EFL SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' STRATEGIES FOR REDUCING ANXIETY IN SPEAKING PERFORMANCE

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Abstract

This study investigates in depth the strategies used by senior high school students in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context to reduce speaking anxiety. Speaking anxiety is a common problem faced by many students, and this study aims to identify the main causes of such anxiety as well as effective strategies applied by students in the classroom. Through semi-structured interviews with a number of students, this study uncovered several key themes, including fear of communicating, fear of negative evaluation from teachers and peers, and various strategies used to overcome anxiety, such as thorough preparation before speaking, relaxation techniques to calm down, and social support from classmates. The findings from this study are expected to provide practical recommendations for educators, so that they can create a more supportive and inclusive learning environment, which in turn can help reduce students' speaking anxiety and increase their confidence in communicating in English.

Keywords: Speaking Anxiety, EFL Students, Strategies

Abstrak

Penelitian ini menyelidiki secara mendalam tentang strategi yang digunakan oleh siswa sekolah menengah atas dalam konteks Bahasa Inggris sebagai Bahasa Asing (EFL) untuk mengurangi kecemasan berbicara. Kecemasan berbicara merupakan masalah umum yang dihadapi oleh banyak siswa, dan penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi penyebab utama dari kecemasan tersebut serta strategi-strategi efektif yang diterapkan oleh siswa di dalam kelas. Melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur dengan sejumlah siswa, penelitian ini berhasil mengungkap beberapa tema kunci, termasuk ketakutan berkomunikasi, ketakutan akan evaluasi negatif dari guru dan teman sebaya, serta berbagai strategi yang digunakan untuk mengatasi kecemasan, seperti persiapan yang matang sebelum berbicara, teknik relaksasi untuk menenangkan diri, dan dukungan sosial dari teman-teman sekelas. Temuan dari penelitian ini diharapkan dapat memberikan rekomendasi praktis bagi para pendidik, sehingga mereka dapat menciptakan lingkungan belajar yang lebih mendukung dan inklusif, yang pada gilirannya dapat membantu mengurangi kecemasan berbicara siswa dan meningkatkan kepercayaan diri mereka dalam berkomunikasi dalam Bahasa Inggris.

Kata kunci: Kecemasan Berbicara, Siswa EFL, Strategi

INTRODCTION

Speaking anxiety is a prevalent issue among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) senior high school students. The fear of making mistakes, being judged, or not communicating effectively can hinder students' ability to speak confidently and fluently in English. This anxiety can negatively impact their speaking performance, academic achievements, and overall

learning experiences in the classroom. Speaking is a practical and valuable skill that can help contribute to the classroom and the school environment (Purba *et al*., 2023).

Previous study conducted by Nugroho & Hapsari (2024), investigates the strategies EFL high school students used to overcome their speaking anxiety in the classroom. The research findings revealed that the participants experienced anxiety during various classroom learning activities, such as communication, receiving evaluation, and assessment. However, the study also identified strategies used by the participants to manage and reduce English-speaking anxiety, including preparation, relaxation, seeking peer support, and Resignation. The application of these strategies helped students to better cope with speaking anxiety in the classroom context, thereby reducing anxiety levels during learning activities. The following study conducted by Marlia, Akbal, Nur, and McDonald (2023) examined causes, effects, and strategies for alleviating speaking anxiety. Using qualitative methods, researchers found that anxiety stemmed from linguistic issues (poor pronunciation, vocabulary) and non-linguistic issues (lack of confidence, shyness, fear of ridicule). Strategies to reduce anxiety included preparation, avoiding eye contact, and seeking peer assistance. These insights highlight students' challenges and effective coping mechanisms for English speaking.

While the two previous studies provide valuable insights into the strategies used by EFL secondary school students to cope with speaking anxiety, there is still a gap in understanding the broader impact of anxiety on students' academic performance, motivation, and overall well-being. The phenomenon that the researcher explored revolves around high school students who experience anxiety when speaking English in class. This anxiety stems from both linguistic factors (such as pronunciation and vocabulary) and non-linguistic factors (such as lack of confidence and fear of evaluation). Additionally, there is a need to explore the students' strategies for reducing anxiety and promoting a positive learning environment since the previous studies have not yet provided clear pictures of this issue in other contexts.

