



## UNVEILING ENGLISH SPEAKING ANXIETY AMONG EFL LEARNERS IN BANDA ACEH

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### **Abstract**

Speaking is a crucial skill in English language learning; however, many learners experience anxiety that hinders their performance and participation. Grounded in Foreign Language Anxiety theory, this study aims to explore the types and underlying causes of English-speaking anxiety among tenth-grade students at SMAN 5 Banda Aceh in the 2025/2026 academic year. Employing a qualitative descriptive case study design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 14 students identified as experiencing speaking anxiety. The findings reveal three major forms of anxiety: fear of negative evaluation, communication apprehension, and test anxiety, with fear of negative evaluation emerging as the most dominant factor. This suggests that students are particularly concerned about being judged by peers and teachers during speaking activities. Furthermore, several contributing factors were identified, including fear of making mistakes, limited vocabulary, difficulties in pronunciation, and low self-confidence. These factors interact to create a psychological barrier that limits students' willingness to engage in oral communication. The study concludes that English-speaking anxiety significantly influences students' classroom participation and overall speaking development. The findings highlight the importance of fostering a supportive and non-threatening classroom environment, where students feel safe to express themselves without fear of judgment. Pedagogical implications include the need for teachers to adopt anxiety-reducing strategies, such as positive feedback, scaffolding techniques, and communicative activities that promote confidence and gradual language development.

**Keywords:** Communication Apprehension, English Speaking Anxiety, EFL Learners, Fear of Negative Evaluation, Test Anxiety

### **Introduction (Times New Roman, 12 pt)**

Speaking is a fundamental language skill that reflects learners' communicative competence and requires real-time processing of meaning (Brown, 2001; Goh &



Burns, 2012). In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), speaking is often considered the most challenging skill because it demands not only linguistic knowledge but also confidence and spontaneity. In Indonesia, although English is taught across educational levels, many senior high school students continue to struggle with speaking. One of the most significant barriers is anxiety, which interferes with learners' ability to express ideas clearly and participate actively in classroom interaction.

Speaking anxiety is commonly conceptualized within the framework of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), which refers to a specific form of anxiety associated with language learning contexts. It is typically characterized by feelings of nervousness, fear of making mistakes, and low self-confidence (Horwitz, 2001; MacIntyre, 2007). Previous studies have identified key components of speaking anxiety, including fear of negative evaluation, communication apprehension, and test anxiety (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002; Woodrow, 2006). These factors can be intensified in situations that involve public performance, such as speaking in front of a large audience, which often leads to heightened psychological pressure (Mak, 2011).

The impact of FLA extends beyond emotional discomfort, as it can negatively affect learners' cognitive processing, academic achievement, and classroom participation (MacIntyre, 2007). Students experiencing high levels of anxiety tend to avoid speaking activities, resulting in limited opportunities to practice and develop their oral proficiency. To address this issue, researchers have emphasized the importance of supportive teaching strategies, such as creating low-stakes learning environments and providing constructive feedback (Lee, 2013). These approaches can help reduce anxiety and encourage more active student engagement.

Preliminary observations conducted at SMA Negeri 5 Banda Aceh indicate that many tenth-grade students experience speaking anxiety, manifested in nervousness, shyness, and lack of confidence during classroom activities. Several contributing factors were identified, including fear of making grammatical errors, difficulties in pronunciation, and limited vocabulary. In addition, students tend to feel more comfortable speaking in small groups rather than in front of the whole class, suggesting that social context plays a role in shaping their anxiety levels (Osboe et al., 2007).

