

Public Speaking Challenges among EFL University Students: A Phenomenological Analysis of Language Anxiety

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Abstract

Public speaking is a fundamental communication skill for university students in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, yet it frequently induces considerable anxiety, particularly among learners operating within hierarchical and culturally sensitive educational environments. Although language anxiety has been extensively examined, limited attention has been paid to the lived experiences of Indonesian EFL students during public speaking tasks. This qualitative phenomenological study explores the factors triggering public speaking anxiety, the emotional and physical responses experienced by students, and the coping mechanisms they employ. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with undergraduate EFL students at Universitas PGRI Delta, East Java, and analyzed thematically. The findings indicate that anxiety is predominantly triggered by fear of negative evaluation from lecturers and linguistic insecurities, especially related to grammatical accuracy. These anxieties manifest cognitively in the form of mental blocks or “blank minds” and physiologically through symptoms such as trembling and rapid heartbeats. To cope with these challenges, students reported employing technical preparation strategies as well as physical regulation techniques, including box breathing and power posing. The study underscores the importance of pedagogical approaches that integrate linguistic development with emotional support, suggesting that low-stakes, interactive classroom practices can help reduce students’ affective filters and foster sustained confidence in academic oral communication.

Keywords: *Public speaking; Speaking anxiety; University students*

1. Introduction

Public speaking is a fundamental academic requirement in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, where students are frequently evaluated through oral presentations and classroom performances. Although public speaking provides opportunities for communicative development, it often triggers significant anxiety, particularly among university students who must demonstrate linguistic accuracy under evaluative conditions.

Language anxiety has been widely discussed in second language acquisition research. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) conceptualized foreign language anxiety as a situation-specific form of anxiety arising from self-perceptions, beliefs, and fear of negative evaluation in language learning environments. Similarly, Krashen’s Affective Filter Hypothesis explains that heightened anxiety can obstruct language input and output processing, leading to cognitive disruptions such as “blank mind” experiences and difficulty retrieving vocabulary. These theoretical perspectives highlight how emotional states directly influence learners’ speaking performance.

In formal academic settings, public speaking anxiety is further intensified by evaluative pressure and hierarchical classroom relationships. In contexts such as Indonesia, where respect for authority and social harmony are highly valued,

students may experience increased fear of making mistakes in front of lecturers and peers. Consequently, public speaking becomes not only a linguistic challenge but also a psychologically and socioculturally complex experience.

Although previous studies have extensively examined foreign language anxiety, most research has focused on quantitative measurement of anxiety levels rather than exploring students' lived experiences. In the Indonesian EFL context, phenomenological investigations that capture how students experience, interpret, and manage public speaking anxiety remain limited. Understanding these lived experiences is essential for designing pedagogical strategies that address both linguistic competence and emotional regulation.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the lived experiences of Indonesian EFL university students in dealing with public speaking anxiety, focusing on (1) factors triggering anxiety, (2) emotional and physical responses, and (3) coping strategies employed by students.

2. Method

This researcher utilized a qualitative phenomenological approach to capture the personal experiences of EFL university students encountering language anxiety in public speaking. Three undergraduate students enrolled in the English Education Department at Universitas PGRI Delta, East Java, were selected using purposive sampling. The participants were chosen based on specific criteria: (1) they had experienced delivering academic presentations in English, and (2) they reported experiencing anxiety during public speaking tasks. In phenomenological research, small sample sizes are considered appropriate because the emphasis lies on depth of lived experience rather than statistical generalization. Therefore, the selection of three participants allowed for focused, in-depth exploration of individual experiences.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted in Indonesia, enabling participants to express their emotions and reflections naturally. Each interview lasted approximately 4 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent. Although relatively brief, the interviews were highly focused and guided by targeted phenomenological questions addressing specific moments before, during, and after public speaking experiences. Probing questions were used to clarify emotional reactions, physical symptoms, and coping strategies to ensure sufficient depth of data. The focused nature of the interview allowed participants to articulate their lived experiences concisely yet meaningfully. The interview guide focused on their feelings before, during, and after public speaking, as well as factors that triggered anxiety and their strategies for managing it.