This research contributes to the existing body of knowledge by highlighting EFL senior high school students' strategies to reduce speaking anxiety and enhance their speaking performance in the classroom. By identifying effective coping mechanisms such as preparation, relaxation, peer support, and Resignation, the study offers practical recommendations for educators, students, and educational institutions to address speaking anxiety effectively. Furthermore, the research emphasizes the importance of teacher support and intervention strategies in creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment that fosters students'

confidence, motivation, and success in learning English as a foreign language learning classroom.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative case study design, focusing on EFL senior high school students in Landak Regency. The case study method allowed for an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon of speaking anxiety within its real-life context. The purpose was to understand the complexity and uniqueness of the case (Yin, 2003)

The participants of this study were eleventh-grade students from a public school in Landak Regency, specifically those who exhibited anxiety during English speaking activities. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, which provided rich qualitative data regarding students' experiences and coping strategies. The interviews were conducted in a private setting to ensure confidentiality and encourage honest responses.

In this study, the researcher uses Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, which involves six phases: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) reporting. Thematic analysis was employed to identify and analyze patterns within the data. Key themes included communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and various coping strategies such as preparation, relaxation, and peer support.

RESEARCH FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Findings

This section presents the results of data collection derived from interviews, categorized into themes and codes that support the findings and discussions of this study. The main research question addressed was: "What are the causes anxiety in speaking performance among EFL senior high school students', and strategies for reducing anxiety in speaking performance?" Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews.

Face-to-face interviews were conducted in the school library during class hours, with participants in the same location but without the presence of other participants, to ensure their privacy during the interview. The researcher considered this method most appropriate as it allowed the participants to answer sensitive questions without feeling embarrassed, as their answers would not be heard by others. The interviews were conducted on Thursday, July 25, 2024, starting at 9:10 am. Alan (AL) was interviewed first, followed by Devi (DV), then Yanti

(YN), after that Angel (AG), and finally Desta (DS), with each interview taking about 5-7 minutes. This interview aimed to explore how the participants dealt with the anxiety they experienced when speaking in front of anxiety they experience when speaking in front of the class Key findings are categorized into causes of anxiety and strategies for reduction, with relevant interview content included for each theme.

The first major theme identified was communication apprehension, which encompasses various fears related to speaking in public. Within this theme, the fear of public speaking emerged prominently. For instance, AL expressed, *"What makes me feel anxious is when I want to say it because I'm afraid I'll say it wrong."* Similarly, YN shared her experience, stating, *"I used to feel anxious when I was told to come forward to speak in English because I was shy and not confident."* Another aspect of communication apprehension is the fear of mispronunciation. DV articulated this concern by saying, *"What I'm worried about in English is mispronouncing words and being nervous to say them in front of the class."* Additionally, students expressed anxiety regarding the use of complex vocabulary. AG noted, *"I feel anxious if the words are difficult, so I'm not confident."* Lastly, the fear of sentence structure was highlighted by DS, who mentioned, *"I usually feel anxious when it comes to the pronunciation of sentences."*

The second theme, fear of negative evaluation, focuses on the anxiety stemming from the potential judgment of peers and teachers. AL reflected on this fear, stating, *"I have, maybe I mispronounced a word, that's what I thought."* DV echoed this sentiment, saying, *"Yes, I think I may have mispronounced a word, that's what I thought."* YN added, *"When I am asked by my teacher or friends, I always feel nervous, and I am afraid of being wrong."* The fear of public criticism was also significant, with AG expressing, *"I feel scared if I am judged directly in front of many people"*. Furthermore, the fear of being corrected was articulated by DS, who said, *"I have, maybe I mispronounced a word, that's what I thought."*

