# Exploring the Causes and Factors of Speaking Anxiety of EFL Students: A Systematic Literature Review

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## Abstract

Speaking is considered as the most challenging among the four English language skills. Anxiety comes when foreign language students speak in front of the class. This review examines how speaking anxiety affects the EFL students in their classes by analyzing 105 peer-reviewed articles published between 2021 and 2025 from the ERIC, JSTOR, and SAGE Journals databases. The findings revealed that EFL students' level of speaking anxiety is high. The results mentioned that the causes of speaking anxiety among EFL students were classified into two: physical (uncomfortable environment in the classroom and unsuitable class type/size) and emotional (peer pressure/social-image anxiety, teachers' correction and feedback, and lack of fluency in English) causes and the factors of speaking anxiety among EFL students were also classified into two: internal (fear of making mistakes, lack of self-confidence, lack of intrinsic motivation, shyness, nervousness, and fear of losing face) and external (lack of/limited English vocabulary, lack of English oral proficiency, lack of practice, and inaccurate use of grammar) factors. To address the causes and factors of students' speaking anxiety, teachers are encouraged to revisit the syllabus, learning materials and assessments, teaching strategies and among others. Every institution should also focus on strengthening teachers' training, improving speaking skills, and enhancing course quality, while students are inclined to build confidence and practice speaking English language inside and outside of school premises. In conclusion, speaking anxiety plays an essential role in English as a Foreign Language student, its reduction depends on careful planning, strong support systems, and flexible teaching strategies.

Keywords: English as a Foreign Language Students, Speaking Anxiety

## Introduction

One of the languages that is widely used and spoken by many people around the world is the English language (Fauzi & Asi, 2023) and is considered as the lingua franca (Heinzmann et al., 2024). Learning English as a foreign language begins in kindergarten and continues up to the university level in countries such as Indonesia, Japan, China, Turkey and among others. Since English language is considered as a learned skill, students

must become proficient and required to master the English language skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Among those English language skills, speaking is the most crucial and significant skill that should be learned and acquired by the students thoroughly (Fauzi & Asi, 2023).

In the study of Septiawan et al. (2024), the most fundamental language skill to master is speaking but it is considered as the most challenging among the four English language skills (Liu, 2018; Yahia & Egbert, 2023). Speaking is a language skill that focusses on a person's ability to produce and generate words then use it verbally to communicate and interact with one another. The ability of the students to utilize the language features to communicate and interact fluently and accurately is a good indicator of how well their level of English-speaking skills. However, some students found it tough in mastering this language skill because of some aspects. They usually experienced and encountered a variety of challenges such as difficulties in grammar rules, vocabulary (words and phrases), pronunciation, and fluency (Fauzi, 2021). As a result, speaking becomes a challenging and difficult task for foreign language students.

In accordance with the overall English competencies, speaking skill might seem to be the most significant and crucial skill for effective and successful communication, and it should be encouraged and strengthened to achieve success in communication (Boonkit, 2015). However, many students find it challenging and difficult to become proficient and fluent in speaking the English language, most especially in a foreign language classroom (Bhattarachaiyakorn & Phettakua, 2023). This clearly demonstrates that English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students find speaking the English language uncomfortable, most especially when they are required to speak it inside the classroom. It might be claimed that speaking anxiety is one of the many concerns that students must address and deal with in order to master English language and other foreign languages (Bhattarachaiyakorn & Phettakua, 2023).

