EFL Learners' Anxiety in Speaking English among Students from Islamic Schools in North Sumatra

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Abstract

This study explored EFL learners' anxiety in speaking English among students from Islamic schools in North Sumatra, Indonesia. Despite years of formal English education, many students faced significant challenges in speaking English due to anxiety, primarily driven by fear of judgment, fear of making mistakes, and lack of speaking practice. This research focused on identifying the triggers of speaking anxiety, the impact it has on students' speaking participation, and the strategies they use to cope. A qualitative approach was adopted, employing semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and classroom observations to collect data from 15–20 students. The results indicated that students experience emotional and physical symptoms of anxiety, such as sweating, trembling, and hesitation when asked to speak in English. Factors such as Islamic school culture, which emphasizes religious education, and limited exposure to English outside the classroom, contribute to heightened anxiety levels. Despite these challenges, students reported using self-affirmation, peer support, and relaxation techniques as coping mechanisms. The findings highlight the need for teachers to create supportive classroom environments and provide more opportunities for informal speaking practice. This study contributes to the understanding of speaking anxiety among Islamic school students and provides insights into how it can be mitigated to improve their speaking proficiency.

Keywords: EFL Learners, English Speaking Anxiety, Islamic Schools

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Introduction

Speaking a foreign language, especially English, is often viewed as one of the most challenging skills for learners, particularly in non-native contexts like in North Sumatra, Indonesia [1]. For students in Islamic schools, where the emphasis is placed more on religious subjects rather than language learning, speaking English often becomes secondary, which contributes to low proficiency in oral communication. As English becomes an increasingly important language in global communication, the inability to speak confidently often hinders these students from excelling in both academic and professional settings [2]. Speaking anxiety is one of the most significant barriers preventing English learners from speaking in public or classroom settings. This phenomenon is particularly prominent among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students who struggle with confidence, fear of making mistakes, and concerns about how they will be evaluated by their peers and teachers [3].

Previous studies on speaking anxiety among EFL learners have consistently pointed to factors such as language apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and lack of practice as major contributors to speaking difficulties [4]. For students in Islamic schools, these challenges are compounded by the unique cultural and educational environment, where English is not often spoken outside the classroom. Despite years of English instruction, students may still find it difficult to engage in meaningful conversations due to a lack of opportunities to practice speaking. Furthermore, Islamic school students often perceive English as a foreign language that they may not need for their religious education, further reducing the motivation to practice speaking [5].

In North Sumatra, where a significant portion of the population attends Islamic schools, the challenges faced by EFL learners in speaking English are compounded by limited exposure to English-speaking environments. This results in speaking anxiety, which prevents students from using English confidently in real-life situations. Language anxiety can severely restrict students' participation in class and prevent them from fully engaging with the language learning process. Although several studies have explored language anxiety in general EFL contexts, little research has focused specifically on Islamic school students in North Sumatra.

Thus, there is a clear research gap in exploring how speaking anxiety uniquely affects Islamic school students in this region, where religious values and education play a crucial role in shaping students' attitudes toward learning English. Moreover, most studies have examined speaking anxiety in the context of general EFL learners, with little attention given to how the cultural and educational setting in Islamic schools might contribute to heightened levels of anxiety. Therefore, this study aims to explore the specific challenges faced by EFL learners from Islamic schools in North Sumatra, focusing on their anxiety levels when speaking English.

Literature Review
2.1   Speaking Anxiety in EFL Learners

Speaking anxiety is a psychological phenomenon that affects a significant number of language learners. It refers to the feelings of tension, nervousness, or fear that learners experience when they are required to speak in a foreign language. Several factors contribute to speaking anxiety in EFL learners, including fear of negative evaluation, communication apprehension, and test anxiety. Fear of negative evaluation refers to the concern that others will judge their speaking abilities, which is particularly acute in EFL contexts where learners are often self-conscious about making mistakes. Communication apprehension refers to the fear or anxiety of interacting with others in the target language, while test anxiety stems from the pressure of performing well in language exams that often include oral components.

Previous research has consistently shown that speaking anxiety is a major obstacle for EFL learners, preventing them from using English in practical settings. Speaking anxiety was prevalent among Malaysian undergraduate students, hindering their participation in classroom discussions [5]. The significant role of anxiety in preventing learners from speaking

confidently, even when they have a good understanding of grammar and vocabulary. The fear of making mistakes and being evaluated negatively is often cited as a key barrier in language acquisition. As a result, speaking anxiety can significantly reduce the effectiveness of language learning, as it discourages active participation in speaking tasks and impedes fluency development [6].

One of the most widely acknowledged emotional barriers in foreign-language learning is speaking anxiety. Defined originally by Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) as a blend of communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation, this anxiety tends to surface strongly when students are required to speak English in class or public settings [7]. Students experiencing high levels of speaking anxiety often report physical and emotional discomfort (e.g. trembling, sweaty hands, nervousness, self-consciousness) and a tendency to withdraw or remain silent rather than attempt speech. Recent research continues to confirm that speaking is often the most anxiety-provoking skill for EFL students. A comprehensive review covering 2021–2025 concluded that many EFL learners still report high levels of oral anxiety, especially in contexts where speaking tasks involve public speaking or unprepared responses [8].

