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# EXPLORING SPEAKING ANXIETY AMONG SECOND-SEMESTER EFL STUDENTS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY AT TADULAKO UNIVERSITY

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**ABSTRACT**

Speaking anxiety can constrain EFL learners' participation, yet its meaning and perceived causes may vary across learning contexts and stages of university study. This study explored how second-semester students in the English Language Education Study Program at Tadulako University experienced speaking anxiety during classroom activities and what internal and external factors they associated with it. A descriptive qualitative design was used with five purposively selected students who reported experiencing speaking anxiety. Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews and supporting documentation and analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014). The findings describe emotional and physical reactions, including nervousness, hesitation, panic, trembling, and sweating, particularly during spontaneous speaking tasks. Participants associated their anxiety with fear of negative evaluation, limited vocabulary, and low self-confidence, as well as lecturer behavior and classroom atmosphere. They also described coping strategies such as deep breathing, positive self-talk, and regular practice. Although anxiety often discouraged participation, some participants perceived it as a prompt to prepare more carefully. The study contributes a context-specific account of how early-semester EFL students interpret speaking anxiety as an interaction of personal, linguistic, and classroom factors. The findings suggest that lecturers should combine structured speaking practice with supportive feedback, gradual task progression, and a classroom climate in which mistakes are treated as part of learning.

Keywords: EFL Students, Qualitative Study, Self-Confidence, Speaking Anxiety, Tadulako University

## INTRODUCTION

Speaking is widely recognized as one of the most essential yet challenging skills in learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Unlike receptive skills such as reading and listening, speaking requires learners to process language in real time, organize ideas, retrieve appropriate vocabulary, apply grammatical knowledge, pronounce words accurately, and respond spontaneously during interaction. These simultaneous cognitive and linguistic processes make speaking a demanding skill, particularly for learners whose exposure to English is limited outside the classroom. As a result, many EFL students experience difficulties when they are required to communicate orally, especially in formal

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academic settings where they are expected to demonstrate their language competence through discussions, presentations, role plays, or classroom interactions.

The ability to speak English effectively has become increasingly important in higher education because it supports academic achievement, professional development, and participation in global communication. University students are expected not only to understand English but also to express opinions, present ideas, collaborate with peers, and engage in academic discussions using English. Consequently, speaking competence has become one of the primary learning outcomes in English Language Education programs. However, despite the importance of speaking skills, many students continue to experience considerable psychological barriers that prevent them from communicating confidently in English.

One of the most frequently reported psychological barriers is speaking anxiety. Speaking anxiety refers to feelings of nervousness, fear, tension, worry, and discomfort experienced before or during oral communication in a foreign language. These emotional reactions often interfere with learners' ability to express their ideas effectively and may reduce their willingness to participate in classroom speaking activities. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) conceptualized foreign language anxiety as a situation-specific form of anxiety consisting of three interrelated dimensions: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Their theory suggests that language anxiety is not simply a reflection of poor language ability but rather a psychological response that emerges in situations where learners must use a foreign language under evaluative conditions. Similarly, Young (1991) argues that language anxiety develops through interactions among learner characteristics, teacher behavior, classroom procedures, and instructional practices, indicating that speaking anxiety is influenced by both personal and environmental factors.

Speaking anxiety has received considerable attention because it negatively affects various aspects of language learning. Students experiencing anxiety frequently hesitate before speaking, avoid volunteering in classroom discussions, struggle to organize their thoughts, and produce shorter or less accurate responses than they are capable of producing. Anxiety may also reduce students' confidence, limit their opportunities to practice speaking, and ultimately hinder the development of communicative competence. Previous studies have consistently demonstrated that anxious learners often underestimate their own abilities and perceive speaking tasks as more difficult than they actually are. Consequently, speaking anxiety remains one of the most significant challenges faced by EFL learners across different educational contexts.

Recent studies have consistently confirmed the negative relationship between foreign language anxiety and language achievement. Teimouri et al. (2019), through a meta-analysis involving numerous language learning contexts, found that higher levels of foreign language anxiety were associated with lower language achievement. Similarly, Botes et al. (2020) reported that anxiety negatively influenced learners' academic performance and communicative participation in foreign language classrooms. These findings suggest that speaking anxiety remains a significant barrier to effective language learning and classroom engagement.

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In higher education settings, speaking anxiety continues to be a common phenomenon among English language learners. University students frequently encounter communicative situations that require them to present research findings, participate in seminars, engage in group discussions, answer lecturers' questions, and deliver oral presentations in English. These activities demand not only adequate linguistic competence but also confidence and emotional readiness. Students who experience anxiety often hesitate to participate, avoid eye contact, speak with hesitation, or remain silent despite possessing sufficient knowledge to contribute to classroom discussions. Such behaviors may negatively influence academic performance and reduce opportunities for meaningful language practice.

