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Speaking Anxiety in Undergraduate Students: The Causative Factors and Coping Strategies

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Abstract

This study aimed to look for: 1) the symptoms of speaking anxiety, 2) the possible factors causing speaking anxiety, and 3) the strategies to overcome the issue in undergraduate students. Using descriptive case study methodology, the data were collected through observation, questionnaire, and interview to 42 first-year undergraduate students majoring in English Education. The findings of this study are as follows: 1) manifestation of speaking anxiety: a) observable symptom, which are making grammar errors, mispronunciation, stuttering, making fillers/pauses, avoiding eye contact, trembling, touching objects, shaky voice; and b) non-observable symptom, including mind goes blank, getting nervous, difficulty concentrating, faster heart beat, panic, sweating, freezing, and cold palms; 2) causes of speaking anxiety: a) personal and interpersonal issues, b) students' beliefs of foreign language learning, c) teacher-pupil interaction, and d) classroom procedures; and 3) coping strategies of speaking anxiety: a) preparation, b) relaxation, c) positive thinking, d) peer-seeking, and e) increasing self-confidence. The findings of this study implied the prominence of a conducive and supportive learning environment in controlling students' speaking anxiety. This study involved a small number of respondents which may not adequately represent the group. Regarding its limitation, future research can be carried out on a larger population so that the research results are more relevant.

Keywords: EFL classroom, causes of speaking anxiety, coping strategy of speaking anxiety, speaking anxiety, undergraduate student

INTRODUCTION

Anxiety has been a phenomenon that is widely discussed by researchers since it is usually associated with something negative, especially its impact on a certain matter. The term 'anxiety' relates to a condition where doing something related to a particular object could trigger and psychologically affect someone to feel uneasy and worry

(Hilgard, Atkinson, and Atkinson, as cited in Asif, 2017). Some symptoms commonly associated with anxiety such as tenseness, trembling, perspiring, palpitations, and sleep disturbances. Foreign Language Anxiety consists of three major categories, including test anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and communication apprehension (Horwitz et al., 1986). Study by Trang (2013) has found that foreign language anxiety was caused by learner-correlated factors, language tests, teachers, and features of the classroom or instructional activities. Students with a high level of speaking anxiety tend to experience problems or difficulties in speaking performance. A study by Sutarsyah (2017) reported that speaking anxiety experienced by students had negatively impacted their speaking performance in class.

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted educational environments, leading to extended periods of remote and online learning. The shift to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic dramatically altered educational practices and learning environments. Students, accustomed to interacting with classmates and instructors in person, had to adjust to remote learning platforms where speaking anxiety was less pronounced due to the absence of physical audiences. Studies indicate that online settings can reduce speaking anxiety as students are not subjected to direct eye contact or live feedback, factors commonly associated with heightened anxiety. However, the reintroduction to face-to-face learning has presented new challenges, as students must now refamiliarize themselves with public speaking and direct peer interaction. The study's background emphasizes that while online learning may have alleviated some forms of speaking anxiety, it may also have led to a decrease in students' confidence and comfort in traditional classroom interactions.

The study aims to understand the manifestation and causes of speaking anxiety among undergraduate students as they return to traditional classroom settings after the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, it focuses on identifying how speaking anxiety appears in students, investigating the possible factors causing this anxiety, and examining the strategies students use to manage it. This study seeks to fill a gap in understanding the challenges faced by students as they reintegrate into face-to-face learning, particularly in foreign language-speaking contexts. It is generally expected to increase the awareness of readers about foreign language speaking anxiety. Moreover, this study can also be used as a teacher's reference in how to create a conducive and supportive classroom atmosphere so that students' speaking anxiety levels in class can be controlled. In the future, this study is also expected to provide an overview for further researchers if a similar situation occurs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical framework of this study centers on foreign language anxiety, which is an intense fear or unease students feel when required to use a foreign language in class. Language experts believe that foreign language learning is more closely related to situation-specific anxiety than trait anxiety, since situation-specific anxiety only arises in particular circumstances (Oxford and Ehrman, 1992). According to Horwitz et al.

