

THE MULTIFACTORIAL NATURE OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE SPEAKING ANXIETY: A COMPREHENSIVE REVIEW OF CONTRIBUTING FACTORS IN EFL CONTEXT

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Abstract

Foreign language speaking anxiety (FLA) remains a significant barrier to acquiring English as a Foreign Language (EFL), particularly in oral communication. This anxiety manifests through fears of correction, communication apprehension, and heightened self-consciousness, shaped by a complex interplay of pedagogical, institutional, psychological, and sociocultural factors. Teacher-related influences, such as intolerance of mistakes, harsh criticism, and ineffective pedagogy, foster judgment-laden environments that heighten stress. The fear of negative evaluation, particularly through immediate correction or public questioning, further suppresses participation.

Classroom dynamics, such as overcrowding, competitive atmospheres, and limited technological support, amplify communicative pressure, while inadequate academic preparation and limited interaction with native speakers contribute to learners' insecurity. Linguistic challenges, including restricted vocabulary, complex grammar, and pronunciation concerns, discourage spontaneous speech. Additionally, assessment-driven systems that link oral proficiency to academic performance exacerbate anxiety, reinforcing the pressure to perform.

Peer dynamics, such as embarrassment, competitiveness, and fear of judgment from classmates, also play a pivotal role in suppressing engagement. Psychological factors, including low self-esteem, perfectionism, and irrational beliefs, intersect with age, gender, proficiency levels, and multilingual backgrounds, creating diverse experiences of anxiety. Communication apprehension and lack of preparation are recurring themes, underscoring the need for structured and supportive practice environments.

This thematic synthesis presents foreign language speaking anxiety as a multidimensional phenomenon influenced by interrelated pedagogical, institutional, and personal factors. It advocates for holistic approaches that prioritize not only linguistic proficiency but also the emotional well-being of learners, thereby fostering more supportive and effective EFL learning environments.

Keywords: Foreign language anxiety, speaking anxiety, teacher-related influences, fear of negative evaluation, EFL learning environments.

Introduction

Learning to speak English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is a profoundly human endeavour, fraught with intellectual, emotional, and social challenges. Among these, foreign language anxiety (FLA) stands out as a formidable barrier, particularly in oral communication tasks. Speaking demands rapid lexical retrieval, accurate syntax, and clear pronunciation, often under the watchful eyes of peers and instructors (Al-Saraj, 2013). For many EFL learners, this creates a high-stakes environment where fear of mistakes stifles expression, reduces participation, and undermines linguistic progress. This anxiety is not merely a classroom hurdle but a significant obstacle with far-reaching implications for academic success, professional opportunities, and intercultural engagement.

Extensive research across psychology, pedagogy, linguistics, and sociology has established FLA as a critical determinant of learners' willingness to communicate and overall language development (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). Unlike written tasks, which allow time for reflection and revision, oral communication exposes errors instantly, heightening vulnerability and often leading to avoidance behaviours (Sadighi & Dastpak, 2017). FLA is a multifaceted construct, shaped by teacher behaviours, classroom dynamics, assessment pressures, linguistic challenges, peer interactions, and individual attributes such as self-efficacy, perfectionism, and beliefs about language learning. These factors converge to create diverse anxiety experiences, varying across individuals and cultural contexts.

The significance of addressing speaking anxiety extends beyond educational settings. Proficiency in English serves as a gateway to higher education, global employment, and cross-cultural dialogue. When anxiety silences learners, it risks limiting their academic achievements and eroding their confidence in professional and social spheres, positioning FLA as both a pedagogical challenge and a matter of social equity (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). Cross-cultural studies from regions such as Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Turkey, and China reveal strikingly consistent patterns of nervousness, fear of negative evaluation, and communicative reticence, underscoring FLA's universal roots in social judgment and non-native self-expression (Bozkirli, 2019; Alrabai, 2014). However, these studies highlight contextual nuances, such as the amplified fear of public correction in collectivist cultures where face-saving is paramount.

Despite this wealth of research, significant gaps persist. The literature remains fragmented, with studies often focusing on isolated dimensions of FLA—such as teacher feedback or linguistic insecurities—without fully exploring their interconnections (Teimouri et al., 2023). A notable lack of systematic syntheses that integrate these factors into a cohesive framework limits a holistic understanding of how they collectively shape speaking anxiety. Furthermore, longitudinal research examining how early educational experiences influence long-term anxiety trajectories is scarce, as is the exploration of underrepresented regions like Latin America or Sub-Saharan Africa, which could enhance global applicability (Gregersen et al., 2014). The potential of emerging technologies—such as AI-driven pronunciation tools, virtual reality simulations, or mobile apps—to mitigate anxiety remains underexplored, despite their growing relevance in modern EFL contexts (Lee, 2020).

