



Exploring Student Speaking Anxiety in EFL Classrooms: Causes, Effects, and Strategies for Alleviation
A Case Study of the First-Semester Students at Al-Swani Faculty of Arts, University of Tripoli

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Abstract

This study investigates the causes, effects, and potential strategies for reducing speaking anxiety among first-semester EFL students at Al-Swani Faculty of Arts, University of Tripoli. Using a descriptive analytical method, data were collected through a structured questionnaire and classroom observation checklist. The results revealed that speaking anxiety is highly prevalent among beginners, mainly due to fear of making mistakes, limited vocabulary, low confidence, and concerns about negative evaluation. Anxiety was found to negatively influence students' oral performance, leading to reduced participation, hesitation, physical symptoms, and avoidance behaviors. However, the findings also showed that supportive teacher behavior, sufficient preparation time, and collaborative speaking tasks can effectively reduce anxiety. The study concludes that addressing psychological and classroom-related factors is essential for improving learners' oral communication and offers a set of practical recommendations for teachers and institutions.

Keywords: speaking anxiety, EFL learners, classroom observation, foreign language anxiety, oral performance

استكشاف قلق التحدث لدى الطلاب في فصول اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية: الأسباب والآثار واستراتيجيات التخفيف

دراسة حالة لطلبة الفصل الدراسي الأول بكلية الآداب السواني – جامعة طرابلس

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الملخص

تبحث هذه الدراسة في أسباب قلق التحدث، وآثاره، والاستراتيجيات الممكنة لتخفيفه لدى طلاب الفصل الأول من قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بكلية الآداب السواني – جامعة طرابلس. اعتمدت الدراسة المنهج الوصفي التحليلي، وجمعـت البيانات باستخدام استبيان منظم وبطاقة ملاحظة صفيـة. أظهرت النتائج انتشاراً مرتـقاً لقلق التحدث بين المبتدئـين، ويرجـع ذلك أساسـاً إلى الخوف من ارتكـاب الأخطـاء، وضـعـفـ المـفردـاتـ، وـقـلـةـ الثـقـةـ بـالـنـفـسـ، وـالـخـوفـ مـنـ التـقـيـمـ السـلـبـيـ. كـمـاـ بـيـنـتـ النـتـائـجـ أـنـ القـلـقـ يـؤـثـرـ سـلـيـاـ عـلـىـ الـأـدـاءـ الشـفـهيـ، مـاـ يـؤـدـيـ إـلـىـ ضـعـفـ المـشـارـكـةـ، وـالـتـرـدـ، وـظـهـورـ أـعـراضـ بـدنـيـ، وـسـلـوكـيـاتـ التـجـنبـ. وـمـعـ

ذلك، أوضحت النتائج أن سلوك المعلم الداعم، وتوفير وقت كافٍ للاستعداد، والعمل التعاوني، يمكن أن يخفف بشكل فعال من القلق. وتخلص الدراسة إلى ضرورة معالجة العوامل النفسية والصفية لتحسين مهارات التواصل الشفهي لدى المتعلمين، وتقدم مجموعة توصيات عملية للمعلمين والمؤسسات.

الكلمات المفتاحية: قلق التحدث، متعلمو الإنجليزية، الملاحظة الصحفية، القلق اللغوي، الأداء الشفهي

Introduction

Speaking is widely acknowledged to be one of the most essential skills for effective communication in any language, especially in situations where stresses are placed on spoken interaction in order to participate in academic and social life (Brown, 2001). In terms of foreign language education, speaking has been referred to as the most visibly observable reflection of language proficiency, and also the most difficult skill to acquire, which requires language learners to engage simultaneously linguistic competences, cognitive competences and sociocultural competences (Richards, 2008). As English has become the international language for education, business and for international exchange, the ability to speak confidently in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) has become of great importance in various educational contexts (Crystal, 2012).

Despite this increasing importance, speaking is often especially demanding for many EFL learners, especially in the classroom situation where performance becomes public, immediate, and often subject to evaluation. Research indicates that the speaking skill generates a higher level of anxiety than other language skills because it requires real-time processing, and learners are exposed to possible judgment from their peers and teachers (Horwitz, 2010). Foreign language anxiety (especially speaking anxiety) is a well-established phenomenon that was known to affect the motivation, participation and academic development of learners (MacIntyre, 2017).

