in university settings, relatively few have analyzed anxiety levels and causes among Indonesian high school students, who face unique socio-cultural and curricular pressures. This gap justifies the present study, which focuses on the speaking anxiety levels of SMA Negeri 1 Pinrang students.

RESEARCH METHOD

The primary data collection tool was the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), developed by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986). The instrument consists of 33 statements rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly Agree*). Total possible scores range from 33 to 165, where higher scores indicate higher levels of anxiety.

This instrument was chosen due to its strong psychometric properties. Numerous validation studies across cultures have reported internal reliability coefficients between $\alpha = 0.85$ and 0.93 (Horwitz et al., 1986; Dewaele & Dewaele, 2020; Lee & Lee, 2021). For this research, minor adaptations were made to ensure linguistic appropriateness for Indonesian high school students (e.g., simplifying phrasing). The internal reliability coefficient in this study was $\alpha = 0.88$, which indicates high reliability.

To complement the quantitative findings, a short open-ended reflection section was included at the end of the questionnaire. Data were collected in April 2025 during students' regular English class period. During administration, the classroom teacher remained present but refrained from interfering to maintain a natural and comfortable atmosphere. The researcher took brief observational notes regarding students' non-verbal behavior, such as visible nervousness or hesitancy while responding.

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 25. The analysis involved several steps:

1. Descriptive Statistics: Computation of means, standard deviations, and percentages for total FLCAS scores and each subcomponent (CA, FNE, TA).
2. Level Classification: Following Dinar (2015), total scores were categorized as follows:
 - 124–165 = *Very Anxious*

- 108–123 = *Anxious*
 - 87–107 = *Mildly Anxious*
 - 66–86 = *Relaxed*
 - 33–65 = *Very Relaxed*
3. Qualitative Coding: Responses from open-ended questions were coded thematically using an inductive approach (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2018) to identify recurring causes and contextual triggers of anxiety.
4. Triangulation: The quantitative and qualitative findings were compared to ensure interpretive consistency.

The choice of descriptive over inferential analysis reflects the study’s objective: to *describe* rather than *test* relationships among variables. However, mean comparisons among the three anxiety dimensions provided nuanced understanding of students’ affective tendencies.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

The analysis of FLCAS scores revealed a wide range of anxiety experiences among students at SMA Negeri 1 Pinrang. Table 1 summarizes the overall distribution of anxiety levels based on the established scoring criteria (Dinar, 2015).

Table 1. Students’ Levels of Speaking Anxiety

Level of Anxiety Score Range Frequency (n) Percentage (%)			
Very Anxious	124–165	5	16.7
Anxious	108–123	13	43.3
Mildly Anxious	87–107	8	26.7
Relaxed	66–86	4	13.3
Very Relaxed	33–65	0	0.0

The mean score ($M = 116.4$, $SD = 9.2$) indicates that the average participant falls within the *Anxious* category, suggesting a moderate-to-high level of speaking anxiety.

Approximately 60% of students reported either *Anxious* or *Very Anxious* levels, confirming that anxiety is a salient feature in their English-speaking experiences. This pattern is consistent with previous studies in Indonesia (Akbar et al., 2020; Permana et al., 2023) and other Asian EFL contexts (Lee & Lee, 2021; Zhao, 2022). To obtain a more nuanced understanding, the FLCAS items were grouped into three major components: Communication Apprehension (CA), Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE), and Test Anxiety (TA). The mean and standard deviation of each component are presented below.

Table 2. Mean Scores by FLCAS Dimension

Dimension	Number of Items	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	Level Description
Communication Apprehension (CA)	12	3.65	0.58	Moderate–High
Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE)	10	3.72	0.63	High
Test Anxiety (TA)	11	3.54	0.67	Moderate

Among the three dimensions, Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE) obtained the highest mean score ($M = 3.72$), indicating that students' anxiety is particularly triggered by social and interpersonal factors rather than testing situations. Many respondents reported discomfort when being evaluated by teachers or classmates.

The second most salient dimension was Communication Apprehension ($M = 3.65$), showing students' nervousness when asked to speak spontaneously in English. Test Anxiety ranked lowest, suggesting that classroom evaluation contexts are less intimidating than peer interaction during oral communication tasks. The top five FLCAS items that yielded the highest mean scores are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Items with the Highest Mean Anxiety Scores

Item Statement	Mean (M)	Interpretation	
“I get nervous when I have to speak English in front of the class.”	4.23	Public anxiety	performance
“I worry about the consequences of failing my English class.”	4.10	Academic anxiety	performance
“I feel embarrassed if my classmates laugh at my mistakes.”	4.08	Peer judgment sensitivity	
“I can feel my heart pounding when I am called on to answer in English.”	3.95	Physiological arousal	
“I start to panic when I am asked to speak without preparation.”	3.88	Lack of confidence under pressure	

The results clearly show that social exposure and spontaneity are two major anxiety triggers. Students were most anxious when speaking in front of peers, confirming that speaking anxiety in Indonesian EFL classrooms is heavily influenced by social evaluation (Arifin, 2017).