To address these gaps, this systematic thematic review employs a rigorous methodology, detailed in the following section, to synthesize the literature into key thematic clusters: teacher-related influences, fear of negative evaluation, classroom environments, academic backgrounds, native-speaker interactions, linguistic challenges, assessment pressures, peer dynamics, psychological factors, socio-biographical variables, and communication apprehension. By mapping these interconnections, this study aims to provide a comprehensive, human-centered understanding of why EFL learners experience speaking anxiety, identify recurring patterns and contextual variations, and propose evidence-based strategies to foster confidence and resilience. Research consistently demonstrates that anxiety is not immutable; supportive pedagogies, empathetic teaching, collaborative classroom climates, and institutional reforms can transform speaking from a source of fear into an opportunity for growth (Jin & Dewaele, 2018). Beginning with analysing teacher-related factors, this review seeks to illuminate pathways toward more inclusive and empowering EFL learning environments.

Methodology

This study employs a systematic thematic synthesis to integrate and analyze existing literature on foreign language speaking anxiety (FLA) in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. The approach aims to consolidate fragmented findings into coherent thematic clusters,

emphasizing the interaction of pedagogical, institutional, psychological, and sociocultural factors contributing to speaking anxiety. By adopting this rigorous methodology, the study ensures transparency, replicability, and rigour, while addressing the identified gaps in the literature.

Search Strategy

A comprehensive search was conducted across key academic databases, including ERIC, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, for studies published between 2010 and 2019. The search utilized combinations of keywords such as "foreign language anxiety," "EFL speaking anxiety," and "fear of negative evaluation". Boolean operators were used to refine searches, and studies from underrepresented regions, including Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa, were specifically sought to ensure diverse global representation. Additional relevant studies were identified through backwards citation tracking from key articles.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were included if they were peer-reviewed, empirical, and focused on speaking anxiety in EFL contexts. The studies needed to address one or more thematic areas, such as teacher behaviour, classroom conditions, or learner psychology. Studies that were not empirical or available in English were excluded. This process yielded approximately 50 studies, ensuring a comprehensive review of the available literature.

Data Extraction and Synthesis

Data extraction was conducted using a structured template, capturing essential study characteristics, including study context (e.g., country, educational level), methodology (e.g., qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods), sample characteristics, and findings related to speaking anxiety. Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. Using NVivo software, data were coded to identify recurring patterns (e.g., teacher criticism, fear of correction). These were initially grouped into eleven key themes: teacher-related anxiety, peer dynamics, assessment pressures, and linguistic challenges. These themes were refined iteratively to highlight interconnections, such as the impact of teacher behaviours on peer-related fears or how linguistic insecurities amplify assessment anxiety.

Quality Considerations

Studies were prioritized based on methodological rigor, with preference for those that employed mixed-methods designs, large sample sizes, and robust data collection techniques (e.g., longitudinal studies). Cross-cultural diversity was also a key criterion to enhance the generalizability of the findings. The synthesis emphasizes qualitative integration to offer a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the causes of FLA, rather than focusing on quantitative aggregation.

Literature Review

This systematic thematic synthesis consolidates the multifaceted causes of foreign language speaking anxiety in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, drawing on robust empirical research. The literature is organized into eight thematic clusters: teacher-related influences, fear of negative evaluation, classroom environments, academic backgrounds, native-speaker interactions, linguistic challenges, assessment and performance pressures, and learner-related psychological and socio-biographical factors. These themes illuminate the interplay of pedagogical, institutional, interpersonal, and personal determinants, providing a comprehensive framework for understanding and addressing EFL speaking anxiety.

2.1 Teacher-Related Influences

Teachers are pivotal in shaping the instructional and affective dimensions of EFL classrooms. Due to their evaluative authority and pedagogical practices, they wield significant influence over learners' speaking anxiety (Rafada & Madini, 2017). Negative behaviours, such as harsh criticism, error intolerance, and disapproving non-verbal cues, consistently heighten learner

apprehension, while supportive and empathetic approaches foster confidence and communicative willingness.

