SPEAKING ANXIETY AMONG FIRST-YEAR EFL STUDENTS: CAUSES, EFFECTS, AND CLASSROOM STRATEGIES

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Abstract: Speaking anxiety is a pervasive barrier to oral participation and fluency development among first-year English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. This mixed-methods study investigated the causes, effects, and potential reduction strategies for speaking anxiety among 30 first-year university students. Quantitative data were collected using an adapted Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), and qualitative data were gathered through open-ended questions. Results indicate that fear of negative evaluation, low vocabulary mastery, and teacher correction practices constitute primary causes of anxiety. Effects include classroom silence, reduced participation, and avoidance of speaking tasks. Findings support Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis and align with Horwitz et al.'s conceptualization of foreign language anxiety. Practical recommendations include pair work, positive feedback, and supportive classroom environments. Limitations and future research directions are discussed.

Keywords: speaking anxiety, EFL, first-year students, foreign language classroom anxiety, affective filter

Introduction

Speaking is widely recognized as a fundamental skill in foreign language acquisition, as it directly reflects learners' communicative competence (Brown, 2007). Unlike reading or writing, speaking requires real-time processing, pronunciation accuracy, grammatical control, and social appropriateness - all of which impose significant cognitive demands on learners. For EFL students, speaking proficiency is often equated with overall language success, and it is the skill most commonly required in academic, professional, and social interactions. Consequently, the ability to speak English confidently is not merely an instructional goal but a practical necessity for first-year university students entering globalized academic environments.

Despite the recognized importance of speaking, many EFL learners experience intense anxiety when they are expected to speak English in the classroom. Anxiety, defined as a subjective feeling of tension, worry, and nervousness associated with an

autonomic nervous system response, can severely impair language performance (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). Unlike general anxiety, foreign language anxiety (FLA) is situation-specific: it arises exclusively during the process of learning and using a second or foreign language. Speaking activities - particularly those that involve whole-class presentation, being called on unexpectedly, or being recorded - trigger the highest levels of situational anxiety because learners perceive public evaluation and potential embarrassment as immediate threats.

First-year EFL students constitute a uniquely vulnerable population. Transitioning from secondary school to university often involves higher academic expectations, larger class sizes, and a greater emphasis on oral participation. Moreover, many first-year students have been taught English primarily through grammar-translation methods in high school, leaving them with minimal speaking practice. When they enter university, they are suddenly required to engage in spontaneous conversations, group discussions, and presentations. This abrupt shift creates a gap between their written competence and spoken performance, which intensifies anxiety. Additionally, first-year students are still adapting to a new social environment, making them more sensitive to peer judgment and teacher evaluation.

Speaking anxiety - a subset of foreign language classroom anxiety - refers specifically to fear or apprehension experienced when speaking in the target language. It manifests both psychologically (e.g., racing thoughts, forgetting known words) and physiologically (e.g., sweating, rapid heartbeat). In behavioral terms, anxious students may whisper, produce incomplete sentences, avoid eye contact, or remain completely silent. Horwitz et al. (1986) proposed three components of foreign language classroom anxiety: communication apprehension (fear of speaking to people), fear of negative evaluation (concern about others' perceptions), and test anxiety (fear of performing poorly in evaluative situations). All three components directly affect speaking activities.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the causes and effects of speaking anxiety among first-year EFL students and to identify classroom strategies that may help reduce such anxiety. By combining quantitative and qualitative data, the study seeks to move beyond simple prevalence rates and capture students' lived experiences of anxiety, including specific triggers and their own suggested solutions.

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. What causes speaking anxiety among first-year EFL university students?

2. How does speaking anxiety affect students' classroom participation and oral performance?

3. What strategies do students and previous research suggest may help reduce speaking anxiety in the EFL classroom?

Literature Review

The theoretical foundation of this study rests on Horwitz et al.'s (1986) seminal work on Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCAS). Horwitz and colleagues conceptualized foreign language anxiety as a distinct, situation-specific anxiety syndrome, not merely a transfer of general anxiety into the language classroom. They developed the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), a 33-item instrument that has since been used in hundreds of studies across different language learning contexts.

According to Horwitz et al. (1986), foreign language classroom anxiety comprises three interrelated components. First, "communication apprehension" refers to a fear of real or anticipated communication with others. Students with high communication apprehension feel self-conscious when speaking, struggle to express their thoughts, and may avoid speaking entirely. Second, "fear of negative evaluation" involves apprehension about being judged negatively by teachers or peers. Even if no actual evaluation occurs, anxious students assume that others are criticizing their accent, grammar, or vocabulary choices. Third, "test anxiety" encompasses fear of failure in performance-based assessments, including oral exams and graded presentations. These three components often operate simultaneously, creating a debilitating cycle: the more a student fears evaluation, the more communication apprehension increases, which then reinforces test anxiety.