To complement the quantitative findings, open-ended responses were analyzed thematically. Four major themes emerged as dominant perceived causes of speaking anxiety:

1. Fear of Making Mistakes (mentioned by 19 students)
Students expressed a strong concern about mispronouncing words or using incorrect grammar. Many equated mistakes with personal failure.
“I am afraid of making a mistake because others will laugh.”
“If my pronunciation is wrong, I feel embarrassed.”
2. Peer Judgment and Classroom Environment (12 students)
Students reported that their peers’ reactions—such as laughter, whispering, or teasing—intensify their nervousness.
“When my classmates giggle, I lose my focus.”

3. Limited Vocabulary and Preparation (15 students)

A lack of linguistic resources often caused hesitation. Students feared being unable to continue speaking mid-sentence.

4. Teacher Feedback Style (8 students)

Some students felt anxious because teachers corrected mistakes in front of the class, which heightened feelings of inadequacy.

“I prefer if the teacher corrects me after class, not in front of everyone.”

These findings align with global literature identifying error correction, peer comparison, and communication pressure as recurring triggers of L2 anxiety (Gkonou et al., 2020; Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2022). This combination of statistical and narrative evidence provides a strong foundation for understanding students’ emotional barriers to speaking English, which will be further interpreted in the Discussion section.

Discussion

The results indicate that most students at SMA Negeri 1 Pinrang experienced moderate to high speaking anxiety, with a mean score of 116.4 (SD = 9.2). This finding aligns closely with earlier studies conducted in Asian EFL contexts (Lee & Lee, 2021; Zhao, 2022; Nguyen & Pham, 2023), which similarly revealed that between 55% and 70% of students report considerable discomfort when speaking in English.

The prevalence of anxiety in this study supports Krashen’s (1985) Affective Filter Hypothesis, emphasizing that affective variables—particularly anxiety—can act as psychological barriers preventing input from being processed into output. Even when students possess sufficient grammatical or lexical knowledge, high anxiety may inhibit their ability to retrieve and use that knowledge effectively during speaking tasks.

In the context of Indonesian secondary education, this moderate-to-high anxiety level may also reflect cultural influences. Indonesian learners often perceive teachers as authority figures and tend to avoid making mistakes publicly (Arifin, 2017). As Brown (2001) noted, in high power-distance societies, students may internalize perfectionism and fear “losing face,” leading to verbal inhibition.

The FLCAS dimension analysis showed that fear of negative evaluation ($M = 3.72$) was the most significant contributor to speaking anxiety. Students worry about

how they will be perceived by teachers and peers, confirming Leary's (1983) assertion that individuals with high evaluation sensitivity are more prone to social anxiety.

This result also resonates with findings from Lee and Lee (2021) and Permana et al. (2023), who identified peer judgment as a primary stressor in Asian classrooms. In collectivist cultures, maintaining social harmony is vital; thus, public mistakes can be particularly distressing.

Communication apprehension ($M = 3.65$) followed closely, suggesting that spontaneous speaking situations—such as being called on without preparation—trigger nervousness. This supports MacIntyre and Gardner's (1991) cognitive model, which explains that anxious learners allocate more mental resources to self-monitoring than to language production, leading to slower, less fluent speech.

Interestingly, test anxiety ($M = 3.54$) was relatively lower, suggesting that oral assessments were not perceived as threatening as peer interactions. This finding contrasts with Western studies (e.g., Horwitz et al., 1986) where test anxiety often dominates, implying that peer dynamics play a stronger role in Asian EFL classrooms than formal testing conditions.

The study's findings can also be interpreted through Control-Value Theory of Achievement Emotions (Pekrun et al., 2007), which posits that anxiety emerges when learners perceive high task value but low control. At SMA Negeri 1 Pinrang, students value English proficiency highly—it is a subject associated with intelligence, global mobility, and academic success. However, their perceived control is low due to limited speaking practice and linguistic insecurity. This discrepancy creates a “high-value, low-control” condition, ideal for anxiety to flourish. Moreover, the findings support a Complex Dynamic Systems (CDS) perspective (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2022), viewing anxiety as a dynamic and fluctuating construct rather than a fixed trait. Students may feel confident during pair-work but anxious during public speaking. Such variability suggests that anxiety is not a permanent characteristic but context-dependent, modifiable through pedagogical and emotional interventions.