Despite the growing body of research on speaking anxiety, studies focusing specifically on Indonesian senior high school students, particularly in the Aceh context, remain limited. This gap highlights the need for more context-sensitive investigations that capture students' lived experiences and challenges. Therefore, this study aims to identify the types of speaking anxiety and analyze the factors that contribute to it among tenth-grade students at SMA Negeri 5 Banda Aceh. The research questions guiding this study investigate two aspects. First, the types of speaking anxiety which students experience, and second, the factors that



contribute to students' speaking anxiety. This study focuses on classroom speaking activities and examines both psychological and sociocultural factors influencing students' performance. It is expected that the findings will contribute to the development of more effective pedagogical strategies for reducing anxiety and improving students' speaking competence in EFL classrooms.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Speaking is widely recognized as a fundamental language skill that develops naturally alongside other language abilities and plays a central role in communication. According to Tarigan (2015), speaking is an activity of conveying information, ideas, and responses to others through oral language, which contributes to the development of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. This view highlights speaking as an interactive process that involves both the speaker and the listener. In line with this perspective, MacIntyre (2007) defines speaking as a productive oral communication skill that enables learners to express ideas, opinions, and feelings in various contexts. This definition emphasizes that speaking is not merely producing sounds, but also constructing meaning through verbal and non-verbal elements. To communicate effectively, learners must be able to organize their thoughts, choose appropriate language, and deliver messages clearly. Furthermore, effective speaking requires mastery of several key components. Bahdi (2014) identifies five essential elements of speaking ability: pronunciation accuracy, grammatical competence, vocabulary mastery, comprehension, and fluency. These components work together to support meaningful and successful oral communication. A deficiency in any of these elements may lead to difficulties in expressing ideas and can contribute to speaking anxiety among learners.

Anxiety is a psychological factor that significantly influences language learning, particularly in speaking activities. Foreign Language Anxiety defines anxiety as a subjective emotional state characterized by feelings of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry. While anxiety is a natural emotional response, excessive levels can interfere with students' ability to perform effectively. In educational settings, anxiety is commonly associated with reduced academic performance and limited participation (Dawood et al., 2016).

In the context of second or foreign language acquisition, anxiety plays a crucial role in shaping learners' experiences. Na (2007) argues that anxiety can significantly affect the language learning process, while Marcos-Llinás and Garau (2009) note that anxiety levels may vary depending on learners' proficiency. Angelia and Listyani (2019) further emphasize that anxiety should not be viewed as a disorder, but rather as a behavioral response to uncertain or challenging situations, such as speaking in a foreign language.

Anxiety can be categorized into three main types as proposed by Horwitz et al. (1986). Trait anxiety refers to a stable tendency to experience anxiety across various situations, including language learning contexts. State anxiety, on the



other hand, is temporary and occurs in response to specific situations, such as being asked to speak in front of the class. Situation-specific anxiety is more directly related to particular contexts, such as speaking in a foreign language classroom, where anxiety consistently arises during speaking activities. Speaking anxiety is influenced by both internal and external factors. Moreover, by Horwitz et al. (1986) identify several contributing factors, including lack of preparation, limited speaking experience, and environmental influences such as audience behavior and perceived authority. These factors can reduce students' confidence and increase their fear of making mistakes.

More specifically, Horwitz et al. (1986) further identify three primary sources of speaking anxiety: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Communication apprehension refers to learners' fear or discomfort when engaging in oral communication, often associated with shyness, low self-confidence, and limited language proficiency. Test anxiety arises in evaluative situations, such as oral examinations, where students feel pressure to perform well, leading to nervousness and decreased fluency. Fear of negative evaluation involves concern about being judged by teachers or peers, which may result in avoidance of participation or reluctance to speak. These three components provide a comprehensive framework for understanding students' anxiety in speaking contexts, particularly in a foreign language.

Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) is a situation-specific form of anxiety that is particularly evident in speaking activities. Gregersen and Horwitz (2002) explain that anxious learners often exhibit perfectionistic tendencies and become overly sensitive to mistakes, which increases their anxiety and reduces their willingness to communicate. This heightened self-awareness can make learners perceive minor errors as significant failures. MacIntyre (2002) further explains that anxiety interferes with essential cognitive processes, such as attention, memory, and language retrieval. During speaking tasks, learners may experience mental blocks, difficulty recalling vocabulary, or confusion in organizing sentences. This cognitive disruption negatively affects fluency and overall speaking performance. In addition, individual differences play an important role in shaping speaking anxiety. Dewaele (2007) highlights that factors such as personality traits, emotional stability, prior learning experiences, and self-confidence levels influence how learners respond to speaking situations. For instance, introverted learners or those with low self-esteem are more likely to experience higher levels of anxiety.