Teacher Behaviour and Psychological Impact

Harsh corrective practices, including blunt feedback and public correction, exacerbate anxiety by framing errors as failures rather than learning opportunities. Bouddage and Elfatihi (2018) found that Moroccan learners withdrew from participation when errors were met with disapproval, a pattern echoed by Tieni (2018), who noted that harsh feedback discourages engagement in oral tasks. In China, Han Luo (2018) observed that extrinsically motivated learners are particularly vulnerable to negative teacher reactions, though intrinsically motivated learners also experience anxiety, albeit to a lesser degree. Similarly, in Pakistan, Waseem and Jibeen (2013) linked evaluative teacher attitudes to reduced motivation and heightened fear of judgment. Meanwhile, Liu and Zhang (2013) confirmed that teacher behaviours mediate intrinsic and extrinsic motivations in Chinese universities. Bhatti et al. (2016) further emphasized that perceived teacher support mitigates external stressors. In contrast, negative conduct amplifies anxiety, a finding corroborated by Bozer and Çalışkan (2016), who noted that unsupportive instructors foster long-term avoidance of speaking activities. Alrabai (2014) in Saudi Arabia highlighted that encouragement and constructive feedback transform speaking into a growth-oriented process, underscoring teacher behaviour as a consistent predictor of anxiety across cultures.

Pedagogical Competence and Awareness

Beyond behaviour, pedagogical incompetence significantly contributes to anxiety. Ashraf (2019) found that ineffective teaching strategies and poor classroom management in Saudi Arabia increased learner stress, reinforcing fear of negative judgment. Teachers lacking proficiency in modern EFL methodologies, such as task-based learning, inadvertently heighten risk perceptions, discouraging participation (Dewaele, 2019). Aydoğan et al. (2018) and Samoilova et al. (2017) noted that instructors who fail to create supportive environments amplify anxiety, whereas task-based approaches and constructive feedback reframe errors as learning opportunities. Gregersen et al. (2014) further emphasized the role of emotional intelligence in teaching, suggesting that training programs must integrate affective strategies to reduce anxiety effectively.

Teacher-Student Communication Barriers

Communication breakdowns between teachers and learners are a significant anxiety trigger. Bouddage and Elfatihi (2018) identified poor teacher-student rapport as a primary cause of nervousness in Morocco. Samoilova et al. (2017) observed that students in technical fields, such as engineering, experienced heightened stress when unable to comprehend instructors. Kudo et al. (2017) found that linguistic gaps in English-medium instruction amplify apprehension, particularly when learners struggle to follow lectures or articulate confusion. Cultural hierarchies exacerbate these barriers, with Al-Saraj (2013) noting that in Arab contexts, hierarchical dynamics discourage learners, especially females, from seeking clarification (Bensalem, 2017). Studies in Greece, Iran, and Jordan similarly highlight fear of misunderstanding or negative evaluation as a persistent driver of anxiety (Chengchen, 2019).

Synthesis: Teachers are central to learners' affective experiences, with negative behaviors, pedagogical shortcomings, and communication barriers intensifying anxiety. Supportive, competent, and approachable instructors create safe spaces for oral engagement (Bensalem, 2018). Interventions must prioritize teacher training in emotional intelligence, communicative pedagogies, and culturally sensitive rapport-building to transform speaking from a risk-laden task into an opportunity for growth.

2.2 Fear of Negative Evaluation and Correction

Fear of negative evaluation, particularly through error correction, is a dominant cause of EFL speaking anxiety. Oral tasks expose mistakes publicly and instantaneously, unlike written tasks that permit revision (Hidayati, 2018). The manner and context of correction profoundly influence learners' emotional states, determining whether they feel encouraged or humiliated.

Error Correction and Public Humiliation

Direct or public correction intensifies anxiety by highlighting errors in front of peers. Bouddage and Elfatihi (2018) reported that Moroccan learners felt embarrassed and reluctant to continue after blunt feedback, while Kelsen (2019) noted that irritation or scolding during corrections discourages participation. Alrabai (2014) found frequent correction in Saudi Arabia undermines confidence, framing mistakes as inadequacy rather than learning opportunities. Yassin and Razak (2017) emphasized that private, supportive feedback mitigates embarrassment, fostering gradual confidence, whereas public corrections amplify fear of humiliation.