The transition from secondary school to university further increases the challenges associated with speaking English. During the early semesters of university education, students are expected to adapt to new academic expectations, unfamiliar learning environments, different teaching approaches, and increased communicative demands. They are required to interact more actively with lecturers and classmates while simultaneously adjusting to higher academic standards. This transition may intensify students' speaking anxiety because they are still developing both linguistic competence and academic confidence. Therefore, understanding speaking anxiety among students in the early stages of higher education is essential for improving English language teaching and learning.

Previous research has identified numerous factors contributing to speaking anxiety among EFL learners. Psychological factors such as fear of making mistakes, fear of negative evaluation, low self-confidence, perfectionism, and shyness have consistently been identified as major contributors. Students frequently worry that grammatical errors, incorrect pronunciation, or inappropriate vocabulary choices will result in criticism from lecturers or classmates. Such concerns often discourage learners from participating actively in speaking activities and reduce their willingness to communicate. In addition, linguistic limitations, including insufficient vocabulary, limited grammatical knowledge, and pronunciation difficulties, further increase students' anxiety because they reduce learners' confidence in expressing their ideas clearly and accurately.

Recent research has also highlighted the role of emotional and psychological variables in shaping speaking anxiety. Khajavy et al. (2018) found that self-confidence significantly predicted learners' willingness to communicate, whereas anxiety reduced their readiness to participate in classroom interaction. Likewise, Jiang and Dewaele (2020) reported that students with higher levels of self-confidence tended to experience lower levels of speaking anxiety and demonstrated greater communicative engagement.

External factors also play an important role in shaping students' speaking anxiety. Classroom atmosphere, lecturer behavior, peer interaction, teaching methods, assessment practices, and opportunities for speaking practice all influence how students perceive speaking activities. Supportive lecturers who provide constructive feedback and encourage participation may help students build confidence and reduce anxiety. Conversely, highly competitive classrooms, excessive correction, or negative peer reactions may increase learners' emotional pressure and discourage them from speaking. These findings indicate that speaking anxiety is influenced by the interaction between internal psychological conditions and external learning environments rather than by linguistic competence alone.

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Classroom climate has been identified as one of the most influential environmental factors affecting language anxiety. Mercer and Gregersen (2020) emphasized that supportive teacher behavior and positive classroom relationships contribute to learners' psychological well-being and confidence. Similarly, Wang and Dewaele (2024) found that supportive classroom environments reduced speaking anxiety while simultaneously increasing learners' enjoyment and participation during speaking activities.

Numerous empirical studies have investigated speaking anxiety among university students in different EFL contexts. Anggreni et al. (2024) reported that second-semester students at Tadulako University experienced moderate to high levels of speaking anxiety caused primarily by limited vocabulary, fear of making mistakes, and low self-confidence. Their findings suggest that psychological factors remain central in shaping students' classroom participation. Similarly, Afidawati et al. (2024) found that students continued to experience speaking anxiety after returning to face-to-face learning because many had insufficient opportunities to practice oral communication during periods of online learning. Their study demonstrated that reduced speaking practice may have long-term effects on learners' confidence and communicative performance.

Recent studies indicate that speaking anxiety is shaped by interacting psychological, linguistic, and social conditions rather than by proficiency alone. Rafli and Muslim (2023), for example, reported anxiety among learners with relatively high oral proficiency, especially in spontaneous speaking situations. Studies in Indonesian and international university contexts have also highlighted the role of classroom pressure, teacher feedback, evaluation, and peer responses (Anthoney & Dawala, 2023; Lestari et al., 2024; Marlia et al., 2023). Taken together, these studies suggest that learners' anxiety is not simply an individual deficit: it is also influenced by the demands and social relationships embedded in classroom communication. However, the extent to which these factors are experienced and interpreted may differ according to learners' educational stage and local context.

Despite this growing body of research, an important gap remains between studies that measure anxiety levels or examine broad university populations and studies that document how students at a specific stage of study interpret their experiences. Quantitative research provides useful evidence about patterns and associations, but it may not fully capture how learners describe the emotional, physical, and behavioral dimensions of speaking anxiety or how they connect these experiences to classroom conditions and coping practices. Qualitative inquiry can complement this evidence by examining students' own accounts in context.

This issue is particularly relevant for second-semester students, who are still adapting to university expectations while participating in discussions, presentations, and other communicative tasks. Their experiences may reflect the interaction between developing language resources, emerging academic confidence, and unfamiliar expectations for oral participation. Nevertheless, academic semester alone should not be treated as evidence of a unique anxiety profile; the value of focusing on this group lies in examining their accounts within this transitional educational context.

To address this gap, the present study explores the speaking anxiety experienced by second-semester students in the English Language Education Study Program at Tadulako

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University. It examines students' descriptions of anxiety during classroom speaking activities and the internal and external factors they perceive as contributing to it. It also considers the coping strategies and consequences described by participants, providing a connected account of the phenomenon rather than treating emotional reactions, contributing factors, and coping responses as separate issues.