The third theme identified was test apprehension, particularly in the context of oral exams. Students reported feeling intense pressure during these assessments. AL shared, *"I'm always anxious because I'm afraid the exam results won't be what I expect,"* while YN noted, *"Very happy and anxious when the teacher supervises the class"*. Anxiety about understanding exam questions was also prevalent, with DV stating, *"My feelings when learning English are not only happy, but also excited. What makes me anxious about the exam is that I am very confused about answering the exam questions and I am also worried about the results"*. Time

pressure further exacerbated this anxiety, as AG mentioned, *"I don't feel confident when time is limited"*. Lastly, the lack of vocabulary comprehension contributed to feelings of inadequacy, with DS expressing, *"I don't understand a lot of the meanings in English; I usually only understand English for things that are often spoken every day."*

In terms of strategies for reducing speaking anxiety, the first identified strategy was preparation. Students emphasized the importance of practicing speaking to build confidence. AL stated, *"We have to prepare, for example, we have to be confident,"* while YN added, *"Yes, because if we learn little by little, we can do it too."* Gradual improvement through practice was also highlighted, with AL noting, *"I think that studying and practicing is very helpful; later on, we can also."* Writing responses in advance was another effective strategy, as AG mentioned, *"I try to write down the answers first so that I'm better prepared when I speak."* Visualization techniques were also beneficial, with DS stating, *"To speak in English, I often use the method of not reading all, which means touching a little but not reading all."*

The second strategy identified was relaxation techniques. Students reported using various methods to calm their nerves before speaking. AL expressed the need to overcome nervousness, saying, *"I need to be able to overcome my nervousness during class speaking activities."* YN emphasized the importance of being calm, stating, *"First, be confident, second, be calm, and third, be relaxed."* Breathing techniques were also mentioned, with DV noting, *"What I use for relaxation techniques is to regulate breathing, so that the mind becomes calm."* Maintaining calmness through visualization was highlighted by DS, who said, *"I often use techniques to stay calm and not get nervous; usually, what I think about is confidence."* Self-affirmation was another helpful strategy, as AG mentioned, *"I often close my eyes for a while and tell myself that I can do it."*

The third strategy was positive thinking. Students recognized the importance of focusing on their strengths and past successes. AL stated, *"In my opinion, when I speak English, we have to be able not to be nervous and we also have to focus."* YN added, *"We must remain calm and confident; we must remain focused with one goal so that we are no longer nervous."* Visualization of success was also emphasized, with DV stating, *"Believing because visualizing is the process of picturing in my mind the things I want in and out of my life."* Maintaining a positive mindset was crucial, as DS noted, *"Positive thoughts are always confident and away from shyness and nervousness."*

The fourth strategy involved peer seeking. Students found support from classmates to be instrumental in alleviating anxiety. AL shared, *"When they help me, they say you can do it and focus, don't be nervous."* DV echoed this, saying, *"When they help me, they say you can do it and focus, don't be nervous, just pretend there's no one in the class."* YN noted that talking with classmates helped reduce anxiety, stating, *"When talking with classmates, I don't feel anxious even though talking with classmates is very exciting."* DV further emphasized the importance of peer support, saying, *"It helps; if I talk to my classmates, I forget my nervousness, anxiety, and I become more courageous to speak in English."*

The final strategy identified was resignation, where some students reported avoiding speaking altogether due to excessive anxiety. AL mentioned, *"Never because I think speaking English is a bit difficult and I'm afraid of mispronouncing it."* YN added, *"Once, when I felt tired, I wanted to complain and didn't want to do anything."* The negative impact of avoidance was evident, with AL stating, *"Giving up or avoiding learning English really affected me."* YN echoed this sentiment, saying, *"Avoiding learning English affects me a lot; when I want to learn, there is always the urge to give up."* DV expressed that the difficulty of speaking led to avoidance, stating, *"Never because speaking English is very difficult to speak English during class."* Lastly, AG noted, *"Sometimes, if the atmosphere is tense, I want to avoid it because I'm afraid I won't be able to do it."*

Discussion

The findings from the interviews with senior high school students learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) shed light on the multifaceted nature of anxiety in speaking performance. These findings suggest that speaking anxiety is influenced by various factors such as communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test apprehension. The students also demonstrated a range of strategies they use to cope with anxiety, including individual and social techniques. These strategies emphasize the role of both personal initiative and the social context in overcoming language production challenges. In understanding these dynamics, educators can better tailor their teaching strategies to address the root causes of anxiety and promote a more supportive learning environment.