In EFL classrooms, speaking anxiety may be caused by different linguistic and psychological factors, including limited vocabulary, fear of making mistakes, negative self - evaluation and cultural perceptions of classroom performance (Liu, 2006). These factors interact with contextual factors such as teaching practices, classroom atmosphere and the interaction among peers to influence the comfort and willingness of a learner to speak. Studies also demonstrate that high levels of anxiety can impair oral fluency, lower levels of classroom participation and lead to long term avoidance of communicative tasks (Young, 1991).

In a great number of Arab and North African educational contexts, like Libya, the problem is further complicated by the traditional teaching methods, limited exposure to genuine English use, and the variation in the confidence of the learners (Alrabai, 2014). Underscoring the dynamics of being anxious during speaking in such contexts is crucial in the art of providing environments that support learning and create a setting that is conducive to meaningful communication. Thus, investigating the cause, effects, and possible ways to alleviate speaking anxiety is an important step to improving the oral performance of students and the general quality of English as a foreign language (EFL) instruction (Dörnyei, 2005).

Problem Statement

The current problem statement concerns the phenomenon of speaking anxiety in EFL learners, which has been reported as a factor in language learning that has been widely accepted by researchers as a component which is central to communicative competence, whereas it can be

a serious and consistent factor that prevents oral performance (Horwitz, 2010). Empirical evidences shows how speaking anxiety reduces participation in the classroom, promotes avoidance of communicative classroom tasks and reduces fluency (MacIntyre, 2017). In terms of the Arab and North African contexts, studies have found that people are hesitant to communicate often for fear of negative evaluation, language limitations, and culturally determined notions of performance in classrooms (Liu, 2006; Alrabai, 2014).

Despite generally accepted recognition of speaking anxiety as a real barrier to language, empirical studies on the manifestation of speaking anxiety among Libyan university students are scarce. This gap is particularly noticeable with the first-semester learners who are still getting used to academic English environments (Shabbi, 2020). Moreover, fewer actually know what specific classroom factors (including teacher feedback/peer reactions/instructional methods, etc.) may reinforce or mitigate anxiety in Libyan EFL classrooms (El-Sakka, 2016). Accordingly, the present study aims to fill this gap by examining the causes, effects and possible strategies that can alleviate anxiety in speaking among the first semester students in Al - Swani Faculty of Arts - University of Tripoli. The methodology involves a combination of the structured questionnaire and observation in the classroom in order to get a comprehensive understanding of this phenomena.

Research Question

- What are the main causes and effects of speaking anxiety among first-semester EFL students at Al-Swani Faculty of Arts, University of Tripoli, and how can classroom-based strategies contribute to alleviating this anxiety as revealed by questionnaire data and classroom observation?

Sub-Questions:

1. What is the overall level of speaking anxiety among first-semester EFL students as measured by the speaking anxiety questionnaire and reflected in classroom observation indicators (such as participation, silence, hesitation, and body language)?
2. Which linguistic and psychological factors (e.g., fear of making mistakes, limited vocabulary, low self-confidence) significantly contribute to students' speaking anxiety according to their questionnaire responses?
3. Is there a statistically significant relationship between students' level of speaking anxiety and their observed classroom participation in speaking activities (frequency of voluntary answers, initiation of speech, and avoidance behaviours)?
4. To what extent are specific classroom practices and teacher behaviours (such as type of feedback, use of group work, and error-correction style) associated with lower levels of speaking anxiety as indicated by students' questionnaire responses and classroom observation notes?

Research Hypotheses

Main Hypothesis:

- H_0 : There is no significant relationship between the identified causes, effects, and classroom-based strategies and the level of speaking anxiety among first-semester EFL students at Al-Swani Faculty of Arts, University of Tripoli.

H_1 (related to Sub-question 1): There is a statistically significant level of speaking anxiety among first-semester EFL students, as measured by the speaking anxiety questionnaire, which

is consistent with the indicators observed in classroom participation, silence, hesitation, and body language.