Arribathi et al. (2021) claims that anxiety may lead to disruptions in the physiological and psychological aspects of a person. Physiological symptoms may include headaches, cold fingers and sweats, high heart rate, diminished appetite, sleep difficulties, and tightness in the chest. On the other hand, among the psychological symptoms were restlessness, fear, a desire to escape reality, and having trouble of concentration. Moreover, anxiety is a concern that is unclear and lacks an identified object (Ramli et al., 2024). Putri (2020) states that anxiety is a result of both being concerned about intangible problems and lacks courage and confidence. It has long been thought and believed that anxiety hinders learning and acquiring a foreign language, especially when it comes to speaking it. When learning and acquiring the English language, anxiety is considered as one of the challenges to experienced and overcome. The study of Ramli et al. (2024) concluded that students in an English-speaking classroom might lead to less focused and confident because of their emotions and they tend to be more likely to make errors and mistakes when they are

anxious and frightened. Besides, the more errors and mistakes students make, the more frightened and intimidated they get, and the less likely they are to speak clearly and effectively.

Anxiety can be greatly increased by several factors, including insufficient assistance from teachers, excessive corrections, a negative evaluation of students' performance, a high-class size that prevents one-on-one attention, too much teacher-centered classroom, a focus on exam-related learning, and among others.

In this context, the research study will examine the levels, causes, and factors of speaking anxiety among EFL students based on the information/input presented in the literature review. Through an analysis of existing research, this study aims to offer recommendations for improving the classroom set up, syllabi, and teaching strategies of EFL teachers. The study will address the following questions:

1. What is the level of speaking anxiety among EFL students when speaking the English language?
2. What are the causes of speaking anxiety among EFL students when speaking the English language?
3. What are the dominant factors of speaking anxiety among EFL students when speaking the English language?

**Method**

The researcher conducted a systematic literature review to explore the levels, causes, and factors of speaking anxiety of EFL students. Yıldız (2022) states that SLR provides a scientific methodology that explains in detail how the research process proceeds. SLR's main purpose is to determine and discover the research process of a study focusing on speaking anxiety. In this case, SLR seeks to outline specific criteria and standards, including formulating a search protocol, identifying the research topic, organizing the research procedure, choosing and selecting studies, and extracting and synthesizing data (Kraus et al., 2020). One notable and significant aspect of SLR is its approach or methodology, which collects and gathers findings from an extensive number of studies related to the topic of the research study, critically evaluates them, synthesizes the findings, and presents them in a systematic way (Pati & Lorusso, 2017). In order to ensure the research study's scientific and methodological accuracy, this approach is significant and crucial. Following Okoli's (2015) guidelines, the review systematically identified, assessed, and synthesized relevant studies using specific criteria.

The researcher used the keyword "Speaking Anxiety" to locate relevant journal articles in the Educational Research Information Center (ERIC), JSTOR, and Sage Journals databases. These databases were prioritized for their credibility and comprehensive resources relevant to the topic, ensuring that all included journals are rigorously peer-

reviewed. However, the initial search in ERIC with the keyword "Speaking Anxiety" returned a limited number of directly relevant articles. To address this, a secondary search with the keyword "Causes and Factors of Speaking Anxiety of EFL Students" was conducted yielding additional articles. Despite these efforts, the pool articles remained insufficient for a systematic review.

In the screening process, the researcher considered three (3) criteria for selecting journal articles: (a) journal publication type, (b) publication date/time frame, and (c) descriptors (Table 1). Specifically, only peer-reviewed journal articles with full text, published within the last five (5) years (2021-2025), were included. The search focused on studies related to Speaking Anxiety.

The researcher employed thematic analysis to examine 105 journal articles. A thematic analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke (2006), was used to explore the Levels, Causes, and Factors of Speaking Anxiety of EFL Students. The analysis followed the steps outlined by Braun and Clarke: (a) familiarization with the data, (b) generating initial codes, (c) searching for themes, (d) reviewing themes, (e) defining and naming themes, and (f) producing the report. In this study, Microsoft Excel was used to plot information about Speaking Anxiety, particularly the key findings, conclusions, and recommendations. Based on the research questions, the data were coded and thematized by combining similar codes. These themes were then written up and discussed in the paper.