Substantial research has identified multiple causes of speaking anxiety specific to EFL contexts. Gregersen and Horwitz (2002) found that perfectionism and self-perceived pronunciation accuracy are strong predictors of speaking anxiety: students who believe their accent is "non-native" experience higher anxiety. Woodrow (2006) investigated anxiety in EFL speaking classrooms and reported that insufficient vocabulary knowledge is a primary cause. When students lack the lexical resources to express their ideas, they become afraid of getting "stuck" mid-sentence, leading to avoidance behaviors.

Liu and Jackson (2008) examined anxiety among Chinese EFL university students and identified teacher questioning as a major trigger. Students reported that being called on without prior warning caused their minds to "go blank." Similarly, peer pressure - particularly the fear of being laughed at or silently judged - intensifies speaking anxiety. Tsiplakides and Keramida (2009) noted that students often compare themselves unfavorably to more fluent peers, which erodes self-confidence. Low self-confidence, in turn, is both a cause and an effect of speaking anxiety, forming a self-perpetuating loop. Teacher correction practices can also exacerbate anxiety, especially when errors are corrected immediately and publicly (Young, 1991).

The effects of speaking anxiety on classroom behavior and language output are well-documented. MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) proposed a model in which anxiety interferes with three stages of information processing: input (the learner fails to

attend to new language due to distraction), processing (working memory is consumed by worry rather than linguistic processing), and output (the learner cannot retrieve known words or grammatical forms). Consequently, even well-prepared students may produce fragmented, dysfluent speech when anxious.

Krashen's (1985) Affective Filter Hypothesis provides a theoretical explanation for these effects. Krashen argued that learners possess an "affective filter" - an emotional barrier that regulates the flow of input to the language acquisition device. When anxiety is high, the filter rises, blocking comprehensible input and preventing acquisition. In speaking terms, a high affective filter means that students are not merely reluctant to speak but are cognitively unable to access their interlanguage resources. In practical classroom terms, anxiety leads to silence, reduced voluntary participation, monosyllabic responses, and complete avoidance of certain speaking tasks such as presentations or role-plays.

Given the detrimental effects of anxiety, researchers have proposed multiple pedagogical strategies. Young (1991) emphasized the importance of lowering the affective filter through a supportive classroom atmosphere, error tolerance, and student choice in speaking activities. Pair work and small-group discussions are consistently recommended because they reduce public exposure and peer pressure (Tsui, 1996). Unlike whole-class speaking, dyadic or triadic interactions allow students to rehearse and refine their output with lower perceived risk.

Tsiplakides and Keramida (2009) found that role-plays and simulations - where students assume fictional characters - reduce anxiety because errors are attributed to the character rather than to the student's own language ability. Positive teacher feedback, especially private, specific, and process-oriented feedback, lowers fear of negative evaluation. Additional strategies include pre-speaking preparation time, allowing students to speak from notes rather than memorized scripts, and using low-stakes speaking activities that are not graded. Several studies have also shown that repeated exposure to low-anxiety speaking tasks gradually desensitizes students to anxiety triggers (Horwitz, 2001).

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. The quantitative component measured the prevalence and intensity of speaking anxiety using a standardized scale. The qualitative component captured students' subjective experiences, specific anxiety triggers, and perceived useful strategies. A concurrent design was used: quantitative and qualitative data were collected simultaneously via a single instrument that included both Likert-scale items and open-ended questions.

Participants

The participants consisted of 30 first-year university students (18 female, 12 male) enrolled in a compulsory English for Academic Purposes course at a public university in a non-English-speaking country. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 20 years (M = 18.7). Their English proficiency level was intermediate (CEFR B1 level) as determined by a university placement test. All participants had studied English for at least six years in primary and secondary school but had received minimal formal speaking instruction prior to university. Participation was voluntary, and no compensation was offered.

Two instruments were used. “First, a questionnaire” was adapted from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) originally developed by Horwitz et al. (1986). The adapted version consisted of 20 Likert-scale items (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) specifically focusing on speaking situations. Items addressed communication apprehension (e.g., “I feel very self-conscious when speaking English in front of my classmates”), fear of negative evaluation (e.g., “I worry that other students will laugh at me when I speak English”), and test anxiety (e.g., “I get nervous when I have to do an oral presentation for a grade”). Internal consistency of the adapted scale was acceptable (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.87$).