Spontaneous Demands and Cognitive Overload

Unexpected questioning and impromptu speaking tasks heighten anxiety by diverting cognitive resources from communication to stress management. Tulgar (2018) found that unanticipated questions provoke nervousness, while Takac (2019) demonstrated that the mere anticipation of being called upon induces stress. This unpredictability exacerbates learners' fear of appearing incompetent, particularly in high-stakes settings.

Cultural Dimensions of Evaluative Fear

Fear of judgment is nearly universal but shaped by cultural norms. Public correction is particularly threatening in collectivist societies where group harmony and face-saving are prioritized. Alsowat (2016) linked face-loss to heightened anxiety among Saudi learners, while Al-Saraj (2013) noted that Arab female learners feared public mistakes due to cultural expectations of modesty. Similar patterns in East Asia reveal preferences for silence over risking embarrassment (Dewaele & Magdalena, 2019). Tzoannopoulou (2016) and Naghadeh et al. (2013) confirmed that Greek and Iranian learners prioritize error avoidance over communication due to perceived evaluation from teachers and peers.

Synthesis: Fear of negative evaluation, amplified by harsh or public correction, is a powerful predictor of speaking anxiety across cultures. Effective pedagogy requires balancing correction with psychological sensitivity, using strategies like recasting, private feedback, and cooperative learning to normalize errors and preserve learner dignity (Karatas et al., 2016). Addressing cultural nuances, particularly in collectivist contexts, is critical to mitigating this fear.

2.3 Classroom Environment and Institutional Factors

Classroom environments, encompassing physical, social, and technological dimensions, significantly influence speaking anxiety, shaping learners' perceptions of oral participation opportunities (Irawan et al., 2018). Unlike individual factors, these conditions affect all learners simultaneously, fostering confidence or amplifying stress.

Physical and Institutional Constraints

Inadequate facilities and overcrowding exacerbate anxiety by limiting individual attention and fostering competitive atmospheres. Dewaele and Alfawzan (2018) and Abrar (2017) found that poorly equipped classrooms in Saudi Arabia and Indonesia leave learners feeling unsupported, associating resource scarcity with diminished success. As Alrabai (2014) noted, overcrowded settings heighten anonymity and fear of unexpected questioning, reducing engagement. MacIntyre and Gregersen (2014) further highlighted that resource-limited environments reinforce perceptions of inadequacy, particularly in underprivileged institutions.

Social-Emotional Climate

The classroom's social-emotional climate is a critical determinant of anxiety. Competitive or judgmental atmospheres consistently elevate stress levels. Asmal (2019) showed that classroom dynamics shape tolerance of ambiguity and perceived competence, while Bozer and Çalışkan (2016) noted that competitive Thai classrooms discourage participation. Akbari and Sadeghi (2013) found that emotionally hostile environments among Kurdish-Persian bilinguals intensify anxiety, underscoring the need for collaborative climates.

Technology as a Double-Edged Sword

Technological integration, such as Skype or mobile apps, reshapes classroom dynamics but can both alleviate and exacerbate anxiety. Aydoğan (2018) reported that learners unfamiliar with digital platforms feel scrutinized, while Dewaele and Magdalena (2019) noted that unsupportive teacher behavior compounds technology-related stress. Conversely, Gregersen et al. (2014) suggested that well-implemented technology, such as virtual simulations, can provide low-pressure practice, highlighting the importance of teacher guidance in leveraging digital tools.

Synthesis: Classroom environments are active agents in shaping speaking anxiety. Supportive, well-resourced, and collaborative settings foster confidence, while overcrowded, competitive, or technologically mismanaged classrooms amplify stress. Institutions must prioritize equitable resources, smaller class sizes, and empathetic climates to promote oral engagement (Irawan et al., 2018).

2.4 Academic Background and Prior Experiences

Learners' academic histories profoundly shape their approach to EFL speaking, with prior exposure, past failures, and educational disparities forming the foundation for current anxieties.

Limited Exposure and Pedagogical Mismatch

Limited prior exposure to communicative English significantly heightens anxiety. Gopang et al. (2017) found that Pakistani learners with weak English backgrounds felt unprepared for oral tasks, while Alrabai (2014) noted that students trained in grammar-translation methods struggled in communicative classrooms. Abrar (2017) observed that Indonesian learners faced insecurity when transitioning to spontaneous speaking, a challenge compounded by rote-based early instruction (Waseem & Jibeen, 2013).