## Results and Discussion
## Level of Speaking Anxiety of EFL Students

English as a Foreign Language students experienced high levels of speaking anxiety (Mamun, 2021; Zrekat & Sohbani, 2022; Bhattarachaiyakorn & Phettakua, 2023; Faqihi, 2023; Fauzi & Asi, 2023; Septiawan et al., 2024; Tiang-uan & Oulis, 2024).

## Causes of Speaking Anxiety of EFL Students
## Physical Causes

An uncomfortable environment in the classroom is one of the physical causes of speaking anxiety among EFL students (Rashid, et al., 2020; Malik et al., 2021; Mamun, 2021; Inada, 2022; Zrekat & Sohbani, 2022; Faqihi, 2023; Zakiya et al., 2024). Inada (2022) found out that EFL students need a comfortable classroom environment. In order to reduce students' worry and establish a comfortable environment in the English language classroom, teachers must recognize and comprehend the causes of their speaking anxiety (Faqihi, 2023). To create a comfortable environment in the classroom, teachers should speak in clear English when teaching complex concepts and grammar rules to the students. Students should be free to choose the topics they want to discuss and explore and if needed,

utilize bilingual dictionaries in addition to a few L1 terms. Ansari (2015) asserts that teachers' understanding of their students' FLSA is crucial because it enables them to be more considerate of their classroom behavior, which fosters a positive learning atmosphere and inspires students to be more involved and less nervous. Additionally, it helps teachers identify the factors that make their students anxious so they may address those things and lessen anxiety in the classroom. In contrast, although many Japanese EFL communication classrooms have implemented the English-only policy, which severely restricts the use of the native language, in an attempt to increase students' competency in the target language, the policy is one of the primary reasons of concern in these programs or classes (Rivers, 2011).

In the study of Inada (2022), unsuitable class type/size is another cause of speaking anxiety of EFL students Malik et al., 2021; Mamun, 2021; Inada, 2022; Zrekat & Sohbani, 2022; Mai et al., 2024). In the absence of students with high speaking skills, low-level students often start a conversations in their L1 rather than L2 (English), which makes group dynamics essential and crucial in all classrooms. According to the study of Mai et al. (2024), students did not view it as a deterrent, perhaps because they were used to high school, but they did find it difficult to plan and manage speaking exercises. As supported by the study of Celce-Murcia (2001), large classes are standard in several Asian countries and pose multiple challenges, from classroom management issues to limiting interactional opportunities for students.

### Emotional Causes

Peer pressure/social-image anxiety is one of the emotional causes of speaking anxiety among EFL students (Rashid, et al., 2020; Malik et al., 2021; Mamun, 2021; Inada, 2022; Zrekat & Sohbani, 2022; Mai et al., 2024; Tiang-uan & Oulis, 2024). Because poor English speakers feel inferior and fear of being ridiculed and humiliated, fluent English speakers should pay more attention and teach less proficient speakers appropriate English terms rather than critizing their usage of the L1(Inada, 2022). Despite a general preference for group-based learning, some students felt excluded from these groups, primarily because of the dominating presence of particular classmates. These feelings are consistent with the findings of Vogel et al. (2014), which highlight the significant impact of social comparison on students' perceptions of themselves. Additionally, the study of Mai et al. (2024) delineated the students' considerable anxiety surrounding potential mistakes in front of their peers. This was resonated in Liew's (2009) assertion that language students often refrain from participation due to the trepidation of making errors.

Teachers' correction and feedback is another emotional cause of EFL students' speaking anxiety (Malik et al., 2021; Nugroho et al., 2021; Yaniafari & Rihardini, 2021; Zrekat & Sohbani, 2022; Pruksaseat, 2022; Khouni et al., 2022; Faqihi, 2023; Mai et al.,

2024; Tiang-uan & Oulis, 2024). Many students are afraid of being taken aback by the teachers' corrections, which makes them reluctant to speak up or participate in the class discussion. Teachers' feedback and the timing of feedback are very crucial and significant. Also, students are anxious because they are afraid of being rude or corrected for every error or mistake, they commit (Khouni et al., 2022).