Key themes pertaining to students' experiences of coping with language anxiety while public speaking were identified using a descriptive qualitative analysis of the semi-structured interview data. To guarantee the correctness and comprehensiveness of the participants' answers, the interview tapes were first transcribed verbatim. Second, in order to fully comprehend the data content, the transcripts were reviewed several times. Third, remarks and phrases relating to the phenomena that were significant and pertinent were classified and highlighted. Fourth, themes that captured the spirit of the students' experiences were produced from the codes after they were categorized. In order to uncover patterns of difficulties, emotional reactions, and coping mechanisms employed by students, these topics were ultimately analyzed and explained. Peer debriefing and member verification were carried out to guarantee the validity and dependability of the analysis.

The data were analyzed using the six-phase thematic analysis framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, the interviews were transcribed verbatim and read repeatedly to achieve data familiarization. Second, significant statements related to anxiety experiences were coded and categorized. Third, these codes were organized into broader themes representing (1) triggering factors, (2) emotional and physical responses, and (3) coping strategies. To enhance credibility, peer debriefing and member checking were conducted to verify interpretations and ensure trustworthiness.

Table 1 : Thematic Framework of Public Speaking

Main Theme	Sub Theme	Description
Factors Language Anxiety	Triggering	
	Fear of making errors	Anxiety arising from the fear of making mistakes in grammar or word pronunciation.
	Fear of negative evaluation	Pressure felt due to the fear of being judged poorly or criticized, especially by lecturers or authority figures.
	Lack of preparation	A lack of self-confidence caused by insufficient mastery of the material or inadequate preparation.
Emotional and Physical Responses	situational pressure	Pressure stemming from external factors, such as tight deadlines or the requirement to answer questions spontaneously.
	Nervousness and shaking	A physical response characterized by intense nervousness that cause the body to shake while speaking.
	Blank mind and forgetting words	A cognitive state where the speaker suddenly loses focus, the mind goes blank, and they forget the intended words.

	Cold hands and trembling voice	Specific physiological symptoms including cold extremities and a shaky voice caused by an anxiety spike.
	Relief after presentation	A significant emotional shift toward calmness and satisfaction once the presentation task is completed.
Coping Strategies Used	Preparation and repeated practice	A strategy to manage anxiety by reviewing material and practicing intensively before the performance.
	Practicing in front of mirror	A self-visualization and evaluation technique used to build confidence by observing one's own delivery.
	Speaking with friends	Reducing the mental burden by discussing or practicing with peers to create a more comfortable environment
	Games and interactive activities	The use of interactive classroom activities and games to create a more relaxed and less formal atmosphere.

3. Findings and Discussion

This qualitative phenomenological study aimed to reveal the lived experiences of university English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students when facing public speaking anxiety. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with three participants. Through thematic analysis, three main themes aligned with the research focus were found: (1) Factors Triggering Language Anxiety: emotional cognitive and contextual sources of anxiety, (2) Emotional and Physical Responses: bodily and mental reaction to anxiety, (3) Coping Strategies Used: Reducing pressure by addressing the root cause

Factors Triggering Language Anxiety

The findings reveal that public speaking anxiety was primarily triggered by fear of making linguistic errors, fear of negative evaluation, and insufficient preparation. Participants consistently expressed concern about grammatical accuracy and pronunciation, particularly when speaking in front of lecturers. One participant stated, "I am afraid of saying the wrong thing and making mistakes in grammar," highlighting the central role of linguistic insecurity.

Fear of negative evaluation emerged as another dominant theme. Students reported worrying about being judged incompetent by peers or lecturers. This evaluative pressure intensified anxiety, especially in formal classroom settings. Additionally, lack of preparation and situational pressure, such as tight deadlines or being asked spontaneous questions, further heightened nervousness.

These findings indicate that speaking anxiety among Indonesian EFL students stems from an interaction between linguistic limitations, evaluative concerns, and classroom context.

Emotional and Physical Responses

Participants reported experiencing both physiological and cognitive symptoms during public speaking. Common physical responses included trembling, cold hands, rapid heartbeat, and a shaking voice. Cognitively, students frequently described experiencing a "blank mind" or sudden difficulty retrieving vocabulary while speaking.