The study's contribution is therefore contextual and interpretive. It brings together students' reported emotional and physical reactions, perceived personal and classroom-related factors, and coping practices in a qualitative account of speaking anxiety during the early stage of university study. The findings are intended to inform classroom practices that support participation without assuming that the experiences of five students represent all EFL learners or that the reported relationships establish causal effects.

The study addresses two research questions: (1) How do second-semester students in the English Language Education Study Program at Tadulako University experience speaking anxiety during classroom speaking activities? and (2) What internal and external factors do these students perceive as contributing to their speaking anxiety?

These questions guide the analysis of students' accounts and the discussion of implications for English language teaching in similar higher-education contexts.

## METHODS

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to explore speaking anxiety experienced by second-semester students in the English Language Education Study Program at Tadulako University. A descriptive qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the purpose of this study was to obtain an in-depth understanding of students' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of speaking anxiety during classroom speaking activities rather than to measure anxiety levels statistically. Qualitative research allows researchers to explore participants' subjective experiences within their natural contexts and provides rich descriptions of complex social phenomena. Through this approach, the researcher was able to investigate how students experienced speaking anxiety, what factors contributed to their anxiety, and how they attempted to cope with it during English-speaking activities.

The study was conducted at the English Language Education Study Program, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Tadulako University, Palu, Indonesia. This setting was selected because English is taught as a foreign language, and students are regularly required to participate in various speaking activities such as classroom discussions, presentations, pair work, role plays, and oral assignments. These learning activities provide opportunities for students to communicate in English while simultaneously exposing them to situations that may trigger speaking anxiety. The research was carried out during the second semester of the 2024/2025 academic year, when students had begun participating in more communicative classroom activities following their initial adaptation to university learning.

Five second-semester students were purposively selected because they reported experiencing anxiety during English-speaking classroom activities. Eligibility criteria were that participants were enrolled in the English Language Education Study Program at Tadulako University, had participated in activities such as presentations or discussions,

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acknowledged anxiety when speaking English before lecturers or classmates, and voluntarily agreed to participate. This criterion-based selection was intended to obtain detailed accounts from students with direct experience of the phenomenon. The sample was designed for depth of description rather than statistical representativeness; the findings are therefore interpreted as context-specific insights.

To protect participants' privacy and maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were used throughout the study instead of participants' real names. The participants were identified as Student A, Student B, Student C, Student D, and Student E. The use of pseudonyms ensured that personal identities remained confidential while allowing participants to express their opinions and experiences openly during the interview process. All interview recordings, transcripts, and supporting documents were stored securely and were used solely for academic research purposes.

Data were collected primarily through semi-structured interviews supported by documentation. Semi-structured interviews were selected because they provided flexibility for the researcher to ask predetermined questions while allowing participants to elaborate on their responses and discuss experiences that emerged during the conversation. This interview format enabled the researcher to explore participants' feelings, perceptions, and experiences in greater depth than would have been possible through structured interviews or questionnaires.

The interview guide contained eleven open-ended questions developed in line with the research questions and literature on foreign language anxiety. Questions addressed participants' experiences and physical or emotional reactions, fear of negative evaluation, self-confidence, vocabulary limitations, lecturer behavior, classroom atmosphere, coping strategies, and perceived effects on speaking. Follow-up prompts were used to clarify responses and invite concrete examples. The manuscript states that the guide was reviewed for relevance and clarity; the authors should specify who reviewed it and whether any pilot testing or revisions were undertaken, if applicable.

Before conducting the interviews, the interview guide was reviewed to ensure that each question was relevant to the research objectives and understandable for the participants. Prior to the interview sessions, participants received an explanation regarding the purpose of the study, the interview procedures, and their rights as research participants. Each participant voluntarily agreed to participate after providing informed consent. They were informed that participation was entirely voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without negative consequences.

Each interview was conducted individually in a quiet and comfortable environment within the university to minimize distractions and encourage participants to speak freely. The interviews lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes depending on the participants' responses and the depth of information shared. With participants' permission, all interviews were audio-recorded to ensure that every response was accurately documented. After the interviews were completed, the recordings were transcribed verbatim to facilitate systematic analysis. The transcripts were then reviewed several times to ensure accuracy and completeness before the coding process began.

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In addition to interviews, documentation was employed as supporting data to strengthen the credibility of the findings. The documentation included interview transcripts, field notes recorded during the interview sessions, and photographs documenting the research activities. Field notes contained observations regarding participants' nonverbal expressions, emotional reactions, pauses, and body language during the interviews, providing additional contextual information that supported the interpretation of the interview data. These documents served as supplementary evidence and helped enhance the overall trustworthiness of the research findings.

Data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), comprising data collection, data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. The researcher repeatedly read the interview transcripts, identified meaningful statements relevant to the research questions, assigned codes, and grouped related codes into categories. The categories were then organized into thematic displays concerning students' experiences of speaking anxiety, internal factors, external classroom influences, coping strategies, and perceived impacts. Interpretations were checked against the original transcripts throughout the process so that the reported themes remained grounded in participants' accounts.