Impact of Past Negative Experiences

Negative experiences, such as criticism or poor exam performance, create lasting insecurities. Abrar (2017) and Anggraeni (2018) reported that Indonesian students carried fears from past embarrassment into new settings, anticipating failure. Ashraf (2019) similarly noted that early discouragement in Saudi Arabia heightened later anxiety, underscoring the long-term impact of formative experiences.

Socioeconomic and Educational Disparities

Socioeconomic disparities exacerbate anxiety by limiting access to quality English education. Al Asmari (2015) and Gopang et al. (2017) found that rural or underprivileged learners in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia felt inferior alongside better-prepared peers, reinforcing marginalization. Bhatti et al. (2016) noted that weaker academic achievement correlates with higher nervousness, while Liu and Zhang (2013) observed that high achievers face perfectionist anxiety, fearing failure to meet expectations.

Synthesis: Academic backgrounds, shaped by limited exposure, negative experiences, and socioeconomic inequities, create enduring anxieties that persist into advanced learning. Continuity in communicative education and equitable access to quality instruction are essential to mitigate these effects (Zhiping & Paramasivam, 2013).

2.5 Interactions with Native Speakers

Interactions with native speakers, while valuable for authentic exposure, often trigger intense anxiety due to perceived linguistic and cultural authority. Al-Saraj (2013) found that Arab

learners feared misinterpreting humour or cultural norms, viewing errors as social failures. Dewaele and Magdalena (2019) reported similar anxieties among Japanese learners, where mistakes in politeness norms risked cultural embarrassment. Abrar (2017) and Barabas (2013) noted that Indonesian and Palestinian learners viewed rare native-speaker interactions as high-stakes, amplifying pressure due to limited practice opportunities. Kayaoğlu and Sağlamel (2013) emphasised that such encounters overwhelm learners without gradual scaffolding, reinforcing linguistic and cultural insecurities.

Synthesis: Native-speaker interactions are a double-edged sword. They offer authentic practice but trigger deep anxieties rooted in cultural distance and lack of exposure. Structured, low-pressure opportunities are critical to transforming these interactions into constructive learning experiences.

2.6 Linguistic Challenges: Vocabulary, Grammar, and Pronunciation

Linguistic mechanics—vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation—are central to speaking but also major anxiety triggers due to the immediacy of oral production. Limited vocabulary causes learners to freeze, interpreting pauses as incompetence (Zhang, 2014; Gopang et al., 2017). Grammar concerns, reinforced by drill-focused schooling, lead to hyper-focus on accuracy, disrupting fluency (Alrabai, 2014; Sijali & Khanal, 2016). Pronunciation anxiety, particularly among Arab and Turkish learners, stems from fears of non-standard accents marking them as outsiders (Al-Saraj, 2013; Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2014; Mohtasham & Farnia, 2017). Hidayati (2018) and Al-Otaibi (2018) highlighted that cognitive overload from managing these elements simultaneously, coupled with perfectionism, intensifies stress, especially in rural settings.

Synthesis: Linguistic challenges are interdependent, with vocabulary gaps, grammar fears, and pronunciation insecurities converging to undermine confidence. Pedagogies that balance fluency with accuracy and normalize errors are essential to alleviate anxiety (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2014).

2.7 Assessment and Performance Pressures

Assessment contexts, such as oral exams and presentations, are among the most anxiety-inducing due to their high-stakes nature. Al-Saraj (2013) and Qaddomi (2013) reported that Arab and Palestinian learners feared harsh judgment from strict or unfamiliar examiners. Çagatay (2015) and Ali and Fei (2017) noted that Pakistani learners dreaded forgetting material or mispronouncing words during presentations, with memorization strategies often backfiring. Han Luo (2018) and Alrabai (2014) found that grade-driven students link oral performance to academic identity, amplifying test anxiety, while Yousofi (2015) observed physiological symptoms like trembling that disrupt performance. Abrar (2017) and Aydoğan et al. (2018) highlighted that peer presence during presentations intensifies anxiety, often surpassing teacher evaluation fears.

Synthesis: Assessment-related anxiety reflects compounded fears of judgment, memory failure, and peer scrutiny. Supportive, fluency-focused assessments can mitigate stress and encourage participation (Asmal, 2019).

2.8 Learner-Related Psychological and Socio-Biographical Factors

Learners' internal beliefs, psychological traits, and socio-biographical backgrounds significantly shape speaking anxiety, interacting with external factors to create unique anxiety profiles.