The qualitative findings revealed that students' fear of making mistakes and peer judgment remain dominant triggers. Comments such as *“I am afraid of being laughed*

at” and “*I lose focus when my classmates giggle*” demonstrate that students’ anxiety is socially constructed within classroom dynamics.

Similar findings have been documented in other EFL contexts (Gkonou et al., 2020; Dewaele & Dewaele, 2020), where peer behavior and teacher responses directly influence learners’ affective states. This underlines the critical role of teacher feedback style. Correcting mistakes too directly or in public may inadvertently increase students’ anxiety (Wu, 2020). Conversely, feedback that emphasizes progress rather than error has been shown to lower affective barriers (Mercer & Gregersen, 2020).

Additionally, several students mentioned limited vocabulary and lack of preparation as anxiety sources. This highlights the interplay between linguistic competence and emotional readiness—a connection well-documented by MacIntyre et al. (2019), who found that linguistic self-confidence mediates the effect of anxiety on oral performance.

The anxiety levels observed in this study are comparable to those reported by Akbar et al. (2020) among Indonesian university students ($M = 118.7$). However, the nature of anxiety differs: whereas university learners often experience anxiety related to accuracy and academic performance, high school students’ anxiety is more socially oriented, driven by peer judgment and teacher presence.

The findings also align with Nguyen and Pham (2023), who found that higher self-efficacy significantly reduces speaking anxiety. Although self-efficacy was not measured directly in this study, the qualitative responses suggest that students with greater confidence in their vocabulary and pronunciation skills tend to report lower anxiety.

Furthermore, Hamidah et al. (2024) recently showed that implementing mindfulness-based practices (e.g., breathing exercises before speaking) significantly reduces classroom anxiety. Integrating similar affective strategies into Indonesian classrooms could potentially benefit students at SMA Negeri 1 Pinrang.

The implications of these findings are pedagogically significant for EFL teachers, particularly in secondary education, Promote an Emotionally Safe Classroom Climate Teachers should adopt supportive, nonjudgmental feedback styles that prioritize encouragement and growth.

Creating an atmosphere where mistakes are viewed as learning opportunities reduces fear of negative evaluation, Implement Communicative and Low-Stakes Speaking Activities Frequent informal speaking opportunities—such as pair work, role plays, or mini-dialogues—can desensitize students to the stress of speaking publicly, Balance Accuracy and Fluency Early stages of speaking activities should focus on fluency and message delivery, while accuracy can be addressed later through reflection and feedback, Encourage Self-Reflection and Anxiety Management Teachers can incorporate short reflection sessions where students express their feelings about speaking tasks and identify personal coping strategies (as suggested by Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2022), Integrate Affective Strategy Training Techniques such as positive visualization, controlled breathing, and self-affirmation have proven effective in reducing L2 speaking anxiety (Hamidah et al., 2024).

Incorporating these practices aligns with the goals of *Kurikulum Merdeka*, which emphasizes holistic development—cognitive, affective, and social—rather than purely linguistic performance. Future studies could also explore interventions—such as peer mentoring programs or affective strategy instruction—to evaluate their effectiveness in reducing students' speaking anxiety. Moreover, examining gender differences or the role of teacher immediacy behaviors may yield additional insights into anxiety dynamics in Indonesian classrooms.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the levels and dimensions of students' speaking anxiety among second-grade students at SMA Negeri 1 Pinrang, South Sulawesi, Indonesia. Using the *Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS)* and open-ended reflections, it was found that the participants generally experienced moderate to high levels of anxiety ($M = 116.4$, $SD = 9.2$). The findings revealed that fear of negative evaluation and communication apprehension were the most significant dimensions contributing to anxiety, while test anxiety appeared less influential. The qualitative data supported these findings by highlighting that students' anxiety mainly stems from peer judgment, fear of making mistakes, limited vocabulary, and teacher feedback styles.

These results confirm the importance of considering affective factors in English language instruction, particularly in communicative speaking tasks.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings align with Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1985), demonstrating how anxiety can inhibit language performance despite sufficient linguistic competence. The results also resonate with Pekrun's Control-Value Theory (2007), illustrating that low perceived control combined with high task value intensifies anxiety. Moreover, viewed through a Complex Dynamic Systems lens (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2022), anxiety emerges as a fluctuating, context-dependent emotion that educators can influence through classroom practices.

Pedagogically, teachers are encouraged to:

- Foster supportive, nonjudgmental classroom environments;
- Integrate low-stakes speaking activities to build confidence;
- Provide constructive feedback that values effort over error; and
- Incorporate affective strategy training to help students manage anxiety.

By addressing the emotional dimension of language learning, educators at SMA Negeri 1 Pinrang and similar contexts can help students speak English with greater confidence, fluency, and enjoyment. Future studies should adopt longitudinal or mixed-method designs to further explore how anxiety evolves and how targeted interventions can sustainably reduce it.

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