The analysis compared accounts across the five participants to identify recurring patterns as well as differences. The themes reported in the Results section represent patterns across the interview data rather than frequency estimates for a larger population. To strengthen transparency, the final manuscript should report a concrete example of the coding process (an anonymized excerpt, initial code, category, and resulting theme) based on the actual analysis records.

Trustworthiness was addressed through member checking, systematic documentation of research procedures, transcript-to-theme checking, and description of the study context. Participants were invited to review their interview transcripts and clarify statements where necessary. The researcher documented participant selection, interviewing, transcription, coding, and interpretation. These procedures were intended to support credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. The authors should add any additional procedures actually used, but should not claim independent coding, peer debriefing, or an audit trail unless these were conducted.

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the research process. Prior to data collection, participants were informed about the objectives of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the confidentiality of the information they provided. Written informed consent was obtained before conducting the interviews. Participants were assured that their identities would remain anonymous through the use of pseudonyms and that all research data would be used exclusively for academic purposes. The researcher also respected participants' rights to decline answering any question or withdraw from the study at any stage without experiencing any academic or personal consequences. By adhering to these ethical principles, the study sought to ensure respect for participants while maintaining the integrity and credibility of the research process.

## RESULTS

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***Students' Experiences of Speaking Anxiety***

The findings revealed that speaking anxiety was commonly experienced by second-semester students in the English Language Education Study Program at Tadulako University. All participants described speaking English in front of lecturers and classmates as a challenging experience that frequently generated feelings of nervousness, anxiety, hesitation, and discomfort. These emotional reactions appeared consistently across participants despite differences in their individual speaking abilities, suggesting that speaking anxiety was not limited to students with lower English proficiency.

Most participants explained that their anxiety became more intense when they were asked to speak spontaneously without sufficient preparation. Situations such as answering lecturers' questions unexpectedly, expressing opinions during classroom discussions, and delivering impromptu presentations created considerable emotional pressure. Students reported that they often worried about making grammatical mistakes, forgetting vocabulary, or being unable to continue speaking fluently once they began communicating in English.

In addition to emotional reactions, participants also described several physical symptoms associated with speaking anxiety. Common physical responses included trembling hands, excessive sweating, cold sweats, increased heartbeat, panic, and temporary confusion while speaking. Some students explained that these physical reactions made it even more difficult to concentrate on the content they wanted to deliver, leading to interruptions in communication and reduced speaking performance.

One participant explained:

> "When the lecturer suddenly asks me to answer in English, I immediately feel nervous. My hands shake, and sometimes I forget the words that I actually know."

Another participant stated:

> "I become very anxious when I have to speak in front of the whole class. I worry that I will make mistakes and everyone will notice them."

These accounts illustrate how anxiety was experienced as both an emotional state and a physical response during public or unprepared speaking. The reported symptoms also suggest a possible interaction: concern about errors may draw attention away from the message and make word retrieval feel more difficult. This interpretation is based on participants' descriptions and should not be read as a measured causal relationship.

Table 1 summarizes the major themes identified from participants' descriptions of their speaking anxiety experiences.

*Table 1. Summary of students' experiences of speaking anxiety*

| Theme | Findings |
|---|---|
| Emotional responses | Nervousness, anxiety, hesitation, discomfort, panic |
| Physical responses | Trembling, cold sweats, sweating |
| Anxiety-provoking situations | Speaking without preparation, speaking in front of the class |

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Table 1 summarizes the reported dimensions of anxiety. The themes are connected: emotional discomfort and physical symptoms may coincide with hesitation or silence, especially when students anticipate evaluation. The table should be read alongside the excerpts above, which show how participants described these experiences in their own words.

### *Internal Factors Contributing to Speaking Anxiety*

The interview data identified three major internal factors contributing to students' speaking anxiety: fear of negative evaluation, limited vocabulary, and low self-confidence. These factors repeatedly appeared in participants' responses and were perceived as the primary reasons underlying their reluctance to speak English during classroom activities.

#### *Fear of Negative Evaluation*

Fear of negative evaluation emerged as one of the strongest psychological factors contributing to speaking anxiety. Most participants expressed concern about being judged by lecturers and classmates whenever they spoke English. They worried that grammatical mistakes, incorrect pronunciation, or inappropriate vocabulary choices would attract criticism or negative comments from others.

One participant commented:

"I am afraid my classmates will laugh if I pronounce a word incorrectly."

Another participant explained:

"Sometimes I know the answer, but I choose to stay silent because I am worried about making mistakes."

The excerpts suggest that fear of negative evaluation was not limited to concern about formal grades; it also involved anticipated reactions from peers. Such expectations may make even familiar language feel risky to use in public. Because the data represent participants' accounts, the analysis describes perceived pressures rather than independently verifying classmates' behavior.

