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EFL Students' Experiences With Anxiety In Learning English Speaking: A Narrative Inquiry

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Abstract

Speaking anxiety in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning can significantly impact students' academic performance. This study explores EFL students' experiences with different types of speaking anxiety and the strategies they use to manage it. Using a qualitative descriptive approach through narrative inquiry, data were collected from two students at SMA Nurul Jadid, selected through purposive sampling. Thematic analysis was conducted following the Miles and Huberman model. The study identified six key themes: anxiety due to lack of experience and knowledge, anxiety during live evaluations, context-based anxiety (online vs. offline), anxiety under limited preparation, shifting perspectives on anxiety, and coping strategies. Common strategies included seeking support from trusted individuals and intensive practice. The level of anxiety varied among individuals, with distinctions between general and situational anxiety. The findings support the Foreign Language Anxiety framework by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope, particularly the components of communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. However, a new insight emerged: participants reported lower anxiety in online settings compared to offline ones, suggesting that anxiety is influenced by environmental factors, not solely by personality traits. This highlights the dynamic nature of speaking anxiety in EFL contexts.

Keywords: Anxiety, EFL Students, English speaking.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, English has consolidated its position as a global lingua franca and has become essential across sectors such as education, business, and international communication. This global demand has pushed educational institutions to emphasize the development of students' communicative competence, particularly in speaking. However, despite significant investments in English language instruction, many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students continue to experience speaking anxiety, which affects their ability to engage meaningfully in oral communication tasks.

Speaking anxiety presents an ongoing challenge, especially in contexts where learners have limited exposure to authentic English use outside the classroom. In Indonesia, for example, students often face psychological barriers, limited oral practice, and cultural influences such as fear of negative judgment and high respect for authority, which may intensify language anxiety (Li & Dewaele, 2020). A study by Ajiza (2023) found that 68.1% of university students in Indonesia reported experiencing high speaking anxiety due to both internal and external factors, underscoring the significance of this issue.

The theoretical framework of this research draws upon the Foreign Language Anxiety model proposed by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), which identifies three core components of anxiety: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. These components have been widely validated in various EFL contexts and remain relevant in understanding the psychological dimensions of language learning (Shirvan et al., 2020). In line with Dewey's experiential learning theory, learning is most effective when students reflect on personal experiences, especially emotional and cognitive responses (King & Ng, 2018). This perspective suggests that examining students' lived experiences with anxiety can offer deeper insights into how they manage and overcome it.

Previous research has largely focused on quantitative measures of anxiety, revealing its prevalence and effects on language learning (Ajiza, 2023; Shirvan et al., 2020). However, limited studies have explored the personal narratives behind these statistics. Qualitative inquiry, particularly narrative inquiry, is essential to understand how students make sense of their experiences and develop coping mechanisms (King & Ng, 2018).

This study aims to explore the lived experiences of two Indonesian EFL students who initially struggled with high speaking anxiety but eventually transformed their fear into success through participation in public speaking competitions. By focusing on their personal stories, this research seeks to illuminate the complex interplay between anxiety, identity, emotional resilience, and language learning. The study hypothesizes that students' reflective and experiential engagement with their anxiety contributes significantly to the development of communicative competence, especially in socio- culturally supportive environment.

2. METHOD

3.1. Research Design

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design using a narrative inquiry approach. The qualitative method was selected to explore the in-depth experiences, perspectives, and coping strategies of EFL students regarding speaking anxiety. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) emphasize, narrative inquiry allows researchers to understand human experience as it is lived and told through stories. This design aligns with the research objective, which is to uncover the subjective emotional and psychological dimensions of language anxiety as experienced by students in real-life learning contexts.

3.2. Data and Data Sources

The data in this study consist of narratives derived from semi-structured in-depth interviews with two EFL students from SMA Nurul Jadid. The participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique, based on specific criteria such as their level of involvement in English language activities and willingness to share their personal experiences. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms Rara and Dina were used. Rara had extensive experience with English through self-directed learning and extracurricular participation, while Dina had more limited exposure and engagement. These diverse backgrounds provided contrasting yet complementary perspectives on the phenomenon of speaking anxiety.

3.3. Data Collection

Data were collected primarily through semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted face-to-face. This method was chosen to allow flexibility in exploring emergent topics while still addressing the main research questions. The researcher used interview guidelines developed from a literature review and piloted them before actual implementation to ensure clarity and relevance. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to preserve the authenticity of participants' voices. Throughout the process, the researcher also took field notes to capture non-verbal cues and contextual factors, enhancing the richness and depth of the data.