Numerous previous studies have revealed that one of the causes for speaking anxiety is a lack of fluency in English (Malik et al., 2021; Zrekat & Sohbani, 2022; Khouni et al., 2022; Faqihi, 2023; Mai et al., 2024). According to teachers, students struggle not just with speaking but also with the four language skills and three competencies (pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar). Sufficient grammar and vocabulary are necessary for effective communication in order to convey one's thoughts as well as feelings. Thus, anxiety and communication issues are frequently caused by a limited or lack of vocabulary (Khouni et al., 2022). Therefore, it is essential that teachers consider ways to help children improve their vocabulary and receptive skills.

## Dominant Factors of Speaking Anxiety of EFL Students
### Internal Factors

Fear of making mistakes is one of the factors that increased the unwillingness and hesitancy of students to use and speak English in the classroom (Liu & Hong, 2021; Malik et al., 2021; Zrekat & Sohbani, 2022; Balakrishnan et al., 2022; Khouni et al., 2022; Zrekat & Sohbani, 2022; Faqihi, 2023; Ramli et al., 2024; Zakiya et al., 2024; Septiawan et al., 2024; Mahdi, 2024). It is because students worry about their teacher's evaluation and the unfavorable/negative reactions of their peers in the classroom. Al Nakhlah (2014) believed that fear is linked and associated with the concerns of criticism and unfavorable and negative evaluation towards the students' performance (Khouni et al., 2022; Fauzi & Asi, 2023; Bhattarachaiyakorn & Phettakua, 2023). Additionally, this is significantly affected by the students' anxiety about receiving criticism from the teacher or ridicule from their peers or classmates fear of being laughed at by other students or being criticized by the teacher (Liu & Hong, 2021; Balakrishnan et al., 2022; Khouni et al., 2022).

Lack of self-confidence is identified by both the teachers and the students as one of the factors preventing students from participating (Kalra & Siribud, 2020; Suryani et al., 2020; Gürbüz & Cabaroğlu, 2021; Mamun, 2021; Malik et al., 2021; Khouni et al., 2022; Fauzi & Asi, 2023; Ramli et al., 2024; Mai et al., 2024; Mahdi, 2024; Zakiya et al., 2024; Septiawan et al., 2024; Tiang-uan & Oulis, 2024). Li and Liu's (2011) findings, which suggest a strong correlation between students' self-confidence and their readiness to participate in class discussions. Notably, as Huong (2010) points out, the variation in skill levels in many Vietnamese classrooms might make these confidence problems worse, particularly for those who believe their skills fall short of those of their peers. In addition

to their negative comparison with other students, low self-esteem is caused by low motivation and a negative attitude toward the English language (Mamun et al., 2018). This worsens anxiety. As a result, they are unwilling to participate in classroom discussions or offer to respond to teachers' questions. Cooperative or collaborative learning activities are not commonly utilized in Bangladeshi classrooms, which hinders students' ability to speak or communicate. Furthermore, the students rarely have to use the English language outside of the classroom. These situational factors make it possible for individuals to experience severe speaking anxiety.

Lack of intrinsic motivation is identified by both the teachers and the students as one of the factors preventing students from actively participating in class discussions (Gürbüz & Cabaroğlu, 2021; Zrekat & Sohbani, 2022; Mai et al., 2024; Ramli et al., 2024; Poolperm & Boonmoh, 2024). This is supported by Richard's (2022) claim that a key factor in students' zeal, tenacity, and bravery during the learning process is motivation. Passivity, procrastination, and avoidance actions are some of the consequences of low motivation, as highlighted, can seriously impair students' ability to participate actively in class discussion, according to Brewster and Fager (2000) and Goslin (2004). Moreover, according to Leong & Ahmadi (2017), students' willingness to study will rise as a result of improved motivation in all forms. Every teacher should focus on increasing their student's motivation to learn since numerous studies have shown that motivated students are more likely to stick with their studies and receive better grades than less motivated ones. Thus, according to the earlier viewpoint, students' lack of motivation affected their capacity to learn English.