#### *Limited Vocabulary*

Limited vocabulary was another important factor contributing to speaking anxiety. Participants frequently explained that they understood the topic being discussed but struggled to express their ideas because they could not recall appropriate English words. As a result, they often paused for long periods, mixed English with Indonesian, or avoided speaking altogether.

Several students reported that insufficient vocabulary made them lose confidence during presentations and discussions because they could not organize their thoughts smoothly. This limitation increased their anxiety, particularly during spontaneous speaking activities where preparation time was unavailable.

#### *Low Self-Confidence*

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Among all internal factors, low self-confidence appeared to be the most influential factor affecting students' speaking behavior. Participants consistently described themselves as lacking confidence when communicating in English despite having studied the language for several years.

Students with lower confidence tended to avoid volunteering during classroom discussions, speaking only when directly called upon by lecturers. Conversely, students who perceived themselves as more confident reported feeling less anxious and were more willing to participate actively in classroom communication.

Table 2 summarizes the internal factors identified during the interviews.

*Table 2. Internal factors contributing to speaking anxiety*

| Internal Factors | Findings |
|---|---|
| Fear of negative evaluation | Students worried about being judged by lecturers and classmates |
| Limited vocabulary | Students experienced difficulty expressing ideas and maintaining communication |
| Low self-confidence | Students were reluctant to participate in speaking activities and tended to avoid speaking situations |

The internal factors appear to reinforce one another. Limited vocabulary may heighten concern about making errors, while low confidence may make students less willing to take the communicative risks needed to practice. This relationship helps explain why participants could know an answer yet still remain silent; however, the study does not establish a single causal sequence for every participant.

### *External Factors Contributing to Speaking Anxiety*

Besides internal factors, participants also identified several external factors that influenced their speaking anxiety. The interview data indicated that lecturer behavior and classroom atmosphere played significant roles in shaping students' emotional responses during speaking activities.

Many participants explained that lecturers' teaching styles affected their confidence while speaking. Lecturers who encouraged participation, responded patiently to mistakes, and provided constructive feedback helped students feel more comfortable using English. In contrast, lecturers who frequently corrected mistakes during speaking or appeared strict increased students' nervousness and hesitation.

One participant stated:

> "When the lecturer is friendly, I feel more confident to try speaking even if I make mistakes."

Another participant explained:

> "If the lecturer looks serious or immediately corrects every mistake, I become afraid to continue speaking."

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Participants also emphasized the importance of classroom atmosphere. Positive and supportive classroom environments encouraged students to participate actively, whereas classrooms where students frequently laughed at mistakes or showed little support increased speaking anxiety. Students reported feeling more confident when classmates listened attentively and respected each other's efforts to communicate in English.

Table 3 presents the external factors identified from the interview data.

*Table 3. External factors contributing to speaking anxiety*

| External Factors | Findings |
|---|---|
| Lecturer behavior | Strict lecturers increased anxiety, while supportive lecturers reduced anxiety |
| Classroom atmosphere | Positive and interactive classroom environments increased students' comfort and participation |

These accounts position the classroom as part of the anxiety experience rather than merely the setting in which it occurs. Lecturer responses and peer reactions can shape whether mistakes are interpreted as normal steps in learning or as events that invite judgment. This finding points to the importance of classroom interaction norms alongside individual coping strategies.

### *Coping Strategies and the Impact of Speaking Anxiety*

Despite experiencing considerable anxiety, participants described several strategies they used to manage their emotional reactions before and during speaking activities. The most commonly reported coping strategies included taking deep breaths, thinking positively, calming themselves before speaking, practicing English regularly, and focusing their attention on specific objects rather than on the audience.

One participant explained:

"Before presenting, I usually take a deep breath and tell myself that I can do it."

Another participant reported:

"I try not to think about my mistakes. Instead, I focus on delivering my ideas."

These strategies helped participants reduce nervousness, improve concentration, and increase confidence during classroom speaking activities.

The findings also revealed that speaking anxiety produced both negative and positive impacts on students' speaking development. On the negative side, anxiety reduced classroom participation, discouraged students from volunteering to answer questions, interrupted fluency, and slowed the development of speaking skills because students avoided opportunities to practice English.

Interestingly, some participants also perceived anxiety as a motivating factor. They explained that feeling anxious encouraged them to prepare more carefully before presentations, practice speaking more frequently, and improve their vocabulary and pronunciation. Consequently, although anxiety often created obstacles during classroom

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communication, it also motivated some students to improve their English-speaking competence.

Table 4 summarizes the coping strategies and impacts identified during the interviews.

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*Table 4. Coping strategies and the impact of speaking anxiety*

| Category | Findings |
|---|---|
| Coping strategies | Deep breathing, positive thinking, staying calm, focusing on specific objects |
| Negative impacts | Reduced participation, avoidance of speaking activities, slower speaking development |
| Positive impacts | Motivation to improve speaking ability |

Taken together, participants' accounts suggest that speaking anxiety is dynamic: it can restrict immediate participation while also prompting preparation in some circumstances. This does not mean that anxiety is beneficial in general; rather, the perceived consequences differed across situations and participants. The pedagogical priority is to support participation and preparation without creating unnecessary emotional pressure.