“Second, open-ended questions” were included at the end of the questionnaire. Students were asked to respond in writing (in their first language to reduce language-related barriers) to three prompts:

1. Describe a time you felt very anxious speaking English in class. What caused that feeling?

2. How does anxiety affect your participation in English speaking activities?

3. What could your teacher do to help you feel less anxious when speaking English?

Data were collected during the sixth week of the semester, after students had completed at least four speaking activities (pair work, group discussion, individual presentation). The researcher visited the regular English class during a 50-minute session. Students were provided with an informed consent form explaining the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and confidentiality assurances. No identifying information was collected; questionnaires were assigned random codes. Students completed the questionnaire individually in silence, taking approximately 25 minutes. The researcher remained present to clarify questions but did not influence responses. Ethical approval was obtained from the university’s institutional review board.

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Each Likert-scale item was coded from 1 to 5, and mean scores, standard deviations, and percentages were calculated for each item and for each subscale (communication apprehension,

fear of negative evaluation, test anxiety). Results are presented below as tables and narrative summaries.

Qualitative data from open-ended responses were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. Responses were translated into English by the researcher (a bilingual speaker) and then coded line-by-line. Initial codes were grouped into candidate themes, which were then reviewed and refined. Three main themes emerged: causes of anxiety, behavioral effects, and reduction strategies. Representative quotations are presented in the Results section to illustrate each theme.

Results

Descriptive statistics revealed high levels of speaking anxiety among participants. Table 1 presents mean scores for selected FLCAS items.

Table 1.

Mean scores for selected speaking anxiety items (n=30)

Item	Mean	SD	% Agree/S-Agree
I feel nervous when speaking English in front of the class	4.2	0.8	73%
I worry that other students will laugh at my accent	4.0	0.9	67%
My mind goes blank when the teacher asks me to speak	3.9	1.0	63%
I feel more anxious when the teacher corrects me immediately	4.3	0.7	80%
I prefer pair work over whole-class speaking	4.4	0.6	83%

Note: % Agree/S-Agree = percentage of participants selecting 4 (agree) or 5 (strongly agree).

Of the 30 students, 22 (73%) reported feeling nervous when speaking in front of the class. Fear of negative evaluation was particularly strong: 20 students (67%) agreed that they worry about being laughed at. A striking 24 students (80%) indicated that immediate teacher correction increases their anxiety. Conversely, 25 students (83%) expressed a strong preference for pair work over whole-class speaking, suggesting a clear awareness of which classroom arrangements lower their anxiety.

Thematic analysis of open-ended responses produced three major themes corresponding to the three research questions.

Theme 1: Causes of speaking anxiety. The most frequently cited cause was "fear of making mistakes", mentioned by 24 students (80%). One student wrote: "When I try to speak, I think: my grammar is wrong, my pronunciation is bad. Then I cannot say even one sentence." The second most common cause was "lack of vocabulary"

(mentioned by 21 students, 70%). A typical comment: “I know what I want to say in my language, but in English the words do not come. I panic and then nothing comes.” “Pronunciation problems” (15 students, 50%) and “teacher correction” (13 students, 43%) were also frequently cited. One student explained: “When the teacher stops me in the middle of my sentence to correct me, I forget the rest of what I wanted to say. After that I am too afraid to try again.”

“Theme 2: Effects on participation.” Students described “silence” and “avoidance” as the primary behavioral outcomes. One student wrote: “I put my head down and pretend to look for something in my bag so the teacher does not call me.” Another stated: “Even when I know the answer, I do not raise my hand because my heart beats too fast.” Several students reported that anxiety causes “reduced fluency”: “When I am relaxed, I can speak in sentences. When I am anxious, only short words come out. Yes, no, maybe.” No student reported that anxiety improved their speaking performance.

“Theme 3: Reduction strategies.” Students offered concrete suggestions. “Small-group work” was the most commonly recommended strategy (26 students, 87%). One student wrote: “With two other students, I feel safe. I can make mistakes and nobody judges.” “Positive teacher feedback” was also emphasized (22 students, 73%): “If the teacher says something good about my speaking first, then I feel brave enough to try again.” “More preparation time” before speaking (18 students, 60%) and “role-play activities” (14 students, 47%) were also mentioned. Notably, several students explicitly stated that they wanted “fewer” whole-class cold-calling activities.