Anxiety has significant negative effects on foreign language learning, particularly in speaking performance. According to Erdiana et al. (2020), anxious learners often struggle to think clearly, process information effectively, and demonstrate their language competence. Anxiety can interfere with multiple stages of language processing. At the input stage, it acts as a filter that limits the amount of information learners can absorb. During the processing stage, it disrupts the internalization of language elements such as vocabulary and grammar. At the



output stage, anxiety affects learners' ability to produce language, often resulting in hesitation, errors, or avoidance of speaking tasks. Overall, this theoretical framework highlights that speaking anxiety is a complex phenomenon influenced by psychological, cognitive, and social factors. Understanding these dimensions is essential for analyzing students' experiences and identifying appropriate strategies to reduce anxiety in EFL classrooms.

### **Method**

This study employed a qualitative descriptive case study design to explore students' speaking anxiety in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate as it enables an in-depth understanding of learners' feelings, perceptions, and experiences in a natural setting. As noted by Creswell (2012) and Creswell (2013), qualitative research focuses on interpreting how individuals construct meaning from their experiences within specific contexts. The case study design was used to provide a detailed examination of a particular group of students experiencing speaking anxiety.

The participants of this study were 14 tenth-grade students from class X.I at SMA Negeri 5 Banda Aceh during the 2025/2026 academic year. The participants were selected purposively based on preliminary classroom observations indicating visible signs of speaking anxiety, such as nervousness, reluctance to speak, and low self-confidence. The focus of the study was on students' experiences of anxiety during English speaking activities, including the types of anxiety and the factors contributing to it.

Data were collected through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews. Observation was conducted during speaking activities, particularly group presentations, to identify students who exhibited anxiety-related behaviors such as avoiding eye contact, hesitating, remaining silent, or showing physical signs of nervousness. Field notes were used to document students' behaviors and classroom interactions. Based on these observations, selected students were invited to participate in interviews.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain deeper insights into students' experiences of speaking anxiety. An interview guide consisting of open-ended questions was used to explore students' feelings, perceived causes of anxiety, and their responses to speaking tasks. The interviews were conducted face-to-face, recorded with participants' consent, and subsequently transcribed to ensure accuracy. Each interview lasted approximately 5–10 minutes.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following procedures adapted from Michael Quinn Patton. First, the data were organized and transcribed into a manageable format. Second, the data were coded and grouped into categories based on recurring patterns related to types and causes of speaking anxiety. Finally, the findings were interpreted and described to provide a comprehensive



understanding of the phenomenon. This analytical process allowed the researcher to identify key themes, such as fear of negative evaluation, communication apprehension, and test anxiety, as well as the factors influencing students' speaking anxiety. This methodological approach ensured a systematic and in-depth exploration of students' speaking anxiety within its real classroom context.

## Findings and Discussion

### Findings

This study was conducted through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with 14 tenth-grade students of class X.I at SMA Negeri 5 Banda Aceh in the 2025/2026 academic year. The analysis focuses on identifying the types of English-speaking anxiety experienced by students and examining the underlying causes, grounded in the framework of Foreign Language Anxiety. The findings are presented and interpreted in relation to relevant theories and previous studies to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

#### 1. Types of Speaking Anxiety

The findings indicate that students experienced three types of anxiety: trait anxiety, state anxiety, and situation-specific anxiety. Among these, situation-specific anxiety emerged as the most dominant type, followed by state anxiety and trait anxiety, as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** The result of the pre-test and post-test

Type of Anxiety	Frequency of Occurrence	Percentage (%)
Specific situational anxiety	6	42,9%
State anxiety	5	35,7%
Trait anxiety	3	21,4%

The results show that specific situational anxiety was the most dominant type, accounting for 42.9%. This indicates that students mainly felt anxious in certain situations, such as speaking in front of the class, giving presentations, or answering teachers' questions. Six students reported feeling comfortable speaking with friends but anxious in formal or evaluative settings.

##### a) Specific Situational Anxiety

Six students (S1, S2, S8, S10, S12 and S14) described this type of anxiety. They explained that speaking English with friends felt normal or comfortable, but anxiety increased when they had to speak in front of the class, give a presentation, or take a speaking test.