## DISCUSSION

### *Students' Experiences of Speaking Anxiety*

The findings of this study revealed that speaking anxiety was a common experience among second-semester students in the English Language Education Study Program at Tadulako University. All participants reported experiencing emotional reactions such as nervousness, anxiety, hesitation, discomfort, and panic when they were required to communicate in English during classroom activities. In addition to these emotional responses, several participants described physical symptoms including trembling, sweating, cold sweats, and confusion, particularly when speaking in front of lecturers and classmates without prior preparation. These findings demonstrate that speaking anxiety extends beyond psychological discomfort and manifests through physical reactions that interfere with students' ability to communicate effectively.

The findings support Horwitz et al.'s (1986) theory of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety, which explains that anxiety experienced in language learning is a situation-specific phenomenon rather than a general personality trait. According to this theory, learners often experience communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety when required to use a foreign language. The present findings clearly illustrate these components because students not only feared making linguistic mistakes but also experienced physical tension while speaking. The appearance of trembling, sweating, and panic suggests that anxiety affects students cognitively, emotionally, and physiologically, reducing their ability to organize ideas and communicate fluently.

The findings are also consistent with Young (1991), who emphasized that speaking anxiety develops through the interaction of learner characteristics, classroom situations, teacher behavior, and instructional practices. In this study, participants explained that spontaneous speaking tasks created considerably greater anxiety than prepared presentations. When students had insufficient time to organize their thoughts, retrieve vocabulary, and mentally prepare themselves, they experienced greater nervousness and uncertainty. This finding suggests that spontaneous communication remains one of the most

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challenging aspects of foreign language learning, especially for learners in the early stages of university education.

The present findings are supported by Anggreni et al. (2024), who reported that university students frequently experienced nervousness, fear, and hesitation during English-speaking activities. Similarly, Rafli and Muslim (2023) found that speaking anxiety was experienced even by learners with relatively high oral proficiency, indicating that anxiety cannot simply be explained by language ability. Instead, anxiety appears to be influenced by students' perceptions of communicative situations and the social consequences of making mistakes while speaking English.

These findings are also consistent with the meta-analytic evidence reported by Teimouri et al. (2019), which demonstrated that anxiety affects learners across different proficiency levels and educational contexts. Furthermore, Dewaele and MacIntyre (2016) argued that anxiety often coexists with other classroom emotions and can significantly influence learners' willingness to engage in oral communication.

The present findings are further supported by Alamri and Qasem (2024), who reported that speaking anxiety remains a common challenge among EFL learners regardless of gender differences. Their study demonstrated that students frequently experience nervousness, fear of making mistakes, and concern about classroom evaluation during oral communication activities. Similarly, Paraguas (2025), through a systematic literature review, concluded that speaking anxiety consistently emerges as one of the most frequently reported obstacles affecting learners' oral performance in EFL contexts.

An interesting finding of the present study is that participants consistently associated spontaneous speaking activities with higher levels of anxiety than planned presentations. This indicates that preparation time functions as an important factor in reducing anxiety because students are able to organize vocabulary, grammar, and ideas before speaking. Consequently, English language lecturers may consider gradually increasing the level of spontaneity in classroom speaking activities to help students build confidence while minimizing excessive psychological pressure.

### *Internal Factors Contributing to Speaking Anxiety*

The findings identified three major internal factors contributing to students' speaking anxiety, namely fear of negative evaluation, limited vocabulary, and low self-confidence. Among these factors, low self-confidence emerged as the strongest influence on students' willingness to communicate in English. Although vocabulary limitations and fear of making mistakes contributed to anxiety, participants repeatedly emphasized that confidence ultimately determined whether they attempted to speak or remained silent during classroom activities.

Fear of negative evaluation was consistently identified as an important source of anxiety. Participants worried that lecturers and classmates would criticize their pronunciation, grammatical accuracy, or vocabulary choices. Such concerns discouraged students from participating in discussions even when they understood the topic being discussed. This finding strongly supports Horwitz et al. (1986), who identified fear of negative evaluation as one of the three central dimensions of foreign language classroom

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anxiety. Students often evaluate their own speaking performance through the anticipated judgments of others, leading them to avoid communication as a means of protecting themselves from embarrassment.

The findings also correspond with previous research conducted by Marlia et al. (2023), who found that peer evaluation significantly influenced students' confidence during English-speaking activities. Learners frequently perceive classmates as evaluators rather than learning partners, making them reluctant to express ideas openly. Consequently, classroom interactions become psychologically demanding rather than communicatively meaningful.