Psychological Factors and Self-Concept

Low self-esteem and perfectionism lead learners to view mistakes as evidence of incompetence, reinforcing avoidance (Batiha et al., 2014). Irrational beliefs, such as equating fluency with error-free speech, exacerbate stress (Liu & Zhang, 2013). Personality traits like shyness or introversion heighten public speaking fears, while resilient learners manage anxiety better despite limited proficiency (Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2014; Chengchen, 2019).

Socio-Biographical Influences

Proficiency levels influence anxiety, with low-proficiency learners facing frequent breakdowns and advanced learners fearing failure to meet expectations (Punar & Uzun, 2019). Age effects vary, with younger learners less inhibited but less equipped to manage nervousness, and older learners more self-conscious but determined (Nahavandi & Mukundan, 2013). Gender differences depend on cultural norms, with women in some contexts reporting greater anxiety due to modesty expectations (Mohtasham & Farnia, 2017). Socioeconomic disparities limit access to quality education, increasing vulnerability, while multilingual learners often exhibit reduced anxiety due to prior language experience (Bensalem, 2018).

Communication Apprehension and Preparation

Communication apprehension, characterized by symptoms like trembling or mental blankness, is a core dimension of FLA (Handledare & Fägersten, 2013). Lack of preparation, particularly for impromptu tasks, triggers “speech paralysis,” amplifying fears of losing face or misunderstanding (Baharuddin & Rashid, 2014). This creates a cycle of avoidance that reduces practice and perpetuates insecurity (Kralova & Tirpakova, 2019).

Synthesis: Psychological traits, socio-biographical factors, and communication apprehension converge to shape anxiety, compounded by external pressures. Supportive environments, structured preparation, and resilience-building strategies are critical to breaking avoidance cycles and fostering confidence (Yahya, 2013; Jin & Dewaele, 2018).

Discussion

The literature on foreign language speaking anxiety in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts reveals a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by an intricate interplay of pedagogical practices, institutional conditions, interpersonal dynamics, personal psychology, and sociocultural contexts. The thematic synthesis identifies key contributors—teacher-related influences, fear of negative evaluation, classroom environments, academic backgrounds, native-speaker interactions, linguistic challenges, assessment pressures, and learner-related psychological and socio-biographical factors—whose interconnections provide a holistic understanding of why learners experience apprehension and how it manifests. This discussion synthesizes these findings, highlighting their interdependence, cultural nuances, and cyclical nature, while proposing actionable strategies to mitigate anxiety and foster communicative confidence.

Interdependence of Pedagogical, Institutional, and Interpersonal Factors

External learning environments—teachers, classrooms, and peers—emerge as primary catalysts of speaking anxiety, exerting profound influence on learners’ affective experiences. Teachers, as authoritative figures, shape linguistic acquisition and learners’ self-perceptions (Yousofi, 2015). Harsh correction, error intolerance, and rigid pedagogy equate mistakes with failure, amplifying insecurity and discouraging participation (Waseem & Jibeen, 2013). For instance, unsupportive teacher behaviours, such as public criticism, exacerbate learners’ fear of negative evaluation, creating a feedback loop that stifles oral engagement (Faria & Vijaya, 2019). Conversely, empathetic teachers who employ constructive feedback and foster collaborative climates transform speaking into a source of motivation and growth (Al-Otaibi, 2016).

Classroom environments and peer dynamics are equally critical. Overcrowded or competitive classrooms heighten stress by limiting individual attention and fostering social comparisons, leaving learners unsupported (Subandowo, 2017). Peer ridicule or proficiency gaps intensify anxiety, particularly in collectivist cultures where group harmony is paramount (Tulgar, 2018). However, supportive peers can buffer anxiety, highlighting the potential of cooperative learning to mitigate interpersonal pressures (Yahya, 2013). The interplay is evident: a harsh teacher in a competitive classroom compounds stress, whereas a supportive teacher in a

collaborative environment fosters resilience. This underscores the need for integrated interventions that address teacher behaviours, classroom climates, and peer dynamics as interconnected systems (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2014).

