

Factors Influencing Students' Anxiety in Speaking English: A Case Study at SMA Muhammadiyah Kalosi

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the factors influencing students' anxiety in speaking English at SMA Muhammadiyah Kalosi, aiming to identify specific challenges and propose practical solutions to enhance speaking performance. Employing a qualitative case study design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis of 33 high school students. The results reveal that self-perception, fear of ridicule, feelings of inability, lack of preparation, and fear of making mistakes significantly contribute to speaking anxiety. Observational data corroborate these findings, highlighting symptoms like rapid breathing and nervous laughter. Reducing anxiety includes thorough preparation, mental training, and authentic materials like English songs and films. The study emphasizes the importance of a supportive classroom environment and provides insights into effective anxiety management techniques. These findings have implications for English language teaching practices, suggesting that creating a safe space for making mistakes and incorporating engaging materials can enhance students' confidence and speaking skills. The study contributes to the broader discourse on language anxiety and offers a foundation for future research in diverse educational settings.

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INTRODUCTION

Speaking is a vital medium of communication, enabling individuals to convey ideas and messages orally. Speaking is regarded as one of the primary outcomes of language acquisition, signifying its central

role in language learning (Chen et al., 2023; Hasan et al., 2020; Ismail, 2017). It is expected that language learners can effectively communicate in the target language. The mastery of a language does not depend solely on how frequently it is learned but also on how consistently it is practiced in authentic communicative

contexts (Mustakim & Ismail, 2019). This emphasizes the need for integrating speaking exercises into real-life communication to enhance students' linguistic capabilities.

In teaching English as a foreign language (EFL), speaking holds a pivotal position. It allows learners to engage in meaningful discussions, share ideas, and articulate information clearly. Al-Khreshah (2024) highlighted that speaking enables individuals to navigate various social situations and exchange information effectively. Proficient speakers are better equipped to understand and respond to their surroundings, making this skill indispensable in language education (Zhou, 2023). Despite its importance, many learners encounter significant challenges when attempting to communicate in English, often stemming from psychological and linguistic barriers (Hwang et al., 2014).

At SMA Muhammadiyah Kalosi, students face specific challenges related to speaking anxiety that hinder their ability to effectively communicate in English. Despite being exposed to English language instruction, many students exhibit reluctance and discomfort when participating in speaking activities. This anxiety is often rooted in a combination of self-perception issues, such as low self-confidence and fear of negative evaluation, as well as linguistic challenges, including limited vocabulary and concerns about grammatical accuracy. Additionally, the pressure to perform in front of peers exacerbates these feelings, leading to avoidance behaviors and reduced participation in class discussions. The lack of a supportive environment that encourages risk-taking and learning from mistakes further compounds these issues, making it difficult for students to practice and improve their speaking skills. Addressing these specific challenges is crucial for enhancing students' linguistic competence and building their confidence in using English as a means of communication.

A critical barrier to effective speaking is anxiety, a common issue among students learning English as a foreign language. Anxiety can hinder students' ability to express themselves, leading to

hesitation, avoidance, or performance deficits. As noted by Lin & Tang (2017); Liu & Li (2023), language anxiety is a multifaceted psychological construct that adversely affects speaking performance. It is recognized as a significant affective variable influencing language learning outcomes. This problem is not confined to novice learners but extends to those with considerable exposure to English (Zheng et al., 2023). Even students accustomed to using English can experience heightened levels of anxiety during speaking activities, indicating its pervasive nature (Apridayani et al., 2023).

The underlying causes of speaking anxiety are diverse, ranging from linguistic deficiencies to psychological traits. Li & Heydarnejad (2024) identified several factors contributing to speaking failures and heightened anxiety, including inadequate vocabulary, grammatical inaccuracies, and fear of making mistakes (Bahruddin et al., 2024). These issues are often exacerbated by a lack of practice and insufficient exposure to the target language. Additionally, anxiety can manifest as intense emotional responses, such as fear and nervousness, often accompanied by physical symptoms like sweating, muscle tension, and elevated heart rates (Durdevic, 2022; Muliawati et al., 2020). Such reactions can disrupt the flow of communication and diminish learners' confidence in their abilities.