Limited vocabulary also emerged as an important contributor to speaking anxiety. Participants explained that they frequently knew what they wanted to express but were unable to recall appropriate English vocabulary. This limitation interrupted the flow of communication and increased feelings of panic because students worried about long pauses or incomplete responses. Liang et al. (2024) similarly reported that inadequate vocabulary knowledge remains one of the most common linguistic barriers contributing to foreign language anxiety among university students. Vocabulary limitations not only reduce speaking fluency but also weaken learners' confidence because they become uncertain about their ability to communicate successfully.

Among all internal factors, self-confidence appeared to have the greatest influence on students' speaking behavior. Participants consistently explained that confidence determined whether they volunteered to answer questions, participated in discussions, or presented ideas before the class. Even students who possessed relatively adequate vocabulary sometimes avoided speaking because they doubted their own abilities. This finding supports Liu (2008), who concluded that self-confidence significantly predicts learners' willingness to communicate in a foreign language. Students with stronger self-confidence are generally more willing to accept mistakes as part of learning, whereas students with lower confidence often interpret mistakes as personal failures.

The dominance of self-confidence in the present findings suggests that improving students' speaking ability requires more than linguistic instruction alone. Language learning should also address psychological development by creating opportunities for successful speaking experiences that gradually strengthen students' confidence. This implication highlights the importance of integrating emotional support into speaking instruction rather than focusing exclusively on grammatical accuracy.

This finding aligns with Lee (2020), who found that self-confidence positively predicted learners' willingness to communicate in English. Similarly, Khajavy et al. (2018) argued that self-confidence serves as a crucial psychological resource that enables learners to overcome communication barriers and participate more actively in classroom interactions.

The importance of internal psychological factors is also supported by Damayanti and Cahyono (2025), who found that cognitive, linguistic, and social variables collectively influence students' speaking anxiety. Their findings indicated that learners with limited confidence in their language abilities tended to perceive speaking situations as threatening, resulting in greater communication avoidance. These results reinforce the argument that

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self-confidence serves as a crucial factor in determining students' willingness to participate in oral communication.

***External Factors Contributing to Speaking Anxiety***

The present study also demonstrated that speaking anxiety is strongly influenced by external classroom conditions. Participants consistently reported that lecturer behavior and classroom atmosphere significantly affected their emotional readiness to communicate in English. Supportive lecturers encouraged participation and reduced students' anxiety, whereas strict teaching styles and excessive correction increased nervousness and hesitation.

These findings support Brown (2000), who emphasized that successful language learning depends on the creation of supportive learning environments where students feel psychologically safe to experiment with language. When learners perceive the classroom as a place where mistakes are accepted as part of learning, they become more willing to communicate and participate actively. Conversely, classrooms characterized by excessive criticism or constant correction may discourage students from speaking because they become preoccupied with avoiding mistakes rather than expressing ideas.

Young (1991) similarly argued that teacher attitudes, instructional practices, and classroom climate play important roles in shaping students' foreign language anxiety. The present findings reinforce this argument because participants consistently associated supportive lecturers with reduced anxiety. Lecturers who smiled, encouraged participation, and provided constructive feedback helped students develop greater confidence, while lecturers who immediately corrected every error unintentionally increased students' fear of making mistakes.

Recent studies further support the importance of classroom environment in reducing speaking anxiety. Mercer and Gregersen (2020) emphasized that teacher support enhances learners' emotional security and promotes active participation. Likewise, Wang and Dewaele (2024) reported that positive classroom climates were associated with lower levels of anxiety and higher levels of foreign language enjoyment among EFL learners.

In addition, Alqarni (2021) reported that learning environments significantly influence learners' willingness to communicate and their level of speaking anxiety. Supportive classroom interactions and positive communication experiences were associated with lower anxiety levels and greater speaking participation. These findings further emphasize the importance of creating learning environments that encourage risk-taking and reduce fear of negative evaluation.

The findings are also consistent with Anthoney and Dawala (2023), who reported that classroom pressure and instructional expectations contributed significantly to speaking anxiety among university students. Likewise, Lestari et al. (2024) found that teacher feedback and classroom evaluation influenced students' willingness to participate in oral communication. These studies, together with the present findings, suggest that speaking anxiety should be viewed as a product of interactions between learners and their educational environments rather than solely as an individual psychological characteristic.

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Another important finding concerns the role of classmates in shaping classroom atmosphere. Participants indicated that supportive peers encouraged them to speak more confidently, whereas fear of being laughed at reduced their willingness to communicate. This suggests that speaking anxiety is socially constructed within classroom interactions. Therefore, lecturers should encourage collaborative learning activities that promote mutual respect, peer encouragement, and constructive feedback rather than competition among students.

### *Coping Strategies and the Impact of Speaking Anxiety*

The findings revealed that participants actively employed various coping strategies to manage speaking anxiety. Deep breathing, positive thinking, remaining calm, practicing English regularly, and focusing attention away from the audience were commonly reported techniques. These strategies enabled students to regulate their emotional responses before and during speaking activities, allowing them to participate despite experiencing anxiety.