Historical Weight of Academic Backgrounds

Speaking anxiety is not solely a product of current classroom dynamics but is deeply rooted in learners' academic histories. Students with limited exposure to communicative English or negative experiences with rote-based instruction often enter advanced learning unprepared for spontaneous oral tasks (Bozer & Çalışkan, 2016). Such early conditioning—often emphasizing grammar over fluency—produces lasting insecurities, as learners associate speaking with high-stakes performance rather than authentic communication (Waseem & Jibeen, 2013). For example, students trained in grammar-translation methods struggle to adapt to communicative classrooms, perceiving oral tasks as chaotic and risk-laden (Gopang et al., 2017). Socioeconomic disparities further exacerbate these challenges, as learners from underprivileged backgrounds often lack access to quality English education, reinforcing feelings of inferiority (Al Asmari, 2015). This historical weight underscores the need for continuity in language education, with early curricula prioritizing oral practice to build confidence and prevent long-term anxiety trajectories.

Complex Interplay of Proficiency and Psychological Factors

Linguistic proficiency interacts dynamically with speaking anxiety, revealing its dual role. Low-proficiency learners experience heightened nervousness due to frequent communication breakdowns, undermining confidence and reinforcing avoidance (Zhiping & Paramasivam, 2013). Surprisingly, highly proficient learners may face equal or greater anxiety, driven by pressure to maintain flawless performance or meet external expectations (Liu & Zhang, 2013). This suggests that proficiency alone does not guarantee confidence; psychological factors are equally critical. Perfectionism, low self-esteem, and irrational beliefs about fluency—such as equating errors with incompetence—exacerbate anxiety, leading learners to prioritize accuracy over communication (Batiha et al., 2014). By contrast, learners with resilient psychological orientations, such as positive self-concept or intrinsic motivation, manage anxiety more effectively, even with limited linguistic resources (Jin & Dewaele, 2018). These findings highlight the necessity of integrating psychological support, such as mindfulness or self-efficacy training, alongside linguistic instruction to address the emotional dimensions of speaking anxiety.

Cultural and Social Dimensions

Cultural and social contexts profoundly shape speaking anxiety, mediating how learners perceive errors and interactions. In collectivist cultures, where face-saving and group harmony are highly valued, public mistakes provoke acute embarrassment, amplifying fear of negative evaluation (Tulgar, 2018). Gender norms further complicate these dynamics: in some societies, female learners report greater apprehension due to cultural expectations of modesty, while males may feel pressured to perform confidently to uphold social roles (Mohtasham & Farnia, 2017). Interactions with native speakers epitomize the cultural dimension, as learners often idealize native-speaker norms, perceiving their accents or grammatical errors as unacceptable (Asif, 2017). Notably, this anxiety often stems from imagined judgments rather than actual criticism, reflecting internalized hierarchies of linguistic legitimacy (Dewaele & Alfawzan, 2018). These cultural nuances emphasize the need for culturally sensitive pedagogies that normalize linguistic diversity and reduce the stigma of non-native speech.

Cyclical Nature of Anxiety and Avoidance

A critical insight from the literature is the vicious cycle of anxiety and avoidance. Learners who fear speaking withdraw from participation, reducing practice opportunities and perpetuating insecurities (Kralova & Tirpakova, 2019). This cycle is evident across contexts—

classrooms, exams, and native-speaker interactions—where fear of failure leads to stagnation, further entrenching anxiety (Abrar, 2017). Breaking this cycle requires environments that normalize errors and provide gradual, low-stakes opportunities for practice. For instance, structured rehearsal and cooperative tasks can desensitize learners to speaking pressures, fostering incremental confidence and disrupting avoidance patterns (Yahya, 2013). This cyclical dynamic underscores the urgency of proactive interventions that address both the causes and consequences of anxiety.

Toward a Holistic Understanding

EFL speaking anxiety cannot be reduced to a single factor but emerges from the convergence of pedagogical, institutional, interpersonal, psychological, and cultural dimensions (Javid, 2014). A learner's nervousness in a classroom may reflect not only immediate fear of correction but also years of inadequate preparation, cultural sensitivities, peer comparisons, and internalized perfectionism. This multidimensionality demands a holistic approach to intervention, recognizing that linguistic training alone is insufficient without addressing emotional, social, and systemic factors. Culturally sensitive pedagogies, supportive classroom climates, and psychological resilience-building are essential to transforming speaking from a source of fear into an opportunity for growth (Bensalem, 2018).

Implications and Recommendations

Addressing speaking anxiety requires coordinated strategies across pedagogical, institutional, and policy levels, acknowledging that learners' apprehension reflects systemic shortcomings rather than individual failings.