One participant described the experience as follows: "I feel nervous, my body starts shaking, and sometimes I suddenly forget the words." These symptoms were closely linked to fear of making mistakes and low self-confidence.

Overall, the data suggest that speaking anxiety manifests through interconnected emotional, physical, and cognitive reactions that disrupt performance.

Coping Strategies Used

To manage speaking anxiety, participants employed both preparation-based and regulation-based strategies. Preparation strategies included repeated rehearsal, practicing in front of a mirror, and speaking with friends before presenting in class. These techniques were perceived as effective in increasing confidence and reducing nervousness.

In addition, some participants used physical self-regulation strategies such as box breathing and power posing before speaking. Gradual exposure to speaking tasks was also considered beneficial, as frequent practice helped reduce fear over time. One participant explained, "The more often I speak, the more my brain gets used to it."

Participants also emphasized the importance of supportive classroom environments. They suggested incorporating interactive activities and low-stakes speaking tasks to reduce pressure and encourage confidence.

Discussion

This phenomenological study aims to uncover the essence of the lived experiences of EFL students regarding public speaking anxiety. In line with Hasbiansyah (2008), the phenomenological approach in this study is not merely an analytical tool but a research method used to seek the "essence" of the experience by understanding the world from the subject's point of view as the first person. Based on the thematic analysis, three interrelated main themes were identified:

Factors Triggering Language Anxiety The findings indicate that students' anxiety is triggered by an interaction between a lack of preparation, pressure from authority figures (lecturers), and the fear of negative evaluation regarding grammar and pronunciation. The fear of negative evaluation, particularly from lecturers, has a far more significant impact on triggering tension compared to evaluation from peers.

This is supported by Al-Nofaie (2021), who states that the fear of making mistakes and being negatively evaluated is a primary source of speaking anxiety in oral presentation tasks. Furthermore, Wang & Zhang (2024) explain that hierarchical classroom structures in Asian contexts reinforce students' fear of speaking in front of instructors. These findings also align with Suharsono & Dewi (2022), who noted that Indonesian students tend to avoid public mistakes for fear of appearing incompetent in a collective society.

The findings showing fear of making mistakes and “blank mind” experiences align with Horwitz et al.'s (1986) conceptualization of foreign language anxiety as fear of negative evaluation and communication apprehension. The cognitive disruption reported by participants also supports Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, which suggests that heightened anxiety interferes with language processing and output. Woodrow (2021) also adds that physical symptoms like a trembling voice and a blank mind negatively impact the fluency of students' oral communication.

In coping strategies used, students employ various coping strategies to mitigate anxiety, ranging from technical preparation to social simulation. Practicing independently in front of a mirror and practicing with friends are considered crucial steps for building self-confidence. The subject also emphasized the importance of a relaxed classroom environment, such as the use of games to break the tension.

These findings are supported by Rachmawati (2023), who states that interactive classroom activities and peer collaboration create a low-stakes environment that effectively reduces student anxiety. Additionally, physical regulation strategies such as breathing exercises (box breathing) and power posing have been proven to help lower stress hormones (cortisol). This aligns with the findings of Kim & Park (2022), which suggest that coping strategies involving self-visualization and gradual exposure can alleviate anxiety before speaking.

4. Conclusion

This study explored the lived experiences of Indonesian EFL university students in managing public speaking anxiety. The findings confirm that anxiety is primarily triggered by linguistic insecurity, fear of negative evaluation, and situational classroom pressure. These factors contribute to both cognitive disruptions and physiological reactions that interfere with speaking performance.

Beyond confirming established theories of foreign language anxiety, this study highlights the role of emotional self-regulation strategies, such as box breathing and mirror practice, alongside conventional preparation techniques. This suggests that managing speaking anxiety requires not only linguistic readiness but also physiological and psychological regulation.

Pedagogically, the findings emphasize the importance of creating supportive classroom environments. Lecturers are encouraged to design low-stakes speaking tasks, incorporate interactive activities, and gradually increase speaking demands to reduce evaluative pressure. Integrating simple emotional regulation techniques into speaking instruction may further support students' confidence and communicative development.

Future research may involve larger participant groups and longer interviews to deepen understanding of phenomenological experiences across diverse EFL contexts.

5. References

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