(1986), foreign language anxiety is defined as “a distinct complex of self-perception, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors, related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process.” This anxiety comprises three primary types: test anxiety, communication apprehension, and fear of negative evaluation, all of which can negatively impact language performance.

The Causes of Foreign Language Anxiety

Several causes of foreign language anxiety are identified, including personal and interpersonal factors, beliefs about language learning, teacher beliefs, teacher-student interactions, classroom procedures, and language testing (Young, 1991). Personal and interpersonal issues, such as low self-esteem and competitiveness, can aggravate anxiety that affects students' willingness to communicate and make them hesitant to speak. Classroom expectations, like maintaining native-like pronunciation, can also heighten stress. Furthermore, spontaneous speaking performance without preparation will only make students get more nervous and be reluctant to engage in classroom activity. Teacher method and attitudes in class, particularly harsh mistakes and error correction, can further elevate students' anxiety levels, especially in students who are already insecure about their language proficiency. A study by He (2013) investigating the reasons leading to Chinese students' foreign language speaking anxiety also found three prominent reasons that are consistently emphasized by both students and teachers, which are speaking on an unfamiliar topic in foreign language, fear of foreign language speaking test, and not having enough time to prepare before speaking in foreign language.

The Coping Strategy of Foreign Language Anxiety

To manage foreign language anxiety, Kondo and Ling (2004) propose strategies such as preparation, relaxation techniques, positive thinking, seeking peer support, and, in some cases, resignation. Preparation includes efforts to strengthen study habits and reduce anxiety through confidence-building practices. Positive thinking, in particular, helps students shift their focus from potential mistakes to learning goals, while peer support fosters a sense of solidarity among students facing similar struggles. These strategies offer practical ways to mitigate anxiety and enhance students' classroom experiences. Moreover, in his study, Lucas (1984) also mentioned two approaches to control students' foreign language speaking anxiety in Japan from the teachers' perspective. The first one is to create a warm and easy-going classroom atmosphere, and the second step is to involve students in various classroom activities.

Anxiety in Speaking Classroom

Speaking activities diverse into five categories of classroom speaking performance, including imitative, intensive, responsive, interactive, and extensive (Brown, 2004). In speaking classes, speaking activities can be done individually, such as presentations, in pairs such as role plays and conversation cards, and in groups such as discussions and asking and answering questions. Different types of speaking activity may affect students' speaking anxiety differently.

Speaking anxiety, specifically, is highlighted as a predominant form of anxiety in language learning. Many scholars, including Horwitz et al. (1986) and Price (1991), find that speaking, rather than listening or reading, is the skill most affected by anxiety, often triggered by spontaneous speaking tasks. According to Horwitz et al. (1986) and Suleimenova (2013), observable indicators of speaking anxiety include physical symptoms like trembling or stuttering, while non-observable symptoms can include panic, difficulty concentrating, and even avoiding class or delaying tasks. This anxiety can severely restrict students' willingness to participate in speaking activities, limiting their language practice and progress.

Related studies provide insights into the complex interactions between speaking anxiety and students' backgrounds. For example, Rajitha (2020) classifies the causes into internal and external factors, such as shyness or limited vocabulary, while Marwan (2007) identifies insufficient preparation and fear of failing the course as primary motivators. Strategies like regular practice, confidence-building, and teacher support are suggested to alleviate these issues, emphasizing the need for a supportive learning environment. Collectively, these findings underscore the importance of tailored approaches to help students overcome speaking anxiety and improve their language skills.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study was conducted at one of the state universities in Surakarta, Central Java, Indonesia. A total of 42 first-year undergraduate students from those classes participated in this study. These classes consist of 34 girls and 8 boys with the age range from 17 to 20 years old. To attain the data, a descriptive case study was employed. In this study, both questionnaires and in-depth interviews were used as the instrument to gain the effect of cross-validation in terms of the data source. To get further results, the researcher also conducted an observation in the classroom during learning activities.