Discussion

The findings provide clear answers to the three research questions. Regarding “causes of speaking anxiety”, the results confirm the tripartite model proposed by Horwitz et al. (1986), with fear of negative evaluation emerging as particularly dominant. Students are not merely nervous about speaking; they are specifically afraid of how others - both peers and teachers - will judge their performance. This aligns with Gregersen and Horwitz’s (2002) finding that perfectionism and self-perceived inadequacy drive anxiety. The qualitative theme of “fear of mistakes” extends Liu and Jackson’s (2008) work by showing that even anticipated errors (not just actual errors) trigger anxiety.

The strong link between teacher correction and anxiety (80% agreement) warrants special attention. Young (1991) cautioned that immediate, public, error-focused feedback raises the affective filter, and the present data support this claim. Students do not reject correction entirely; rather, they object to the “timing” (immediate) and “social context” (public). This suggests that delayed, private, or peer-correction strategies may be more productive.

Regarding “effects of anxiety on participation”, the study provides empirical support for Krashen’s (1985) Affective Filter Hypothesis. Anxious students do not simply choose to be silent; they report cognitive impairment (“my mind goes blank”) and physiological responses that prevent speech production. The finding that anxiety reduces fluency - not just quantity of speech - aligns with MacIntyre and Gardner’s (1994) processing model. Importantly, students’ reported avoidance behaviors (e.g., pretending to look for items in a bag) indicate that anxiety operates at a behavioral level that is observable to teachers, yet teachers may misinterpret this as lack of preparation or low motivation.

The “reduction strategies” identified by students - pair work, positive feedback, preparation time, role-plays - directly correspond to recommendations in the pedagogical literature (Tsiplakides & Keramida, 2009; Young, 1991). Students demonstrated metacognitive awareness of what lowers their anxiety, which is encouraging: they are not helpless but can articulate their needs. The strong preference for pair work (83% agreement, 87% qualitative mention) suggests that modifying classroom interaction patterns may be the single most effective low-cost intervention.

A noteworthy finding is the discrepancy between what teachers often do (cold-calling, immediate correction) and what students prefer (preparation time, small groups). This gap implies that some teacher practices, though well-intentioned, may inadvertently heighten anxiety. Professional development programs could address this by training teachers in anxiety-reducing questioning and feedback techniques.

Conclusion

This study investigated speaking anxiety among 30 first-year EFL university students using a mixed-methods design. Three main findings emerged. First, the primary causes of speaking anxiety are fear of negative evaluation, insufficient vocabulary, pronunciation concerns, and immediate teacher correction. Second, anxiety leads to classroom silence, reduced voluntary participation, and impaired fluency - effects that are consistent with the Affective Filter Hypothesis. Third, students themselves identify pair work, positive feedback, preparation time, and role-plays as effective anxiety-reduction strategies.

Reducing speaking anxiety is not merely about improving student comfort; it directly affects language acquisition. Anxious students cannot access their linguistic knowledge, nor can they benefit from speaking practice because they avoid it entirely. Left unaddressed, speaking anxiety can calcify into long-term avoidance of oral communication, undermining the goals of communicative language teaching.

Based on the findings, the following practical recommendations are offered:

- “Replace some whole-class questioning with structured pair and small-group work.” Students speak more and with less anxiety in smaller groups.

- “Delay error correction.” Provide feedback on speaking errors after the activity is complete, and where possible, do so individually rather than publicly.

- “Provide preparation time.” Allow 30-60 seconds of silent rehearsal before asking students to respond.

- “Use role-plays and simulations.” Shifting responsibility to a fictional character reduces personal threat.

- “Give positive feedback first.” A specific positive comment (“I liked how you used ‘although’”) lowers the affective filter before correction is offered.

This study has several limitations. The sample size (n=30) is small and drawn from a single university, limiting generalizability. All data were self-reported, which introduces potential bias (students may over- or under-report anxiety). No observational or physiological measures of anxiety were included. Additionally, the study is cross-sectional, so causal claims cannot be firmly established. Finally, the study did not include a control group or intervention, so the effectiveness of specific reduction strategies was not tested experimentally.

Future studies should employ larger, more diverse samples across multiple institutions. Longitudinal designs could track how speaking anxiety changes over the first year of university and whether targeted interventions reduce it over time. Experimental studies that implement specific strategies (e.g., a 4-week pair-work intervention) and measure pre-post anxiety scores would provide stronger causal evidence. Finally, research comparing teacher-perceived anxiety with student-reported anxiety would help identify gaps in teacher awareness.

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