Causes of Anxiety in Speaking Performance like, Communication Apprehension is one of the primary causes of anxiety in speaking performance. The fear of public speaking, making mistakes, mispronouncing words, and using complex vocabulary or sentence structures are

major contributors. These concerns are consistent with previous research that shows learners often experience anxiety when they feel insecure about their language abilities (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). For example, participants like AL and YN expressed a heightened fear of making mistakes in front of others, which often leads to hesitation and a lack of confidence, exacerbating their anxiety. Mispronunciation is a particular point of concern for participants like DV and DS, whose anxieties are intensified in a foreign language context where even minor mistakes can feel magnified. The fear of being misunderstood or appearing incompetent can discourage learners from attempting more complex linguistic structures, further entrenching their fear of failure. Additionally, concerns about sentence structure, as highlighted by DS, reflect a broader fear of grammatical errors that can disrupt communication and lead to feelings of inadequacy. These findings reinforce the idea that anxiety in speaking arises not only from the fear of being judged but also from an internal struggle with one's own perceived linguistic shortcomings.

Fear of Negative Evaluation is another significant cause of speaking anxiety. Several participants, including AL, DV, and AG, reported that the fear of being judged by peers and teachers made them nervous about speaking. This aligns with existing studies on language anxiety, which suggest that students feel a heightened sense of vulnerability when their performance is subject to evaluation (Horwitz, 2001). The fear of public criticism, as mentioned by AG, and discomfort with being corrected, as noted by DS, reflect the emotional toll of speaking in front of others. Such negative evaluations often lead to increased self-consciousness and a cycle of anxiety, where students become more apprehensive about future speaking tasks. The social pressure to perform well in front of others can significantly impact their self-esteem and willingness to engage in language learning activities.

Test Apprehension, especially in the context of oral exams, is a third major cause of speaking anxiety. Oral exams create high-stakes situations where students feel intense pressure to perform well in front of an examiner or peers. Participants like AL and YN expressed that they felt particularly nervous during exams due to time constraints, the fear of not understanding questions, and the possibility of poor performance. These findings align with previous research (Aida, 1994; Chen, 2010), which shows that time pressure and difficulty in comprehending exam questions often exacerbate anxiety. In such high-pressure scenarios, students may struggle to focus on the task at hand, leading to further anxiety and potentially lower performance levels.

Strategies for Reducing Speaking Anxiety, despite the challenges posed by speaking anxiety, participants in this study employed a variety of strategies to mitigate their nervousness and improve their speaking performance. These strategies can be categorized into preparation, relaxation techniques, positive thinking, peer support, and resignation.

Preparation was the most commonly mentioned strategy for reducing anxiety. Participants emphasized the importance of practicing speaking, building confidence, and gradually improving their skills. Regular practice helps students feel more capable and less nervous when speaking. For example, AL and YN noted that practicing speaking builds confidence and reduces anxiety, aligning with research suggesting that consistent practice leads to improved performance and decreased fear (Graham, 2006). Additional strategies like writing responses beforehand, as suggested by AG, and visualizing success, as mentioned by DS, were also effective in reducing anxiety. These strategies reflect cognitive-behavioral approaches that encourage students to rehearse positive outcomes to reduce fear (Beilock et al., 2004). Mental preparation helps students feel more in control and confident when speaking.

Relaxation Techniques, such as deep breathing and maintaining calmness, were also frequently used by participants to manage anxiety. DV's use of controlled breathing and YN's advice to stay calm and confident reflect common methods for regulating the physiological symptoms of anxiety. Studies have shown that relaxation exercises can help reduce anxiety and improve performance by lowering physical stress responses (Sullivan & Schmitt, 2011). Visualization of success, as highlighted by DS, helps students maintain control and calmness, particularly in high-stakes speaking situations. These techniques serve to ease both physical and emotional tension, enabling students to focus better on their performance.