The observation sheet consisted of observable and non-observable indicators of speaking anxiety from Horwitz et al. (1986) and Suleimenova (2013) which could indicate the symptoms of speaking anxiety experienced by the students. The observation used to seek for the symptoms shown by students that might indicate their anxiety while they are performing speaking in class, especially the observable symptoms. The observation sheet was also equipped with the causes of speaking anxiety indicators developed by Young (1991), to seek out the factors possibly affecting students' speaking anxiety. The questionnaire used in this study was an adaptation from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz et al., (1986) that consisted of 33 items. It was adapted by taking 18 items that are directly related to foreign language speaking anxiety according to Ozturk and Gurbuz (2014). The respondents were asked to rate each item on a four-point Likert scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. The items ranked in order from the highest to the least by merging the result of 'strongly agree' and 'agree' on each selected item. The interview was conducted on six students as a sample of the population. The interview items use the indicators of strategy for overcoming speaking anxiety adapted and

developed from Kondo and Ling (2004). The interview data was analyzed using a thematic analysis method.

FINDINGS

In this section, the findings are divided into three parts to present the result of each research problem. Each part will display the summarized data accompanied by descriptions and explanations for supporting data. Moreover, the data will be discussed further in the following section to find and understand its compatibility with the theory provided in the previous section.

Table 4.1. Descriptive Statistics of the Symptoms of Speaking Anxiety

Indicators	Speaking Activity			Total (N=42x3)
	Individual	In pair	In group	
Observable				
1. Making grammar errors	36	25	19	63,4%
2. Mispronouncing words	24	30	17	56,3%
3. Stuttering	25	18	18	48,4%
4. Making pauses/fillers	19	14	9	33,3%
5. Avoiding eye contact	14	11	11	28,5%
6. Trembling	12	6	6	19%
7. Touching objects	9	7	4	15,8%
Non-observable				
8. Mind goes blank	32	25	16	57,9%
9. Nervous	29	19	15	50%
10. Difficulty concentrating	17	15	14	36,5%
11. Heart beat faster	17	15	8	31,7%
12. Panic	16	12	10	30,1%
13. Excessive sweating	9	5	2	12,6%
14. Freezing	3	5	3	8,7%

As stated in Table 4.1, this study reveals that speaking anxiety among undergraduate students is a prevalent issue, presenting both observable and non-observable symptoms. Respondents showed their speaking anxiety through several symptoms. Observable indicators include grammar mistakes, mispronunciations, stuttering, and visible signs of nervousness like shaky voices and trembling.

"..(I'm) afraid I won't be able to express what's on my mind, for example I can't deliver the vocabulary I've memorized, I'm afraid (that I'll) mispronounce it, and my friends or even the lecturer won't understand what I'm saying."

(Student C.A/Interview 23/05/2024)

Stuttering is also a symptom that usually appears when someone experiences speaking anxiety. This is very common and can be observed directly, especially in non-native speakers who are not used to converse using English. This study also proves the same point, where respondents who struggle with speaking anxiety also experience stuttering as one of the symptoms that occurs.

"Usually (when I am anxious) my speech starts to stutter, it's like my tongue got tangled up, especially if I want to speak vocabulary that is difficult to pronounce."

(Student I.A/Interview 23/05/2024)

"..sometimes (I) speak haltingly, it feels like I can't speak fluently."

(Student M.S/Interview 29/05/2024)

Some respondents also felt other symptoms such as a shaky voice, making pauses, avoiding eye contact, and trembling. These symptoms felt by the respondents can vary in level from mild to severe.

"...if (I am) performing in front (of the class), my voice will sound like it's shaking until (the other people) can hear it."

(Student F.M/Interview 23/05/2024)

"If (I'm) told to make eye contact during a speaking performance, well that's something I can't do the most."

(Student M.S/Interview 29/05/2024)

"When I'm speaking in front of the class, usually (I'm) shaking..."

(Student M.S/Interview 29/05/2024)

Apart from that, respondents also experienced many other symptoms, even though they could not be observed, they were enough to influence their psychological state. Non-observable symptoms, such as mind goes blank, rapid heartbeats, and excessive sweating, reflect the internal struggle students face when speaking in public.