Student 2:

*“During a presentation, everyone is looking at us the teacher and friends. But in informal situations, talking to friends, even if I make mistakes, it doesn’t really matter.”*

Student 8:

*“Maybe in friends. Maybe one of them likes to play pranks or joke around and laugh, making the person in front of them feel nervous.”*

The findings indicate that anxiety emerged only in specific situations involving public speaking or evaluation. This aligns with the concept of specific situation anxiety, where anxiety is triggered by particular contexts rather than being constant.

#### b) State Anxiety

Five students (S4, S5, S6, S9, S11) describe experiences that reflect state anxiety. They explained that anxiety usually appeared when they were unprepared, confused about vocabulary, or unsure about pronunciation.

Student 4:

*“Yes, I have. Because yesterday I was asked to speak in English, so I became nervous.”*

Student 11:

*“I’m afraid of pronouncing it wrong.”*

This supports the classifications of state anxiety, which refers to anxiety that arises in response to a specific moment or task.

#### c) Trait Anxiety

Three students ( S3, S7, S13 ) described experiences that indicate trait anxiety. They stated that they consistently felt nervous lacked confidence, and believed that their English ability was not good enough.

Student 7:

*“If I make a mistake, they might laugh at me. Then I can’t continue.”*

Unlike state or specific situational anxiety, their anxiety was continuous rather than temporary, indicating a stable personal tendency toward anxiety.

The predominance of situation-specific anxiety suggests that students’ anxiety is largely triggered by particular contexts, especially formal speaking situations such as presentations, answering questions, or speaking in front of the class. Several students reported feeling comfortable communicating in English with peers in



informal settings but becoming anxious when they were the centre of attention. This finding aligns with Horwitz et al. (1986), who argue that anxiety in language learning is often context-dependent and influenced by evaluative situations.

State anxiety was also frequently reported, particularly when students were unprepared or unsure about vocabulary and pronunciation. This indicates that anxiety can arise spontaneously in response to immediate classroom demands. In contrast, trait anxiety was less common, suggesting that only a small number of students consistently experience anxiety across different situations. These findings imply that speaking anxiety is not solely a stable personality trait but is largely shaped by situational and contextual factors.

## 2. Causes of Students' Speaking Anxiety

The analysis further reveals three primary causes of students' speaking anxiety: fear of negative evaluation, communication apprehension, and test anxiety. Among these, fear of negative evaluation was identified as the most dominant factor, followed by communication apprehension and test anxiety, as presented in Table 2.

**Table 4.** The result of the pre-test and post-test

Causes of Students Anxiety	Frequency of Occurrence	Percentage (%)
Fear of Negative Evaluation	6	42,9%
Communication Apprehension	5	35,7%
Test anxiety	3	21,4%

### a) Fear of Negative Evaluation

The second most effective was fear of negative evaluation, also reported by 6 students (42,9 %). Those experiencing this factor expressed concern about being judged, laughed at, or criticized by their peers and teachers, especially during presentations and formal speaking activities.

Six students (S1, S2, S3, S7, S12, S13) described experiences that reflect fear of negative evaluation. They stated that their anxiety increased when they became the center of attention while speaking English. This fear often leads to increased anxiety and avoidance of speaking activities.

### b) Communication Apprehension

This factor was mentioned by 5 out of 14 students (35,7%). Students explained that they felt anxious when they had difficulty expressing their ideas orally in English due to limited vocabulary, poor pronunciation, and lack of fluency.

Five students (S4, S5, S6, S9, S11) described experiences related to communication apprehension. They stated that anxiety appeared when they



wanted to speak but did not know how to pronounce words correctly or could not find appropriate vocabulary.

Student 5:

*“Once, in front of the class, I forgot what I wanted to say. “*

Student 6:

*“(I am) afraid of mispronunciation.”*

Student 11:

*“During the presentation, because during the presentation it was like eh, we should speak more eh, really in English. If you're with friends, it's like you can make a few mistakes.”*

### c) Test Anxiety

Test anxiety was identified as the least affecting factor, mentioned by 3 students (21, 4%). This anxiety emerged mainly during speaking tests or graded speaking activities, where students felt pressure because their performance would influence their academic scores. Three students (S8, S10, S14) described experiences related to test anxiety. They stated that speaking tests and graded speaking activities made them feel anxious.