Shyness is one of the internal characteristics that affected students' speaking anxiety levels (Malik et al., 2021; Khouni et al., 2022; Zrekat & Sohbani, 2022; Nadila et al., 2022; Bhattarachaiyakorn & Phettakua, 2023; Maranatha & Sengkey, 2023; Ramli et al., 2024; Mahdi, 2024). Many students experience the emotional state of shyness when they are required to speak in front of the class in English. This implies that shyness could contribute to students' struggles in class, especially when it comes to speaking lessons. Gebhard (2000) asserts that in order to help students, it is also necessary to pay attention to this issue in delivering the best speaking performance in the classroom. Speaking in front of a group is one of the most prevalent phobias among students, according to Hidayati (2016), and shyness makes their brains go blank or makes them forget what to say. This assertion is supported by the study's findings, which show that most students do not produce their best speaking performances. Additionally, according to Zrekat & Sohbani (2022), students unquestionably agreed that their lack of fluency in speaking English is primarily a result of the linguistic and knowledge gap between those who are shy and ashamed during the speaking process.

Nervousness can create the variations in students' English-speaking anxiety levels (Loan, 2022; Septiawan et al., 2024; Poolperm & Boonmoh, 2024). Inside the classroom, students are being directly observed and monitored by their classmates and teachers while

speaking the English language; therefore, their nervousness may increase if they are nervous. They feel more anxious, tense, and under pressure because they are frightened and nervous of making mistakes or errors when speaking in front of other people, which demonstrates in their body language, facial expressions, and even their speaking abilities (Poolperm & Boonmoh, 2024). According to Loan's (2022) findings, the primary source of speaking anxiety was mostly the expectation of speaking in front of the class in English. This helps to explain the nervousness that students feel when teachers specifically call on them to participate, verbally.

Fear of losing face is one of the internal factors that influenced students' anxiety levels when speaking (Liu & Hong, 2021; Khouni et al., 2022; Zrekat & Sohbani, 2022; Pruksaseat, 2022; Septiawan et al., 2024). The concept of face preservation and the social repercussions of maybe embarrassing oneself or others are at the core of the conversation, discouraging class participation. Many East Asian societies have strong roots in this idea. According to Li and Liu (2011), the fear of looking foolish might show up as a hesitancy to join in conversations or ask questions. For pupils from these backgrounds, the classroom turns into a place where possible embarrassment must be avoided, even at the expense of individual education.

## External Factors

Lack of/limited English vocabulary is considered as the major factor deterring students from participating fully in the class (Liu & Hong, 2021; Malik et al., 2021; Ramli & Aladdin, 2021; Zrekat & Sohbani, 2022; Bhattarachaiyakorn & Phettakua, 2023; Septiawan et al., 2024; Mahdi, 2024). Sufficient vocabulary is necessary for effective communication in order to convey one's ideas and emotions. As a result, anxiety and communication issues are frequently caused by a restricted or nonexistent vocabulary (Khouni et al., 2022). Additionally, students are unable to communicate their own ideas or understand others if they are lacking in adequate vocabulary (Septiawan et al., 2024). According to several studies, it can be difficult to communicate in English without using proper grammar and vocabulary. It implies that students are able to visualize themselves speaking a foreign language; even if they only know a few essential words and expressions, they can nevertheless hold a conversation (Septiawan et al., 2024, Mahdi, 2024).