"When I'm going to the front (of the class) and I see my friends, sometimes (my mind) suddenly goes blank."

(Student C.A/Interview 23/05/2024)

"...and when I am about to speak, suddenly I forget what I want to say, then it just feels like I'm going blank."

(Student I.A/Interview 23/05/2024)

"When I go forward, sometimes I go blank, I forget what I want to say, so (the sentences) are not structured."

(Student A.A/Interview 24/05/2024)

Respondents also tended to feel their heart beat faster when they had to speak in front of their peers and lecturers in the class. Faster heart beat is also a psychological symptom that is commonly felt by most people who are experiencing or facing an unfamiliar situation, in this case having to perform speaking in English.

"The first thing I felt was my heart beating faster, and there was a lecturer who also made me anxious even more..."

(Student C.A/Interview 23/05/2024)

"...(while performing) my heart beat faster for sure"

(Student I.A/Interview 23/05/2024)

"The most prominent symptom is a faster heartbeat, and then nervousness."

(Student A.A/Interview 24/05/2024)

Even though these symptoms are not visible to the naked eye, they tend to be felt more by respondents. These also could trigger and lead them to another symptom such as nervous, panic, difficulty concentrating, and body tension which affect their speaking anxiety more.

"(when performing) my hands became very cold."

(Student F.M/Interview 23/05/2024)

"my heart beats faster, then my palms often get sweaty and shaking."

(Student C.A/Interview 23/05/2024)

"..., then I just cannot focus so it's hard for me to concentrate."

(Student M.S/Interview 29/05/2024)

People with speaking anxiety usually feel and experience a combination of several symptoms, both observable and non-observable. Together, these signs show how deeply speaking anxiety affects students in classroom settings.

For the second research problem, this study found several key factors that contribute to this anxiety. Personal insecurities, including low self-esteem and fear of making mistakes, create significant stress. Students also hold beliefs that increase their anxiety, such as viewing interactions with native speakers as particularly intimidating.

Table 4.2. Descriptive Statistics of the Causes of Speaking Anxiety

	Indicators	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1.	Personal and interpersonal issues	6,1%	45,9%	43,2%	4,7%
2.	Students' beliefs of foreign language learning	7,9%	53,2%	36,5%	2,4%
3.	Teacher beliefs of language teaching	0%	23,8%	66,6%	9,5%
4.	Teacher-pupil interaction	8,3%	57,2%	33,3%	1,2%
5.	Classroom procedures	12,7%	54%	22,2%	4%

6.	Language testing	13,1%	47,6%	37%	2,3%
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More than 50% of respondents admitted that personal and interpersonal problems were one of the causes of their speaking anxiety, especially low self-confidence.

"I realize that my self-confidence is not good enough."

(Student C.A/Interview 23/05/2024)

"When I'm about to perform, I already feel like I can't do my best."

(Student F.M/Interview 23/05/2024)

"It's like being under pressure, so I don't feel confident."

(Student I.A/Interview 23/05/2024)

"For me, maybe I'm still not confident enough because of my limited (skills), because I'm not very fluent in speaking English,..."

(Student A.A/Interview 24/05/2024)

"(because) being seen by friends makes (me) less confident. The lecturer doesn't have much influence, but (because of) being seen by my friends I feel embarrassed."

(Student M.S/Interview 29/05/2024)

Some respondents are also afraid of making mistakes when speaking. This prevents them from being able to speak confidently. Other students also added that their low self-confidence was influenced by the thought that their friends and other students could do better than themselves, which resulted in them being inferior and more restrained from speaking.

"I'm afraid if I make a mistake in conveying (message) or if my pronunciation is bad so they can't understand what I mean."

(Student C.A/Interview 23/05/2024)

"I'm afraid that if I say something wrong, the lecture will reduce my score."

(Student I.A/Interview 23/05/2024)

"..., and so I'm afraid of making mistakes, afraid that the grammar isn't quite right either."

(Student A.A/Interview 24/05/2024)

"Sometimes when I'm performing and I see a friend who's laughing, I think he's laughing at me even though he's not, but that's actually just in my own mind."