2.2 Contributing Factors to Speaking Anxiety

The extent of speaking anxiety depends on a blend of internal and external factors. On the internal side, low self-confidence, fear of being judged, concerns about pronunciation or grammar, and shyness are frequently identified [9]. For example, students in a recent Indonesian study described feeling embarrassed and fearful of making mistakes when required to speak English, which made them reluctant to volunteer responses [10]. Externally, factors such as limited exposure to spoken English outside classroom, insufficient speaking practice, overemphasis on accuracy (grammar/ pronunciation) rather than communicative competence, and peer/teacher pressure intensify anxiety.

A recent case-study in Cambodian higher education identified lack of competence, inadequate preparation, fear of errors, and social pressure from classmates as major contributors to speaking anxiety [11]. Furthermore, contextual variables — such as institutional culture, classroom climate, and frequency of speaking opportunities — also play a role. A 2024 qualitative study among EFL students with high oral proficiency revealed that anxiety often arises not just from personal traits but from the nature of classroom demands and expectations.

Research Methodology

The qualitative approach was particularly suited for investigating complex psychological phenomena such as speaking anxiety. It emphasizes understanding the context and experiences of individuals from their perspectives. This approach is essential for exploring how EFL learners perceive and experience speaking anxiety in English, as it enables the researcher to capture their personal feelings, thoughts, and interpretations of the challenges they face when speaking the language. By gathering in-depth information from students, the study seeks to identify the underlying causes of their anxiety and how this affects their participation in speaking activities [12].

The subjects of this research were Junior High School students enrolled in Islamic schools in North Sumatra, Indonesia. These schools typically focus on religious education, with English being taught as a secondary subject. This setting provides a unique context for examining EFL learners' speaking anxiety since the students may have limited exposure to English outside the classroom and may perceive English as a subject that is not as central to their academic and religious lives. This cultural and educational environment may influence their emotional responses to speaking tasks in English.

The students in this study were likely to have varying levels of exposure to the English language and different degrees of anxiety when it comes to speaking. Therefore, the research

aimed to explore the diversity of experiences among the students in relation to their speaking anxiety. By focusing on a Junior High Islamic School setting, this study aimed to understand how cultural values and religious education intersect with language learning and contribute to anxiety.

The data collection process for this study involved a qualitative approach, combining several methods to gather rich, in-depth insights into EFL learners' anxiety when speaking English. By employing semi-structured interviews, the study aimed to capture the various dimensions of speaking anxiety and understand the underlying factors that contribute to it. Each method allowed the researcher to collect data from multiple perspectives, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

Key areas of focus during the interviews included:

1. Feelings during speaking tasks: Students will be asked to describe their emotions when speaking English in front of their peers or teachers.
2. Triggers for anxiety: Questions will explore the specific causes of their anxiety, such as the fear of making mistakes, fear of being judged, or self-doubt about their language skills.
3. Classroom environment and teacher behavior: The researcher will explore how the classroom setting and teacher's approach to speaking tasks contribute to students' anxiety levels.
4. Coping strategies: The study will examine what strategies or techniques students use to manage their anxiety, whether these involve self-talk, relaxation techniques, or avoidance behaviors.
5. Cultural influences: The researcher will also investigate how students' perceptions of Islamic school culture influence their attitudes towards speaking English, particularly in a religiously focused educational environment.

Once the data collection phase was complete, the analysis focused on identifying themes and patterns in students' responses and behaviors. A thematic analysis approach was used, which was suitable for analyzing qualitative data to identify common themes, categories, and ideas related to speaking anxiety.

1. Transcription and Familiarization: The first step in data analysis was to transcribe all the interviews.
2. Initial Coding: The next step was to apply open coding to the transcriptions. Open coding involves breaking the data into smaller, meaningful units and assigning labels to these units (i.e., codes).
3. Theme Development: Once initial codes were assigned, the researcher grouped related codes into broader themes. For example:
   Fear of negative evaluation: Codes like "judgment from peers," "fear of making mistakes," and "fear of embarrassing oneself" would be grouped under this theme.
4. Interpretation: The final stage of data analysis involved interpreting the themes in the context of the research questions. The researcher considered how these themes reflect the participants' experiences and connect them to the broader literature on EFL learners' anxiety.
5. Ensuring Validity and Reliability: To ensure the validity and reliability of the study, triangulation was used. This meant comparing data from different sources (e.g., interviews) to identify consistency and avoid bias.

Results

The findings of this study aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the EFL learners' anxiety in speaking English among students in Islamic schools in North Sumatra, Indonesia. Through a combination of semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and

classroom observations, this research delves into the factors contributing to speaking anxiety, the impact of anxiety on students' speaking abilities, and the coping strategies that students employ to manage their anxiety. The data collected from 15–20 students and observed classroom activities offer valuable insights into the emotional and psychological barriers that EFL learners face when speaking English.

