Bilingual: Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris Vol. 8 No. 1, 2026 **e – ISSN: 2302 - 6596**
DOI: 10.36985/f997k949

IDENTIFICATION OF STUDENT'S SPEAKING ANXIETY IN MADRASAH ALIYAH AL-WASLIYAH PEMATANGSIANTAR 2026

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Abstract

Speaking remains the most challenging skill in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) acquisition, largely due to affective barriers such as anxiety. This research aims to identify and describe the phenomenon of speaking anxiety among Grade XI students at Madrasah Aliyah Al-Washliyah Pematangsiantar. Employing a mixed-method descriptive design, the research utilized a triangulation of instruments: a Likert-scale questionnaire adapted from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), semi-structured interviews, and classroom observations. The participants consisted of 30 students for the survey phase, with 12 students purposefully selected for in-depth interviews. The quantitative analysis reveals a pervasive issue: 96.7% of students experience speaking anxiety, with exactly half (50%) categorized as having High Anxiety. Qualitative analysis identifies Fear of Negative Evaluation as the dominant dimension, driven by a "judgmental classroom culture" where peers laugh, boo, or imitate mistakes. Physiological manifestations such as heart palpitations (100%) and cognitive blocks like "mind going blank" (66.6%) were prevalent. The research concludes that speaking anxiety in this context is socially constructed, exacerbated by an unsupportive classroom atmosphere. The findings suggest that pedagogical interventions must transcend linguistic drills to address the psychological and social safety of the students.

Keywords: Speaking Anxiety, EFL, Qualitative Descriptive, Madrasah Aliyah, Communication Apprehension.

Introduction

In the landscape of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, the acquisition of oral proficiency stands as a primary objective. However, this goal is frequently obstructed by affective filters, most notably speaking anxiety. Communication is a fundamental aspect of human interaction, facilitating the exchange

of ideas and information. In Indonesia, where English is taught as a foreign language, students often face a dual challenge: mastering linguistic competence while managing the psychological pressure of real-time production. Unlike writing, which allows for reflection and editing, speaking demands spontaneity, accuracy, and fluency, making it a high-stakes activity for many learners. Richards (2008) posits that effective speaking involves not merely grammatical accuracy but the complex negotiation of meaning, a task that becomes daunting when learners are gripped by fear.

Recent scholarly discourse has increasingly highlighted the role of anxiety in inhibiting language acquisition. Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) emphasize that affective factors are decisive in learners' success. Specifically, MacIntyre (2002) defines language anxiety as a distinct psychological state that lowers a learner's willingness to communicate (WTC), thereby depriving them of essential practice opportunities. In the Indonesian context, this phenomenon is compounded by cultural values. Students in collectivist cultures often fear "losing face" or being judged by their peers, leading to avoidance behaviors in the classroom (Liu & Jackson, 2008; Zhang, 2019).

This research focuses on the specific context of Madrasah Aliyah Al-Washliyah Pematangsiantar, a religious-based institution where Arabic and Indonesian dominate daily academic and religious activities. Consequently, English occupies a less dominant position, creating a linguistic environment where speaking English feels unnatural or intimidating. Preliminary observations revealed a paradox: students demonstrated comprehension of the material yet exhibited marked reluctance to speak. They appeared hesitant, avoided eye contact, and often switched codes to Indonesian. This research, therefore, seeks to critically examine the levels, manifestations, and contributing factors of speaking anxiety in this unique educational setting, aiming to bridge the gap between identifying the problem and implementing effective solutions.

Review of Literature

The Nature of Speaking in EFL Contexts

Speaking is a multifaceted cognitive and social process. In EFL settings, learners must simultaneously manage lexical retrieval, grammatical encoding, and pronunciation while adhering to social norms. Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis suggests that high anxiety acts as a mental block, preventing comprehensible input from being processed.

Thus, understanding anxiety is not merely an exercise in psychology but a prerequisite for effective pedagogy.

Dimensions of Language Anxiety

Language anxiety is conceptualized as a multidimensional construct. Horwitz, Tallon, and Luo (2010) categorize it into three primary components:

1. Communication Apprehension: Fear associated with real or anticipated communication, often manifesting as physical nervousness.

2. Fear of Negative Evaluation: Apprehension about others' evaluations, extending beyond the classroom to include social judgments.

3. Test Anxiety: Fear of failure in evaluative situations, particularly during oral examinations.

These dimensions are interconnected. A student who fears negative evaluation may experience communication apprehension, leading to poor test performance, thus creating a cycle of anxiety that is difficult to break.

Research Methodology

Research Design and Participants

This research employed a mixed-method descriptive design. The research was conducted at Madrasah Aliyah Al-Washliyah 67 Pematangsiantar in February 2026. The population comprised 30 students of Grade XI, all of whom participated in the questionnaire phase. For the qualitative phase, 12 students were selected via purposive sampling based on their anxiety levels (High and Medium).

Instruments and Data Analysis

Data were collected through three instruments: a 25-item questionnaire adapted from FLCAS, semi-structured interviews, and non-participant classroom observation sheets. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to categorize anxiety levels into Low (25-58), Medium (59-92), and High (93-125). Qualitative data underwent the interactive analysis model proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994), involving data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing.