(Student M.S/Interview 29/05/2024)

"I feel that my other friends can do better than me, so I was already feeling inferior to them."

(Student F.M/Interview 23/05/2024)

"If (I) look at other friends their public speaking is better, but when I look at myself I can only do this."

(Student I.A/Interview 23/05/2024)

Teacher and student dynamics play a role as well, with students often feeling overwhelmed by direct corrections or spontaneous performance, especially when they are asked to perform without preparation prior.

"Especially if in the middle of speaking the lecturer suddenly cuts me off and corrects (my pronunciation), it makes me nervous and a bit embarrassed"

(Student I.A/Interview 23/05/2024)

Spontaneous performances without sufficient preparation are the main cause of speaking anxiety experienced by students in class, especially when lecturers do name-calling to appoint the student randomly. An increase in speaking anxiety usually occurs in students whose names were called, as well as other students who anticipate this situation and think that their names would also be called.

"If (I'm) asked to come forward spontaneously (it also) makes me anxious, that's because (I'm) afraid (I'll) make a mistake because (I'm) not prepared enough."

(Student F.M/Interview 23/05/2024)

"(I'm) quite anxious, especially if (I am) appointed directly (spontaneously) to answer."

(Student M.S/Interview 29/05/2024)

"For example (if) I'm called to go forward spontaneously, when I am in front of the class (my mind) usually goes blank or (I make) mistakes because there's no preparation."

(Student C.A/Interview 23/05/2024)

This shows that the causes of speaking anxiety in students is a combination of lack of self-confidence, classroom instruction requiring them to have unprepared talks, and students' beliefs about language learning. These factors indicate that speaking anxiety is influenced by a combination of personal, relational, and situational factors within the classroom.

Eventually, to cope with the issue, students employ various strategies to manage their anxiety. They often prepare by studying and practicing in advance, which provides them with a sense of readiness and control. This also helps them to understand the material and context so that when they perform in class they already have an idea of what will be discussed.

"I usually read the material first, there are textbooks for speaking, so we learn first from books. I can also review yesterday's material, or read the material that will be discussed in class. So if (I'm) asked to come forward I already have an idea of the material."

(Student C.A/Interview 23/05/2024)

"Usually I practice first, for example if there is a speaking assignment, I try to memorize the text first before class, then ask a friend to check my practice."

(Student F.M/Interview 23/05/2024)

"Before class, I usually read the material that will be discussed first, for example the lecturer tells us that in the next meeting we will talk about traffic on the road, so beforehand I can first find out the vocabulary related to the material."

(Student I.A/Interview 23/05/2024)

"In a speaking class, usually there is already material that will be studied today, or discussion from previous meetings or assignments, sometimes I study the previous (material), I study the material and practice talking to myself first about things that lead to the topic."

(Student A.A/Interview 24/05/2024)

"If (I) have practiced before class, I won't be so anxious (when performing), I can be more relaxed."

(Student M.S/Interview 29/05/2024)

Relaxation techniques like deep breathing help students calm themselves during anxious moments, so that they can continue their performance by improvisation. Meanwhile positive thinking encourages resilience by normalizing mistakes as part of the learning process.

"...for example if (my mind) suddenly goes blank, I usually take a deep breath and calm myself down, slowing down, while holding my own hands."

(Student C.A/Interview 23/05/2024)

"Usually I take a breath (and) pause first, and then try to recall what comes next in the text."

(Student F.M/Interview 23/05/2024)

"..sometimes (I) think (making mistakes) is normal because we are still learning."

(Student C.A/Interview 23/05/2024)

"I think that's normal, so that's okay. Even though I'll still think about it later, it's more for self-evaluation and it doesn't bother me too much."

(Student F.M/Interview 23/05/2024)

"I keep in mind that I'm still learning, so if I make a mistake it's okay, that's normal, maybe my skills are still at this level."

(Student I.A/Interview 23/05/2024)

"Actually, (in my opinion) making a mistake in pronunciation is normal, people who learn will definitely make mistakes."

(Student M.S/Interview 29/05/2024)

Peer support also plays a role, with students finding comfort in discussing challenges or practicing together with friends. These strategies influence them to be more relaxed and can also make them get more familiar with the topic.