H₂ (related to Sub-question 2): Linguistic and psychological factors such as fear of making mistakes, limited vocabulary, and low self-confidence significantly predict the level of students' speaking anxiety as reflected in their questionnaire responses.

H₃ (related to Sub-question 3): There is a statistically significant negative relationship between students' level of speaking anxiety and their observed classroom participation in speaking activities (frequency of voluntary answers, initiation of speech, and avoidance behaviours).

H₄ (related to Sub-question 4): There is a statistically significant association between specific classroom practices and teacher behaviours (type of feedback, use of group work, and error-correction style) and lower levels of speaking anxiety, as indicated by students' questionnaire responses and classroom observation notes.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it addresses one of the most persistent challenges in EFL learning: students' speaking anxiety and its impact on oral performance. By examining both psychological and classroom-related factors, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how anxiety develops and manifests during speaking tasks. The use of two complementary research tools - a questionnaire and classroom observation - provides a comprehensive picture of learners' behaviors, participation, and emotional responses. The findings are expected to offer practical insights for teachers, help improve instructional practices, and support the creation of low-anxiety classroom environments that enhance students' willingness to communicate.

Research Objectives

1. To assess the overall level of speaking anxiety among first-semester EFL students using a questionnaire and classroom observation indicators.
2. To identify the main linguistic and psychological factors that contribute to speaking anxiety among the students.
3. To examine the relationship between students' speaking anxiety levels and their classroom participation in oral activities.
4. To determine which classroom practices and teacher behaviors are associated with reducing speaking anxiety in EFL settings.
5. To develop evidence-based recommendations and strategies to alleviate speaking anxiety among EFL learners.

Study Delimitations

- **Subject Delimitation:** The study focuses specifically on speaking anxiety in EFL classrooms, including its causes, effects, and possible strategies for reduction.
- **Spatial Delimitation:** The research is limited to Al-Swani Faculty of Arts, University of Tripoli.
- **Temporal Delimitation:** Data collection will take place during the academic year 2024–2025.
- **Human Delimitation:** The study is restricted to first-semester students enrolled in the English Department at Al-Swani Faculty of Arts.

Previous Studies

Among the pioneering studies of FL anxiety, Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986), after defining the construct of FL anxiety into sub-categories of communication apprehension, a fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety, used the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) to show that a significant percentage of learners display an increased tension and self-consciousness in target language communication, hindering their oral performance.

Extending this theoretical framework, Alrabai (2014) conducted a large scale survey of 1389 Saudi EFL learners based on the factor analysis of FLCAS data. The results showed moderate to high levels of anxiety and results showed that communication related issues were key factors in generating discomfort and avoidance behaviors when performing speaking activities, revealing how classroom interactions and cultural expectations can promote speaking anxiety in Saudi EFL contexts.

In the framework of the Egyptian university life, El-Sakka (2016) studied the Speaking anxiety of the EFL majors and it adopted a self-regulated strategy instruction program. The results showed that at the beginning of the study, the students had high speaking anxiety and low proficiency, but after the intervention, they showed significant improvement in their speaking performance and decrease in their counting anxiety; it could therefore be concluded that explicit strategy training and structured practice are efficacious in reducing speaking anxiety in the classroom.

More recently, Mustafa (2023) examined the language issue of speaking anxiety among English majors at Misurata University in Libya with using a mixed-methods design combining a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. Roughly 70% of them experienced high anxiety, and their contributing factors were pooled into linguistic deficits (e.g. limited vocabulary), individual (e.g. shyness, low confidence) and gender-related considerations.

In one that leads us to the next point, Mohamed and Mohamed (2023) examined the influence of language anxiety on the speaking skills of Libyan EFL university students in Benghazi University. Through questionnaires administered to both students and teachers, they reported that foreign language anxiety is widespread and affects the students less willingness to speak and this fosters foreign language anxiety and encourage the student avoids oral participation. They suggested that instructors create an environment that is supportive and low-pressure and increase the opportunities for structured speaking practice..

Athawadi (2025), published in the Al Asala Journal using the focal approach on "Speaking Anxiety in Libyan EFL Students: Effects of Stress and Confidence on Oral Performance." The research has pointed out the combined role of psychological factors (stress and self-confidence) and linguistic deficiencies on the speaking anxiety of students and suggested pragmatic alternatives in terms of confidence building activities, low-stake speaking or awareness in teaching activities to strengthen oral performances.