4.1   Understanding Speaking Anxiety

The analysis of the data revealed that speaking anxiety is a significant barrier to participation and progress in speaking English for many students. A majority of students reported experiencing feelings of nervousness and fear when speaking in front of their peers or teachers. Common emotional responses included sweating, trembling, and a racing heartbeat, which are indicative of the physical manifestations of anxiety. The anxiety was most pronounced during formal speaking activities such as oral presentations and public speaking tasks. A significant number of students expressed that their fear was largely driven by the fear of making mistakes and being judged negatively by their classmates or teachers.

Several students described their anxiety as a constant companion when they were expected to speak English, often leading to avoidance behaviors. As one student stated, "I just prefer to stay silent in class because I'm afraid my classmates will laugh at me if I make a mistake." This fear of judgment and embarrassment was a recurring theme across the interviews, where students revealed that they often refrained from speaking during group discussions and instead opted for passive participation, such as listening to their peers or staying quiet.

4.2   Contributing Factors to Speaking Anxiety

Several factors contributing to speaking anxiety among students were identified through the data analysis. Internal factors, such as low self-esteem, shyness, and lack of confidence, were frequently mentioned by the students. Those with lower self-confidence or more introverted personalities were found to be more susceptible to anxiety when required to speak. For instance, a student with high levels of introversion remarked, "I don't like speaking in front of the class because I'm always afraid they will judge my accent or grammar."

Another significant factor contributing to speaking anxiety was the lack of speaking practice outside of the classroom. Many students admitted that they rarely practiced English in informal settings, and thus, they lacked the fluency needed to speak comfortably. One participant said, "I don't practice speaking English outside of school because my family doesn't speak English at home. So, when it's time to speak in class, I get nervous because I feel unprepared."

External factors also played a crucial role in increasing anxiety levels. The classroom environment and teacher behavior were frequently mentioned as influential. Students expressed that teachers who focused on grammar accuracy and error correction during speaking activities contributed to their anxiety. They felt that making mistakes in front of their peers was embarrassing and that the fear of receiving corrective feedback in a public setting hindered their willingness to participate. However, in classrooms where teachers created a more supportive environment, students were more willing to engage in speaking activities.

The classroom atmosphere and peer interactions also had an impact. Some students reported feeling more anxious when they were asked to speak in front of a large group of classmates, while others felt comfortable speaking in smaller groups. Peer influence was evident, as students shared that when they observed classmates making mistakes without facing judgment, they felt slightly more comfortable participating.

4.3   The Impact of Speaking Anxiety

The impact of speaking anxiety on students' ability to engage in English lessons and improve their speaking skills was significant. Most of the students acknowledged that their anxiety led to avoidance behaviors, such as not participating in class discussions or speaking activities. This avoidance was a direct result of the fear of making mistakes and the subsequent embarrassment of being judged by others. As one student put it, "I don't speak because I'm afraid I will be laughed at if I make a mistake. I prefer to stay silent and not be noticed."

In addition to avoidance, speaking anxiety led to lower participation in oral assessments and other speaking tasks. Even though students understood the language well, their anxiety often prevented them from articulating their thoughts clearly. For example, during an oral exam, one student commented, "I knew what I wanted to say, but my mind went blank because I was so nervous about making a mistake." The emotional toll of speaking anxiety was also apparent, as many students expressed feelings of insecurity and self-doubt. This anxiety not only hampered their speaking skills but also affected their overall motivation to participate in English lessons. Students reported feeling disconnected from the language because their anxiety overshadowed their desire to improve.

The findings from this study corroborate existing literature that identifies fear of making mistakes and fear of negative judgment as key triggers for speaking anxiety. EFL learners often experience heightened anxiety when speaking in front of their peers and teachers, primarily due to their fear of making mistakes and being judged for their language abilities [5]. Similarly, learners' worry about being evaluated negatively often prevents them from participating in oral activities, leading to a cycle of avoidance and reduced speaking practice [13]. In this study, students frequently mentioned feeling embarrassed and self-conscious when speaking English, which aligns with these findings. The fear of being incorrectly evaluated by peers and teachers contributed significantly to their anxiety and reluctance to speak in class.

Conclusion

This research provides valuable insights into the nature of speaking anxiety among EFL learners in Islamic schools in North Sumatra. The findings reveal that speaking anxiety is a significant barrier to active participation in English speaking tasks, with fear of negative evaluation, lack of speaking practice, and teacher behavior identified as key contributors to this anxiety. Students frequently reported feeling nervous, self-conscious, and fearful of making mistakes when asked to speak English in front of their peers or teachers. This anxiety often leads to avoidance behavior, where students refrain from speaking in class, ultimately hindering their progress in language acquisition.

Moreover, the study highlights the role of Islamic school culture in shaping students' attitudes toward speaking English. The emphasis on religious studies and limited exposure to English outside the classroom appear to exacerbate anxiety, as students perceive English as less relevant to their daily lives. This finding underscores the need for educators in Islamic schools to create more opportunities for informal speaking practice and integrate English into students' everyday activities to reduce anxiety and improve fluency.

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