Student 8:

*“Group time (is making me nervous). Because group time is like being looked at individually, and then it feels like they're being judged more. And then there's the fear of looking bad, not being good at speaking, not being fluent. So it's like being afraid of getting a bad grade.”*

Student 14:

*“Nothing really, it's just like during presentations, I'm afraid like that.”*

### **Discussion**

The findings of this study reveal that students experienced three main causes of speaking anxiety, namely fear of negative evaluation, communication apprehension, and test anxiety, with fear of negative evaluation emerging as the most dominant factor. This result is consistent with the framework of Foreign Language Anxiety, which identifies fear of negative evaluation as a central component of anxiety in foreign language learning. Students expressed strong concerns about making mistakes, being laughed at, or receiving negative judgments from both peers and teachers, particularly during presentations and other formal speaking activities.

In addition to fear of negative evaluation, communication apprehension was identified as another significant factor influencing students' anxiety. Many



students reported difficulties in expressing their ideas due to limited vocabulary, poor pronunciation, and lack of fluency. These linguistic limitations contributed to a sense of inadequacy, which in turn reduced their willingness to participate in speaking activities. This finding supports MacIntyre (2007), who argues that anxiety increases when learners are required to process language in real time with insufficient linguistic resources. As a result, students may experience hesitation, pauses, or even avoidance of speaking tasks.

Test anxiety was also evident, although it was less dominant compared to the other factors. This type of anxiety mainly occurred during oral examinations and graded speaking activities, where students felt pressured to perform well and were concerned about receiving low scores. Such performance pressure often led to increased nervousness, reduced concentration, and decreased fluency. This finding reinforces Horwitz et al. (1986), who emphasize that evaluative situations can heighten anxiety and negatively affect students' performance.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that students' speaking anxiety is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon influenced by both psychological and contextual factors. The prominence of fear of negative evaluation and the role of situation-specific contexts indicate that classroom environment and social dynamics significantly shape students' experiences. Therefore, creating a supportive and non-threatening learning environment is essential to reducing anxiety. Teachers are encouraged to implement strategies such as positive feedback, collaborative activities, and low-stakes speaking tasks to foster students' confidence and promote active participation in EFL classrooms.

## **Conclusion**

This study concludes that English-speaking anxiety is a prevalent and significant issue among tenth-grade students at SMA Negeri 5 Banda Aceh. The findings reveal that students experience three types of anxiety: situation-specific anxiety, state anxiety, and trait anxiety. Among these, situation-specific anxiety was the most dominant, indicating that students tend to feel more anxious in formal and evaluative speaking contexts, such as presentations, oral tests, or speaking in front of the class. In contrast, students generally felt more comfortable speaking English in informal situations with peers. State anxiety was also commonly observed, particularly when students were asked to speak spontaneously without preparation, while trait anxiety appeared less frequently and was limited to a small number of students.

The study further identifies three main causes of speaking anxiety: fear of negative evaluation, communication apprehension, and test anxiety. Fear of negative evaluation emerged as the most influential factor, as students were highly concerned about making mistakes, being laughed at, and receiving negative judgments from teachers and classmates. Communication apprehension was also



significant, with students experiencing difficulty expressing ideas due to limited vocabulary, poor pronunciation, and lack of fluency. Test anxiety, although less dominant, contributed to students' nervousness during graded speaking activities. These factors collectively affected students' confidence, participation, and overall speaking performance.

Overall, the findings highlight that speaking anxiety is a multifaceted phenomenon influenced by both psychological and contextual factors. Therefore, it is essential for teachers to create a supportive and non-threatening classroom environment that encourages students to participate actively without fear of judgment. Pedagogical strategies such as providing constructive feedback, implementing low-stakes speaking activities, and promoting collaborative learning can help reduce anxiety and improve students' confidence in speaking English. Future research is recommended to explore intervention-based approaches or include a larger sample to further understand and address speaking anxiety in EFL contexts.

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