Finding And Discussion

Prevalence and Levels of Speaking Anxiety

The quantitative analysis of the questionnaire data reveals a stark reality regarding the psychological state of the students. The data indicates that speaking anxiety is not an isolated issue but a systemic problem within the classroom. Out of 30 students, only one student (3.3%) fell into the Low Anxiety category. The overwhelming majority were clustered in the Medium (46.7%) and High Anxiety (50%) categories. This finding is particularly alarming as it suggests that half of the class is operating under a state of psychological distress that significantly impairs their ability to communicate. These statistics align with MacIntyre's (2002) assertion that anxiety is a pervasive barrier in EFL contexts, yet the concentration of high anxiety in this specific madrasah setting suggests unique environmental stressors are at play.

Fear of Negative Evaluation: The Dominant Dimension

Among the three dimensions of anxiety identified by Horwitz et al. (1986), Fear of Negative Evaluation emerged as the most dominant. The qualitative data suggests that anxiety in this context is largely socially constructed. The interview transcripts revealed a "toxic cycle" of interaction: a student makes a mistake, peers react with laughter or booing, and the student experiences shame, leading to increased anxiety and future avoidance.

For instance, Informant KH (High Anxiety) reported, "I am afraid of mispronouncing words and then my classmates laugh at me, or someone shouts and boos me." Similarly, Informant AZ shared a traumatic experience: "Once I mispronounced a word and several classmates laughed and imitated me. Since then, whenever I am asked to go to the front, I feel extremely nervous." This fear of social humiliation is deeply rooted in the cultural value of "saving face," common in Asian classrooms. It transforms the classroom from a space of learning into a performance stage where errors are met with social punishment rather than corrective support. The data confirms that for these students, the fear is not of the language itself, but of the social consequences of imperfect language use.

Manifestations: Physiological and Cognitive Interference

The research found that anxiety manifests through tangible physiological and cognitive symptoms, validating the somatic nature of language anxiety. All 12

interviewees (100%) reported increased heart rates, while 58.3% experienced trembling. These symptoms are consistent with the "fight or flight" response described by Price (1991), where the body reacts to speaking as a physical threat.

More critically, 66.6% of students reported "mind going blank." This cognitive interference supports the Cognitive Interference Theory proposed by MacIntyre and Gardner (1994). When students are anxious, cognitive resources are diverted to process the worry and fear, leaving insufficient capacity for language retrieval. Informant NN stated, "When my name is called, my heart beats very fast... I sometimes go blank for a few seconds before I can start talking." This finding underscores a tragedy in the learning process: students possess the linguistic knowledge but are unable to retrieve it under the pressure of a judgmental environment.

Contributing Factors: Internal vs. External

The analysis highlights a complex interplay between internal and external factors. Internally, students cited low self-confidence and limited vocabulary. Externally, the “noisy classroom” and disruptive peer behaviors were significant amplifiers. Informant MAR noted, “When the classroom is noisy, I become even more afraid to speak… my classmates will immediately shout and boo me.” This indicates that the classroom atmosphere acts as a “threat amplifier.” Even students who engage in proactive coping strategies, such as attending private courses (Informant KH), find that their preparation is insufficient to counter the fear induced by the chaotic classroom environment.

Students’ Coping Strategies

Despite the high levels of anxiety, students were not passive victims. They employed various coping mechanisms, primarily “Physical Relaxation” (deep breathing) and “Preparation/Practice.” However, the persistence of high anxiety despite these strategies suggests that individual resilience is not enough to overcome a systemic environmental issue. The reliance on deep breathing indicates students are attempting to self-regulate their physiology, but without a change in the “judgmental culture” of the classroom, these strategies act only as temporary Band-Aids.

Conclusion

This research concludes that speaking anxiety at Madrasah Aliyah Al-Washliyah is a pervasive, socially constructed phenomenon. With 96.7% of students experiencing medium to high anxiety, the issue is systemic. The dominant factor is the Fear of Negative Evaluation, fueled by a classroom culture that mocks errors. Anxiety manifests physically through palpitations and cognitively through memory blocks ("mind going blank"), validating that the distress is real and debilitating. The findings suggest that improving linguistic competence alone is insufficient; interventions must address the social dynamics of the classroom.

Suggestion

For English Teachers:

Teachers must actively dismantle the "judgmental classroom culture." Establishing strict norms against mocking and booing is essential to lower the "social threat" level. Pedagogically, teachers should implement "low-stakes" speaking activities like pair work and small group discussions to build confidence gradually. Corrective feedback should be delivered gently and privately to avoid public embarrassment.

For Students:

Students are encouraged to reframe their mindset, viewing mistakes as a natural part of learning rather than a social failure. Active utilization of coping strategies, such as deep breathing and consistent practice, can help manage physiological symptoms.

For Future Researchers:

Future research should investigate the long-term effects of specific interventions aimed at changing peer dynamics in the classroom. Action research focusing on creating a "safe speaking zone" could provide empirical evidence on how shifting the social environment impacts anxiety levels.

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