Language anxiety is particularly pronounced in oral communication contexts (Bahruddin et al., 2024; Woodrow, 2006). This is because speaking demands real-time processing of language, requiring students to retrieve appropriate vocabulary, construct grammatically correct sentences, and deliver them with accurate pronunciation—all under the scrutiny of listeners. The pressure to perform flawlessly can trigger self-doubt, fear of judgment, and a heightened sense of vulnerability (Gregersen, 2020; Woodrow, 2006). Consequently, many students hesitate to participate in speaking activities, which further limits their opportunities to practice and improve their skills.

Identifying the factors that contribute to speaking anxiety is crucial for designing effective interventions (Maher &

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King, 2020). By understanding the specific challenges faced by learners, educators can develop targeted strategies to alleviate anxiety and foster a supportive learning environment (Ismail, 2019). This includes incorporating activities that build confidence, providing constructive feedback, and creating opportunities for practice in low-stress settings. Moreover, raising awareness about the normalcy of anxiety and teaching coping mechanisms can empower students to manage their emotional responses effectively.

The significance of addressing speaking anxiety extends beyond the classroom. In a globalized world, proficiency in English is a valuable asset, enabling individuals to access broader opportunities in education, employment, and social interactions. Therefore, overcoming speaking anxiety is not merely a pedagogical goal but a critical step toward equipping learners with the skills needed to thrive in diverse contexts. By prioritizing the development of speaking skills and mitigating anxiety, educators can contribute to students' overall linguistic competence and confidence.

This study aims to explore the factors influencing students' anxiety in speaking English, with a particular focus on learners at SMA Muhammadiyah Kalosi. Drawing on established literature and empirical evidence, the research seeks to identify the specific challenges encountered by students and propose practical solutions to enhance their speaking performance. By shedding light on the interplay between anxiety and speaking proficiency, this study contributes to the broader discourse on effective language teaching practices and the promotion of learner well-being.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore the factors contributing to students' anxiety in speaking English at SMA Muhammadiyah Kalosi. As Creswell (2014) notes, qualitative case studies are particularly effective in examining complex phenomena within specific contexts. This method allowed for an

in-depth exploration of the psychological, linguistic, and contextual factors influencing student anxiety in English speaking.

Participants

The participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that the individuals involved had relevant experiences with speaking anxiety. A total of 33 high school students from SMA Muhammadiyah Kalosi participated in this study, representing various levels of English proficiency. The selection criteria included students who demonstrated reluctance to speak English in classroom activities or reported anxiety in oral communication contexts.

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through various qualitative methods to ensure triangulation and to enrich the findings. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants to explore their experiences and perceptions regarding speaking anxiety. Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes and was audio-recorded with their consent. Classroom observations were also carried out during English-speaking activities to identify behavioral indicators of anxiety, such as hesitation, avoidance, and physical signs like sweating or nervous movements. Notes were systematically taken to focus on recurring patterns. Additionally, an open-ended questionnaire was administered to supplement the interview data and provide a broader understanding of participants' challenges and coping strategies related to speaking anxiety. Finally, document analysis was performed on English-speaking performance scores and teacher feedback to identify any correlations between anxiety levels and academic performance.

Data Analysis

For data analysis, a thematic approach following (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Victoria Clarke & Braun, 2015) was employed. This process began with familiarization, where transcripts from interviews and observation notes were repeatedly read to develop an in-depth understanding of the data. Coding was then conducted by assigning codes to

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meaningful data segments, such as expressions of fear, avoidance behaviors, or lack of vocabulary. These codes were clustered into related themes, leading to the identification of overarching factors contributing to speaking anxiety. Finally, the identified themes were validated by cross-referencing data from interviews, observations, and document analysis.