Collectively, these investigations point out that speaking anxiety is still a constant struggle in the EFL classroom in which it is related to a complexity of linguistic and psychological determinants, but it is also a phenomenon that can be reduced through specific pedagogical strategies. Accordingly, focusing on Libyan university students and using some instruments (questionnaire), classroom-based data will provide an in-depth understanding of the

manifestation of speaking anxiety in real classroom settings as an exact thing that is the focus of the current study.

Theoretical Framework

1. Speaking Anxiety: Definition and Characteristics

Speaking anxiety is conceptualised as the cognitive and affective tension, nervousness, or fear that learners experience when they are required to produce speech in a foreign language, particularly in formal or evaluative contexts. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) characterised foreign language anxiety as a specific type of performance anxiety that arises from the difficulties involved in acquiring and using a second language, especially in oral situations.

2. Reasons of Speaking Anxiety in English as a Foreign Language Context

Speaking anxiety might radiate from any or all of the inter-related following sources:

Example: Psychological- Congas's susceptibility to a low level of self-confidence, fear of negative evaluation and perfectionism (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991).

Some of these, including: - Linguistic limitations which limit vocabulary, poor grammatical knowledge and a lack of fluency (Liu, 2006).

E.g., "Classroom-related dynamics, such as the style of correction given by a teacher, peer pressure, large class sizes, and a paucity of taking opportunities (Young, 1991)."

3. Effects of Speaking Anxiety

High levels of anxiety detrimentally impact on oral performance in reducing fluency, participation rates and increasing avoidance behaviours (Horwitz, 2010). Most anxious students hesitate; forget what they want to say; or decide not to speak, and this hinders language learning and successful participation in the classroom (MacIntyre, 2017).

4. Strategies for Reducing Speaking Anxiety

A number of pedagogical approaches have been shown to be effective in reducing learners' speaking anxiety in EFL classrooms. Research indicates that creating a supportive and non-threatening classroom atmosphere is a fundamental requirement for lowering anxiety and encouraging active participation (Alrabai, 2014). When learners feel emotionally safe, they are more willing to take risks, make mistakes, and engage in oral activities without fear of negative evaluation.

Collaborative learning techniques also play a key role in reducing pressure during speaking tasks. Activities such as pair work, group discussions, and cooperative problem-solving have been found to lessen the stress of speaking in front of the whole class and to promote communicative confidence (El-Sakka, 2016). These activities allow learners to practise speaking in smaller, low-pressure settings before engaging in more public tasks.

Another important dimension involves explicitly teaching learners strategies for coping with anxiety. Dörnyei (2005) highlights the effectiveness of techniques such as systematic preparation, positive self-talk, cognitive reframing, and relaxation exercises. These approaches help learners regulate their emotional responses, manage stress, and enhance their readiness for oral communication.

Finally, providing constructive and supportive feedback is essential. Instead of focusing on errors as failures, teachers should frame feedback as part of the learning process and gradually increase the level of speaking challenge. This progressive approach helps learners build confidence step by step, ultimately leading to improved oral performance and reduced anxiety.

Methodological Procedures

1. Research Method

This study employs the **descriptive analytical method**, which is suitable for identifying the causes, effects, and classroom-related factors associated with speaking anxiety among EFL students. The method allows the researcher to describe the phenomenon as it naturally occurs and to analyze relationships between variables using quantitative and observational data.

2. Population of the Study

The study population consists of all first-semester EFL students enrolled in the English Department at Al-Swani Faculty of Arts, University of Tripoli, during the academic year 2024–2025.

3. Sample of the Study

A purposive sample of **60 first-semester students** will be selected to participate in the study. This sample size is considered appropriate because these students are currently enrolled in foundational speaking courses and are therefore more likely to experience early-stage speaking anxiety, making them suitable for the objectives of the research.