Pedagogical Implications for Teachers

Teachers wield the most immediate influence over learners' emotional experiences. Instead of harsh corrections, instructors should employ supportive techniques, such as recasts or private feedback, to guide improvement while preserving dignity (Al-Otaibi, 2016). Cooperative learning environments, prioritizing collaboration over competition, reduce harmful peer comparisons and foster mutual support (Yahya, 2013). Humour, encouragement, and empathy can reframe speaking as an enjoyable process, while gradual exposure—progressing from pair work to group discussions to presentations—scaffolds confidence (Rafada & Madini, 2017). Teacher training must integrate emotional intelligence and anxiety-reducing strategies alongside linguistic competence to equip educators for the affective dimensions of teaching (Gregersen et al., 2014).

Institutional Implications

Institutional factors, such as overcrowded classrooms and rigid curricula, exacerbate anxiety by limiting oral participation opportunities. Investments in smaller class sizes, technological resources, and flexible syllabi are critical to creating supportive environments (Subandowo, 2017). Assessment practices require reform, with oral exams emphasizing fluency, effort, and communicative effectiveness over perfect accuracy to reduce stress (Karatas et al., 2016). Low-stakes assessments, peer feedback, and self-reflection opportunities enable practice without fear of failure. Institutions should also provide academic and psychological support, such as language labs and counselling services, recognizing that language learning is both cognitive and emotional (Bensalem, 2018).

Policy-Level Implications

Many anxieties stem from inadequate early schooling, where rote memorization overshadows communicative practice. Policymakers must ensure oral competence is cultivated from early stages through age-appropriate, interactive activities (Yalçın & İnceçay, 2013). Curricula should integrate oral communication across subjects, using project-based learning, debates, and storytelling to provide authentic speaking opportunities. Partnerships with international

exchange programs or online platforms can desensitize learners to native-speaker interactions, reducing cultural anxieties (Kayaoğlu & Sağlamel, 2013).

Future Research and Innovation

The literature points to several promising directions for future research. Longitudinal studies are essential to examine how early language learning experiences influence the development of anxiety over time, addressing a significant gap in understanding long-term anxiety trajectories (Gopang et al., 2017). Research focused on interventions, such as cooperative learning, digital simulations, and mindfulness-based stress reduction, should be prioritized to evaluate their effectiveness in alleviating speaking anxiety (Ashraf, 2019). Additionally, cross-cultural studies, particularly in underrepresented regions such as Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa, are crucial for distinguishing universal patterns of FLA from context-specific cultural and educational influences (Akbari & Sadeghi, 2013). Finally, integrating technological innovations, including AI-assisted feedback systems and virtual language exchanges, holds significant potential to provide learners with low-pressure practice environments, bridging the gap between classroom learning and real-world communication (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2014).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the complex phenomenon of foreign language speaking anxiety is shaped by an intricate web of pedagogical, psychological, social, and institutional factors. As this thematic review reveals, anxiety in EFL speaking is not merely a byproduct of insufficient language skills, but a multifaceted challenge influenced by the interplay of teacher behaviours, classroom dynamics, cultural expectations, and individual learner traits. The recurring patterns of fear, embarrassment, and avoidance underscore the urgent need for a holistic approach to language education that recognises the emotional and psychological dimensions of learning alongside linguistic competence.

Addressing FLA requires a paradigm shift from seeing anxiety as a fixed barrier to viewing it as an opportunity for growth and transformation. Educators, institutions, and policymakers must work collaboratively to create supportive, inclusive environments where mistakes are seen not as failures but as valuable steps in the learning process. The role of teachers is pivotal: when educators approach students with empathy, patience, and constructive feedback, they not only foster linguistic growth but also empower students to overcome their fears and build their confidence.

Moreover, creating an emotionally supportive classroom culture, integrating modern technologies to provide low-pressure practice, and adopting pedagogical approaches prioritising fluency over perfection will significantly reduce anxiety. By embracing these strategies, we can create a learning environment where students feel safe to express themselves, take risks, and, most importantly, thrive as communicators.

Ultimately, the challenge of foreign language speaking anxiety is not insurmountable. With the right combination of pedagogical insight, cultural sensitivity, and emotional support, we can turn the daunting task of speaking a foreign language into a liberating and empowering experience for learners worldwide.

Acknowledgment:

This thematic paper is extracted from the author's PhD thesis, which explores the multifaceted factors influencing foreign language speaking anxiety in EFL contexts.

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