RESULTS

Observation Data

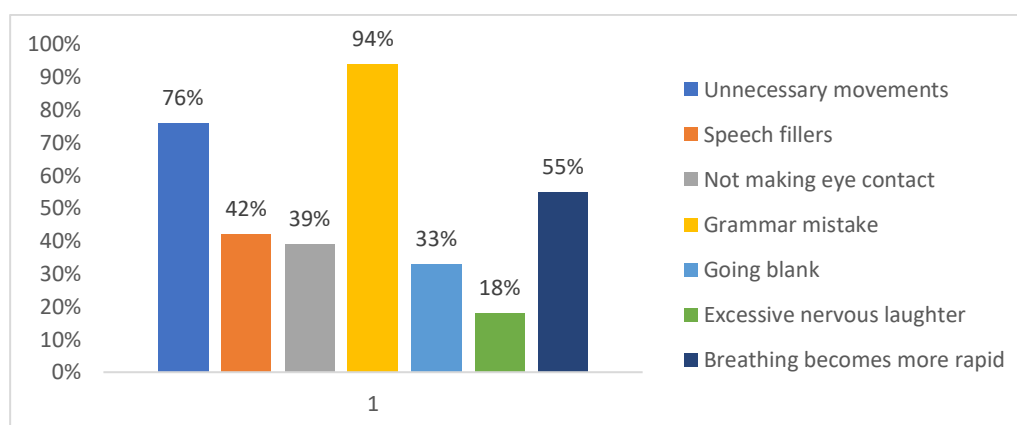


Diagram 1. The symptoms of speaking anxiety observed

The initial observations conducted in class XI MIPA 2 at SMA Muhammadiyah Kalosi revealed that 33 students displayed various symptoms of speaking anxiety during English-speaking tasks, such as delivering speeches. The data indicated that 55% of students exhibited rapid breathing, 33% reported going blank during their presentations, 42% used speech fillers (e.g., “umm”, “eee”, “uhhh”), 76% made unnecessary movements such as fidgeting with their hands or body, and 39% avoided eye contact. Additionally, 18% of students displayed excessive nervous laughter, and 94% made frequent grammatical errors. These behaviors demonstrated that speaking English induced significant anxiety among students, affecting both their verbal and non-verbal communication.

Interview Data

The semi-structured interviews provided deeper insights into the causes of speaking anxiety and the strategies students used to overcome it.

The observational data for this research was obtained by observing 33 students in the XI MIPA class at SMA Muhammadiyah Kalosi. The researcher used an observation sheet adapted from Lia Istioah's (2021) research to identify the presence of English-speaking anxiety in the students. This observation sheet allowed the researcher to directly observe the students' behavior during English language learning activities and record any signs of anxiety that appeared.

Factors Causing Students' English-Speaking Anxiety

Self-Perception Students' lack of confidence and self-esteem emerged as key factors contributing to their anxiety. Many participants expressed feelings of inadequacy regarding their English-speaking abilities. One student mentioned, “My lack of self-confidence was due to fear of appearing in front of the class and making mistakes.” Another added, “There are so many people paying attention, and this makes me nervous and shy.” These statements highlight how self-perception, particularly negative self-assessments, significantly hinders students' ability to perform in speaking tasks.

Fear of Being Laughed At Fear of ridicule was another recurring theme. Students reported feeling embarrassed and afraid that their peers would mock their pronunciation or errors. For instance, one participant stated, “When I was called to

speak in front of friends, I ended up embarrassed and became a laughing stock due to mispronunciation." This fear was corroborated by observations, where students often laughed at their peers' mistakes, reinforcing a cycle of anxiety.

Feeling of Inability A sense of not being adequately prepared or knowledgeable about the language was cited as a major source of anxiety. As one student expressed, "I feel that I lack mastery of English, which makes me anxious when asked to speak." This perception of incompetence stemmed from limited practice and exposure to speaking opportunities.

Lack of Preparation Insufficient preparation amplified students' anxiety. Many admitted feeling nervous and unprepared when tasked with speaking in front of the class. A participant explained, "Because my pronunciation is not fluent, I often panic and forget what to say." Observations supported this finding, as students appeared disorganized and hesitant during presentations.

Fear of Making Mistakes The fear of errors, particularly in grammar and pronunciation, was pervasive among the students. One participant shared, "Pronunciation is difficult, and I'm scared of saying words incorrectly." This anxiety was evident in classroom observations, where students hesitated to speak and appeared visibly nervous when attempting unfamiliar vocabulary.

Strategies to Reduce Anxiety

Preparation Students emphasized the importance of thorough preparation to alleviate their anxiety. One student remarked, "I increase my knowledge of English and practice speaking before class to feel more confident." Many reported reading English books and practicing with friends as part of their preparation (Elihami & Ismail, 2017; Hasan & Ismail, 2020a, 2020b; Samad & Ismail, 2020).