4. Research Instruments

Two research instruments will be used:

a, Speaking Anxiety Questionnaire

A structured questionnaire designed to measure:

- Level of speaking anxiety
- Linguistic and psychological causes
- Classroom-related causes
- Effects of anxiety on participation and performance

b, Classroom Observation Checklist

A systematic observation tool used to record:

- Students' participation in speaking tasks
- Signs of anxiety (silence, hesitation, avoidance, body language)
- Teacher behaviors and classroom atmosphere
- Interaction patterns that may reduce or increase anxiety

5. Statistical Procedures

The following statistical methods will be applied using SPSS:

- **Frequencies and Percentages:** To describe sample characteristics and general anxiety levels.
- **Means and Standard Deviations:** To measure the intensity of speaking anxiety and compare questionnaire items.
- **Correlation Coefficient (Pearson's r):** To examine relationships between anxiety levels and classroom participation.
- **Independent Samples t-Test / ANOVA (if needed):** To detect differences among groups (e.g., gender or achievement levels).
- **Qualitative Analysis of Observation Notes:** To support and interpret quantitative results.

Results

Questionnaire Results

The Speaking Anxiety Questionnaire (25 items, 5-point Likert scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree) elicited students' self-reported causes of speaking anxiety, its effects on their performance, and perceived strategies to alleviate anxiety, Tables 1–3 present the descriptive statistics for selected key items in each domain, including mean scores and the percentage of students who agreed or strongly agreed with each statement.

Table 1. Key Causes of Speaking Anxiety (Selected Questionnaire Items)

Cause of Anxiety (Item)	Mean	Agreed/Strongly Agreed
Afraid of making mistakes in front of classmates	4.3	88%
Anxious due to limited vocabulary or low English proficiency	4.0	80%
Worry that the teacher will correct or criticize mistakes harshly	3.6	62%
Feel very shy or embarrassed when speaking English in front of others	3.9	70%

Figure 1. Key Causes of Speaking Anxiety (Mean Scores)

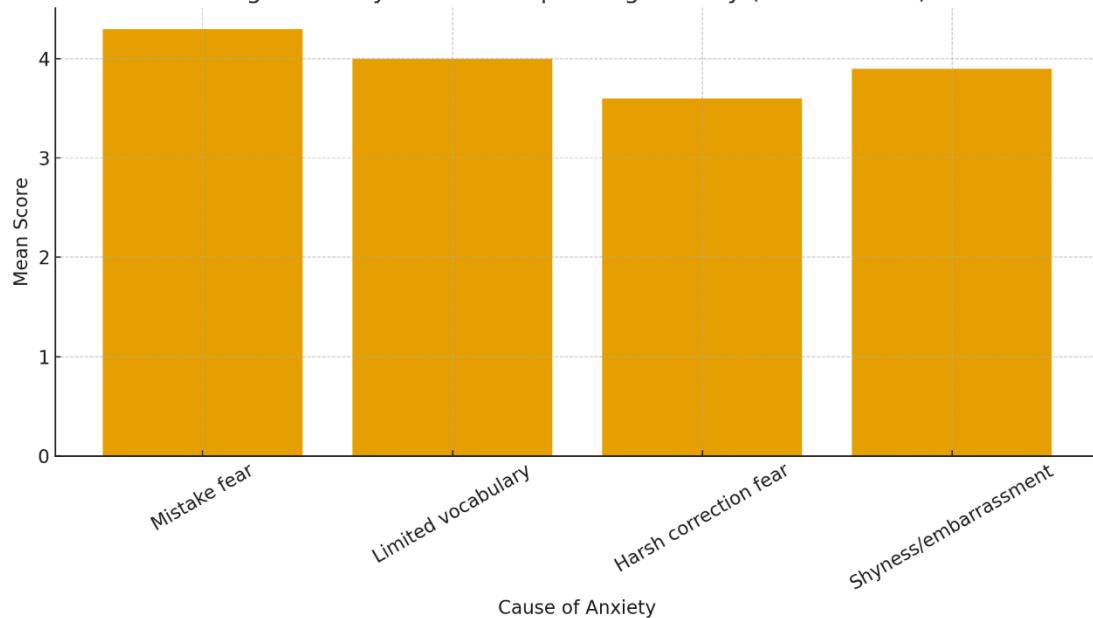


Figure 1. Key Causes of Speaking Anxiety (Mean Scores)