These findings indicate that students are not passive recipients of anxiety but actively attempt to overcome psychological barriers through self-regulation. This observation supports Lestari et al. (2024), who concluded that emotional regulation strategies improve learners' confidence during English-speaking activities. Positive self-talk and relaxation techniques appear particularly effective because they reduce physiological symptoms while increasing learners' belief in their ability to complete speaking tasks successfully.

Similar findings were reported by Resnik et al. (2021), who found that learners frequently employed emotional regulation strategies such as positive self-talk, relaxation techniques, and repeated speaking practice to manage anxiety. Furthermore, Botes et al. (2022) emphasized that emotional regulation plays a significant role in facilitating successful language learning experiences and improving learners' confidence.

Recent studies have also highlighted the effectiveness of various intervention strategies in reducing speaking anxiety. Koçali and Aşık (2026) found that mindfulness-based practices helped learners regulate emotional responses and improve confidence during speaking activities. Likewise, Ebadi and Azizimajd (2026) reported that technology-supported speaking tasks provided learners with opportunities to practice communication in less threatening environments, resulting in reduced speaking anxiety and improved oral performance.

The present study further demonstrated that speaking anxiety produced both negative and positive consequences. Excessive anxiety reduced classroom participation, interrupted speaking fluency, discouraged students from volunteering, and slowed the development of speaking skills because learners avoided opportunities for oral communication. These findings correspond with Horwitz et al. (1986), who argued that excessive foreign language anxiety interferes with language learning by limiting learners' participation and reducing their opportunities to practice communicative skills.

However, the findings also revealed an interesting positive dimension of speaking anxiety. Several participants explained that feeling anxious motivated them to prepare presentations more carefully, practice English more frequently, improve vocabulary, and seek additional speaking opportunities outside the classroom. Rather than discouraging

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learning completely, moderate levels of anxiety encouraged some students to become more responsible and better prepared for speaking tasks.

This positive dimension of anxiety is consistent with Wati et al. (2025), who argued that moderate levels of anxiety may encourage learners to engage in greater preparation and self-monitoring before speaking tasks. When properly managed, anxiety can function as a motivational factor that stimulates learners to improve their speaking competence and communication readiness.

This finding suggests that speaking anxiety should not always be interpreted as a wholly negative phenomenon. Consistent with educational psychology literature, moderate anxiety may function as a motivating force that encourages greater preparation and effort, whereas excessive anxiety becomes detrimental to learning. Therefore, the objective of English language teaching should not necessarily be to eliminate anxiety completely but rather to maintain it at manageable levels that encourage learning without overwhelming students psychologically.

Overall, the discussion demonstrates that speaking anxiety among second-semester students is a multidimensional phenomenon resulting from the interaction of psychological, linguistic, and environmental factors. Understanding these interacting influences provides valuable implications for English language lecturers seeking to develop supportive classroom environments that promote confidence, participation, and communicative competence among EFL learners.

Recent evidence from Indonesian higher education contexts further confirms the persistence of speaking anxiety among university students. Hasan et al. (2026) found that speaking anxiety remains prevalent among EFL learners despite increased exposure to English instruction, while Faradiba et al. (2026) reported that classroom presentations continue to be one of the most anxiety-provoking speaking situations. Furthermore, Arsalan et al. (2025) demonstrated through bibliometric analysis that speaking anxiety remains one of the most widely investigated issues in English language education, highlighting its continuing relevance for researchers and practitioners.

## CONCLUSION

This qualitative study explored how five second-semester students in the English Language Education Study Program at Tadulako University experienced speaking anxiety and what factors they perceived as contributing to it. Participants described emotional and physical reactions during speaking tasks and associated their anxiety with fear of negative evaluation, limited vocabulary, low self-confidence, lecturer behavior, and classroom atmosphere. They also reported strategies such as deep breathing, positive self-talk, and regular practice. Some participants described anxiety as discouraging participation, while others saw it as a reason to prepare more thoroughly.

The study's main contribution is a context-specific account that connects students' emotional and physical experiences with personal, linguistic, and classroom-related factors and their attempts to cope. The findings suggest that speaking anxiety should be considered in relation to the learning environment as well as students' perceived language resources. For lecturers, practical responses include providing low-stakes speaking opportunities,

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allowing preparation time before spontaneous responses, offering constructive feedback without excessive interruption, and establishing clear norms against ridicule. These recommendations are implications from participants' accounts, not tested interventions.

The findings should be interpreted in light of the study's limitations. The study involved five purposively selected students from one university and relied primarily on interview accounts and supporting documentation. It therefore does not estimate the prevalence of speaking anxiety, establish causal relationships, or represent all students in the program. Future studies could compare students across academic stages and institutions, combine qualitative accounts with validated anxiety measures, and evaluate classroom practices designed to support confident oral participation.

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