3.4. Data Analysis

The data analysis followed the Miles and Huberman (1994) model, which consists of three interrelated steps: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Data reduction involved transcribing the interviews and coding significant units of meaning using both deductive (theory-based) and inductive (emergent) coding techniques. Data display was conducted through thematic matrices and narrative summaries to identify patterns, relationships, and themes. Conclusion drawing and verification were carried out by interpreting the findings in relation to relevant theoretical frameworks (such as Horwitz et al.'s FLA model) and validating them through triangulation and member checking. The entire process aimed to ensure credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, in accordance with trustworthiness standards in qualitative research.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Findings

This study explored the experiences of English language anxiety among two EFL students at SMA Nurul Jadid, referred to as Rara and Dina, using a narrative inquiry approach. Thematic analysis identified six key themes: (1) anxiety due to lack of experience and knowledge, (2) anxiety in live evaluation situations, (3) context-based anxiety (online vs offline), (4) anxiety under limited preparation, (5) changing perspectives on anxiety, and (6) coping strategies.

Rara experienced anxiety when selected for a speech competition early in her pesantren experience. Her lack of familiarity with the environment and limited exposure to public speaking created intense insecurity. She compared herself to more experienced seniors, felt overwhelmed, and physically reacted with cold sweats and racing heartbeat.

This theme appeared clearly in Rara's account of facing a live Q&A session. She feared both not understanding questions and not being understood. Physical symptoms like nausea and inability to focus were evident. Dina's anxiety during oral exams, while milder, included worries about grammar and a softer voice. Both participants reported reduced anxiety in online settings. Rara highlighted the ability to re-record and self-correct as beneficial, while Dina valued the opportunity to use notes and prepare calmly. Offline settings caused heightened nervousness, especially with direct audience presence. Rara described being suddenly assigned to speak with just one day's notice. She experienced sleep loss and intense anxiety but sought peer support and practiced repetitively, which helped ease the pressure slightly. This shows how preparation time significantly affects anxiety levels. Rara reframed anxiety from a threat to a natural part of learning. She viewed it as a signal of meaningful growth. Dina also accepted anxiety as normal, though her transformation was less dramatic. These insights represent a cognitive shift toward facilitative anxiety.

Two main strategies emerged: seeking support from trusted peers or family, and engaging in intensive repetitive practice. Rara practiced in front of mirrors, visualized performance success, and adjusted her study partners to avoid stress. Dina used simplified methods such as practicing with roommates or using notes.

3.2. Discussion

The findings reaffirm Horwitz et al.'s (1986) Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) framework communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation while also expanding it. Rara's case shows how these components may overlap, creating intense reactions. The anxiety linked to lack of knowledge and preparation deepens the understanding of communication apprehension by emphasizing perceived competence gaps rather than general shyness.

Anxiety in evaluative settings aligns closely with test anxiety, as seen in both participants' narratives. Physical and emotional symptoms confirm the strong stress impact. The research supports previous studies by Pabro-Maquidato and Mahmudi & Anugerahwati, who found that performance pressure amplifies physiological and psychological responses. A novel contribution of this study is the clear reduction of anxiety in online settings. The asynchronous nature, privacy, and control over performance conditions helped both Rara and Dina feel more confident. This digital context factor adds a modern extension to the FLA framework, especially relevant post-pandemic.

The reframing of anxiety as a positive force—particularly by Rara—introduces the concept of facilitative anxiety, aligning with Alpert and Haber's (1960) distinction between facilitative and debilitating anxiety. This perspective is underrepresented in Indonesian EFL literature and offers a promising direction for future research. The coping strategies align with findings from Sulistyaningsih, Ajiza, and Meliyani et al., especially regarding peer support and preparation. However, this study adds nuance by showing selective social support and integrating advanced techniques like visualization and mirror practice. These strategies suggest that individualized and context-sensitive methods are more effective than general anxiety-reduction recommendations.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This study concludes that speaking anxiety among EFL students is a multifaceted emotional experience shaped by personal background, situational context, and individual coping mechanisms. The participants, Rara and Dina, demonstrated that speaking anxiety manifests through various physical, emotional, and cognitive symptoms, especially in offline, high-stakes speaking tasks. Despite these challenges, both students developed resilience and managed their anxiety through self-reflection, strategic practice, and social support. Notably, the shift in perception from anxiety as a threat to a learning signal highlights a transformative potential often overlooked in EFL contexts. The findings expand the traditional Foreign Language Anxiety framework by emphasizing the role of online environments in reducing anxiety and revealing how students' lived experiences shape their emotional responses. This research suggests that addressing speaking anxiety requires more than instructional intervention; it demands an empathetic understanding of learners' inner narratives and adaptive strategies that empower them to speak with confidence.

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