Mental Training Developing mental resilience was another strategy employed by students. They highlighted the value of gradually building courage through repeated practice. One participant noted, "I train myself by speaking in front of my

friends, which helps me get used to it and feel less nervous."

Listening to English Songs Listening to English songs emerged as a popular method for improving pronunciation and vocabulary. Students found this approach enjoyable and less intimidating. A student explained, "By listening to English songs, I learn new words and correct pronunciation, which boosts my confidence."

Watching English Films Watching English films was another effective strategy cited by students. This method helped them familiarize themselves with natural speech patterns, idiomatic expressions, and accents. One student shared, "Watching Hollywood films improves my vocabulary and makes learning fun."

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of English-speaking anxiety among high school students. The identified factors, including self-perception, fear of ridicule, feeling of inability, lack of preparation, and fear of making mistakes, align with existing literature on language anxiety (Horwitz, 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989). Horwitz (1986) emphasizes the role of self-perception and fear of negative evaluation in foreign language learning. This study corroborates these findings, demonstrating that students' negative self-assessments and fear of being judged by peers significantly contribute to their anxiety (Horwitz, E. K., Tallon, M., & Luo, H., 2010).

The observation data further supports the findings from interviews and questionnaires. The observed behaviors, such as rapid breathing, going blank, and excessive nervous laughter, align with the physiological and behavioral manifestations of anxiety described in the literature (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989). These observations provide concrete evidence of the impact of anxiety on students' performance, highlighting the challenges they face in overcoming their fears and communicating effectively.

The identified strategies for reducing anxiety – preparation, mental training, listening to English songs, and

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watching English films – are consistent with existing research on anxiety management techniques (Oxford, 1990). Oxford (1990) emphasizes the importance of cognitive strategies, such as self-talk and visualization, in managing language anxiety. The students in this study demonstrated similar strategies, such as mental training and self-preparation, to cope with their anxieties. Furthermore, the use of authentic materials, such as English songs and films, aligns with communicative language teaching (CLT) principles, which emphasize the use of authentic materials to enhance language learning experiences (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

The findings of this study have several implications for English language teaching practices. Firstly, teachers should create a supportive and inclusive classroom environment where students feel safe to make mistakes and learn from their errors. This can be achieved by fostering a culture of respect and encouraging peer support. Secondly, teachers should provide ample opportunities for students to practice speaking in a low-pressure environment, such as pair work, group discussions, and language games. This will help students build confidence and overcome their fear of making mistakes. Thirdly, incorporating authentic materials, such as songs, films, and real-life conversations, into classroom activities can enhance student motivation and engagement while providing meaningful learning experiences (Lightner, 2024) (Husnawati, N., Puspitasari, M., & Yundayani, A., 2024).

This study has some limitations that should be considered. Firstly, the sample size was relatively small and limited to a specific high school. Therefore, the findings may not be generalizable to other contexts. Secondly, the study relied heavily on self-reported data, which may be subject to social desirability bias. Future research could address these limitations by employing larger sample sizes, incorporating data from multiple schools, and utilizing a mixed-methods approach that combines qualitative and quantitative data.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the factors influencing students' anxiety in speaking English at SMA Muhammadiyah Kalosi. The research identified key contributors to speaking anxiety, including self-perception, fear of ridicule, feelings of inability, lack of preparation, and fear of making mistakes. These factors align with existing literature on language anxiety, highlighting the significant impact of self-assessment and fear of negative evaluation on students' speaking performance. The study also identified effective strategies for reducing anxiety, such as thorough preparation, mental training, and the use of authentic materials like English songs and films. The findings underscore the importance of creating a supportive classroom environment where students feel safe to make mistakes and learn from them. Teachers are encouraged to provide ample opportunities for low-pressure speaking practice and to incorporate authentic materials into classroom activities to enhance engagement and learning experiences. The study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by providing empirical evidence of the multifaceted nature of speaking anxiety and offering practical strategies for its management. Future research could expand on these findings by exploring the impact of different teaching methodologies on speaking anxiety and examining the role of cultural factors in shaping students' language learning experiences. Additionally, studies involving larger and more diverse samples could provide further insights into the generalizability of these findings across different educational contexts.

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