One common cause of English-speaking anxiety is a lack of oral proficiency in the English language, which includes intonation, emphasis, and pronunciation skills (Liu & Hong, 2021; Malik et al., 2021; Zrekat & Sohbani, 2022; Bhattarachaiyakorn & Phettakua, 2023; Mai et al., 2024; Mahdi, 2024; Septiawan et al., 2024). Language anxiety in the classroom was noted by Maher and King (2023), demonstrating how students' learning chances are hindered by their inadequate spoken fluency or proficiency. Sahatsathatsana (2017) found that poor pronunciation makes it hard and difficult for speakers to

communicate since listeners will not be able to fully understand and grasp what they are trying to say. Additionally, students' production of sounds that have both segmental and suprasegmental elements is referred to as pronunciation. Some English and other languages produce some sounds differently, which could be the cause of speaking anxiety in students by preventing them from speaking English language clearly and confidently (Bhattarachaiyakorn & Phettakua, 2023). Furthermore, this is in line with the studies of Hamouda (2012) and Lubazid (2012), who both highlighted the significance of pronunciation in influencing students' confidence and participation. According to Torres-Marin et al. (2022) and Thaher (2005), students' contributions in class may be further limited by their hesitancy to utilize specific terms because they fear mispronouncing them. Lack of practice is another common factor for speaking anxiety of EFL students (Khouni et al., 2022; Zrekat & Sohbani, 2022; Tiang-uan & Oulis, 2024) since opportunities to practice and use English both inside and outside of the classroom are limited. Students cannot develop their speaking skills unless they engage in sufficient English language exercise. Moreover, students strongly agreed that the heavy focus on art classes which depend largely on memorization make them not really practice speaking the English language, followed by too many students in the classroom, which reduces the chance of practicing speaking (Zrekat & Sohbani, 2022). Due to the nature of the assignments, the methods used by the teachers, and the overly demanding curriculum, students did not have a sufficient chance to practice speaking. Although they are driven to improve their English, students complain about the variety of homework and assignments they must complete, as the curriculum usually prioritizes quantity above quality. Therefore, teachers are rushing through the syllabus while students are working just to keep up, receive the grades for the ongoing assessment, and stay out of trouble or embarrassment from the teacher (Khouni et al., 2022).

Inaccurate use of grammar is a frequent factor to students' speaking anxiety in the classroom (Liu & Hong, 2021; Malik et al., 2021; Zrekat & Sohbani, 2022; Bhattarachaiyakorn & Phettakua, 2023; Maranatha & Sengkey, 2023; Mahdi, 2024; Septiawan et al., 2024; Tiang-uan & Oulis, 2024). The study of Zrekat & Sohbani (2022) found out that traditional pedagogy placed a strong emphasis on grammar and held that mastering the rules was necessary to be proficient in a language, contributed to students' false beliefs. Additionally, the underlying cause of a grammar problem that keeps students from speaking English in class or in everyday conversations may be that they place a greater emphasis on passing the test than using their grammatical knowledge to generate the target language (Bhattarachaiyakorn & Phettakua, 2023).

**Conclusion**

The study focuses on the levels, causes, and factors of speaking anxiety of EFL

students. The findings revealed that the level of speaking anxiety among EFL students was high. Speaking anxiety can hinder students' speaking performance and engagement in the classroom. The causes of speaking anxiety among EFL students were classified into two: physical (uncomfortable environment in the classroom and unsuitable class type/size) and emotional (peer pressure/social-image anxiety, teachers' correction and feedback, and lack of fluency in English) causes. Additionally, the factors of speaking anxiety among EFL students were classified into two: internal (fear of making mistakes, lack of self-confidence, lack of intrinsic motivation, shyness, nervousness, and fear of losing face) and external (lack of/limited English vocabulary, lack of English oral proficiency, lack of practice, and inaccurate use of grammar) factors. These causes together with the factors can create a challenging environment for EFL students to develop their speaking skills without experiencing anxiety. Understanding these factors is crucial for teachers to create more supportive and effective learning environments that can help mitigate speaking anxiety and foster greater communicative competence among EFL students.

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