"I usually tell my friends about my problems that (my speaking skill) still lacks a lot."

(Student C.A/Interview 23/05/2024)

"There are several friends who really strengthened me and convinced me that I can do it."

(Student F.M/Interview 23/05/2024)

"Usually, I chat a lot with close friends. It is not related (to the material), it's just like we're having a casual chat to be more relaxed and not too nervous."

(Student M.S/Interview 29/05/2024)

These strategies highlight the adaptive methods students use to manage speaking anxiety, suggesting the importance of both mental and social approaches in overcoming communication challenges. Students could apply two or more strategies that they can combine to overcome their speaking anxiety so that it can be controlled and does not affect their speaking performance any further.

DISCUSSION

The study's findings highlight how foreign language anxiety affects students' speaking abilities, with factors both observable (e.g., stuttering, trembling) and non-observable (e.g., blanking out, heart palpitations) impacting their performance. This aligns with Horwitz et al. (1986), who identified foreign language anxiety as specific to classroom interactions and intensified by the pressures unique to language learning.

Observable anxiety indicators, such as grammatical errors, mispronunciation, and speech filler use, suggest that the pressure to speak correctly underpins students' anxiety. Stuttering was common, as seen in other EFL (English as a Foreign Language) contexts, indicating that learners' linguistic insecurity often escalates when they must speak publicly. Students also reported anxiety-related physiological symptoms like a racing heartbeat and difficulty focusing, corroborating prior studies by Suleimenova (2013) on the psychophysiological effects of language anxiety .

Factors influencing speaking anxiety fall within Young's (1991) framework, namely, personal and interpersonal issues, beliefs about language learning, classroom interactions, and procedures. Low self-confidence and a fear of errors were significant among respondents, especially due to the comparison they made with more proficient peers. Such comparisons decrease self-esteem, increasing anxiety when they perceive themselves as less competent. This echoes Rajitha's (2020) and Mahmud's (2018) classifications, which emphasize both affective (psychological) and linguistic factors as roots of anxiety .

Students adopted several strategies to manage their anxiety, notably through preparation, relaxation, and positive thinking. Preparation, including rehearsing and previewing materials, was particularly effective in building confidence. This supports Kondo and Ling's (2004) strategy categorization, which includes preparation as a proactive approach to anxiety management. Relaxation methods, like deep breathing and pausing during speech, were reported to help reduce physiological symptoms, while positive thinking (e.g., normalizing mistakes) shifted focus away from perfectionism to improvement. The use of peer support was also evident, as students relied on friends to practice and seek comfort, indicating a social dimension to coping that may be particularly valuable in the classroom setting .

CONCLUSION

The findings illustrate that foreign language speaking anxiety is a multifaceted issue influenced by both internal and external factors, necessitating a combination of individual and instructional interventions. It also underscores the need for supportive classroom practices that alleviate the pressures contributing to student anxiety and highlight the efficacy of targeted strategies that help students build confidence in their speaking abilities.

The study concludes that undergraduate students' speaking anxiety manifests through both observable and non-observable indicators. These symptoms reflect the

intense internal struggle students face when speaking, demonstrating that anxiety not only affects their verbal communication but also their physical and mental states. The study identifies several key factors contributing to students' speaking anxiety, categorized into personal issues, beliefs about language learning, teacher-student interactions, and classroom procedures. Therefore, to manage their speaking anxiety, students adopt various strategies, including preparation, relaxation, positive thinking, peer support and building confidence.

The findings of this study imply that interventions at both individual and institutional levels are essential to address the complex roots of speaking anxiety. Moreover, this study indicates the need to balance structured speaking exercises with flexibility, giving students opportunities to build their confidence gradually. There are also several limitations in this study, especially in the population which may still be too small in quantity to represent the group. So that in the future, research could be carried out on a larger population with more samples in order to obtain more relevant results. The problem discussed in this study is also an issue that may evolve as technology develops. So, further research will always be needed to see whether there are changes in trends in the pattern of speaking anxiety occurring in students.

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