Positive Thinking and focusing on personal strengths were important strategies for reducing anxiety. For instance, DV used positive thinking to focus on aspects of speaking that she excels in, which mirrors self-affirmation techniques known to enhance self-confidence (Steele, 1988). Both AL and DV mentioned visualization of success as a key strategy, which fosters a positive mindset and enhances speaking performance (Swain & Lapkin, 2001). Maintaining a positive mental attitude helps students feel more capable and reduces the likelihood of spiraling into negative thought patterns that contribute to anxiety.

Peer Support played a crucial role in alleviating anxiety. Participants like AL and DV noted that encouragement from classmates and friends helped them feel more confident and less nervous. The supportive environment created by peers fosters a sense of safety and reduces

self-consciousness, allowing students to take risks without the fear of judgment. This finding aligns with social learning theory, which posits that peer interactions are vital for language learning and anxiety reduction (Vygotsky, 1978). Practicing with friends, as YN did, can create a more relaxed environment, making it easier for students to overcome their fears.

Resignation, or avoidance, was reported by some participants who chose to refrain from speaking tasks due to excessive anxiety. AL, YN, and DV mentioned that they sometimes avoided speaking when they felt too nervous or feared failure. This avoidance coping strategy is consistent with anxiety research, which shows that individuals may withdraw from stressful situations to protect themselves from perceived failure (Friedman et al., 2017). While avoidance may temporarily reduce anxiety, it can also have detrimental effects by perpetuating the fear and hindering improvement. Addressing avoidance behaviors through gradual exposure and supportive interventions is essential for helping students overcome their anxiety and become more confident speakers.

This research uniquely focuses on senior high school students learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and their strategies in reducing speaking anxiety in the classroom. Unlike previous studies that examined various levels of education, including elementary school students and college students, this study specifically targets high school students. This study addresses a gap in the literature by providing a comprehensive list of specific strategies to address speaking anxiety, which previous studies lack.

CONCLUSION

This study investigates the causes of and strategies for overcoming speaking anxiety among senior high school students learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). It was found that speaking anxiety is a multifaceted problem mainly driven by communication fear, fear of negative evaluation, and fear of tests. Communication anxiety stems from students' fears related to public speaking, pronunciation errors, and complexity of vocabulary or sentence structure. Fear of negative judgment from peers and teachers further discourages students from participating in speaking activities, while fear of tests, especially during oral exams, increases their anxiety and stress levels.

To overcome these challenges, students adopt a variety of strategies, with preparation being the most frequently mentioned. Regular practice and mental rehearsal were particularly effective in reducing anxiety. Other coping mechanisms included relaxation techniques such as

deep breathing, positive thinking, and seeking peer support, all of which helped students manage their anxiety and improve their speaking performance. This study concludes that although speaking anxiety is a significant barrier in language learning, students can effectively reduce its impact by using a combination of coping strategies, thereby increasing their confidence.

The researcher offers several recommendations based on these findings. Students are encouraged to actively manage their speaking anxiety by integrating regular practice into their routines, whether in formal classroom settings or informal peer interactions. They should also use relaxation techniques to cope with physical symptoms of stress and focus on positive thinking to foster a more optimistic outlook on their speaking ability. In addition, seeking support from peers in a non-judgmental environment can help reduce the stress associated with speaking.

For teachers, creating a supportive classroom environment is essential. They should foster a positive atmosphere where students feel safe to make mistakes and take risks in their language learning. Incorporating diverse speaking activities into lessons will give students plenty of practice opportunities, and constructive feedback should emphasize progress rather than focusing solely on mistakes. Introducing relaxation techniques into the curriculum and encouraging collaboration with peers through group activities can reduce students' fear.

Finally, the researcher suggests that future research explore the coping strategies students use to overcome speaking anxiety in various cultural and educational contexts. Longitudinal research can provide insights into how speaking anxiety develops over time and how coping strategies can be integrated into students' learning process for continuous improvement. In addition, examining the role of technology, such as language learning apps or virtual exchange platforms, especially in online or hybrid learning environments, can open new avenues for research. Comparative studies across different age groups or proficiency levels can also shed light on whether the causes of and solutions to speaking anxiety differ among various student demographics, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the issue.

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