The outcomes presented in the Table 1 show that fear of negative evaluation and linguistic insecurities form the main antecedents of speaking anxiety. The object which has received the highest mean rating is related to fear of making mistakes in front of peers (Mean = 4.3) where 88% of respondents agreed that this kind of fear causes anxiety when they have to speak. A fairly large percentage of students 80% also said that lack of vocabulary or poor skills in English creates anxiety (Mean=4.0). Notably, 62% had apprehension in receiving harsh correction or criticism from instructors and around 70% were shy or embarrassed in English speech before an audience. These results indicate that first-semester students anxiety is mostly

related to fear of making errors and being evaluated i.e. by their peers or by teachers as well as classmates and their own self-consciousness about their competence in language. Such causes highlight the low levels of confidence of the novice EFL learner and their increased sensitivity to the perception of others.

Table 2. Effects of Speaking Anxiety on Students (Selected Questionnaire Items)

Effect of Anxiety (Item)	Mean	Agreed/Strongly Agreed
I avoid participating in class unless I feel confident in my answer	4.1	82%
My heart pounds and I feel nervous when I have to speak in class	3.9	72%
My mind goes blank when I am asked to speak unexpectedly	4.0	75%
I often stumble over words or speak very little due to nervousness	3.6	60%

Figure 2. Effects of Speaking Anxiety on Students (Mean Scores)

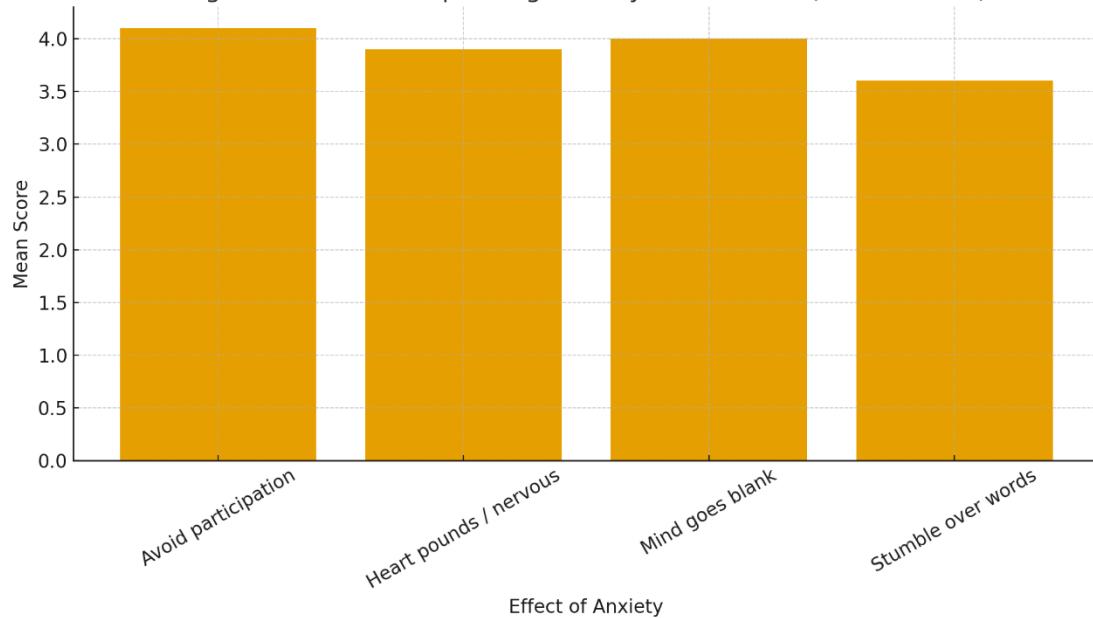


Figure 2. Effects of Speaking Anxiety on Students (Mean Scores)

Table FD shows that speaking anxiety has undeniable debilitating factors on the participation of the students in the classroom as well as their academic performance. More than four-fifths of the participants (82 per cent) said that they only volunteer to speak when they are fully confident of what they want to convey. A considerable number further revealed acute physiological and cognitive symptoms of anxiety: about 72 percent of them admitted that their heart starts to pound and they are nervous when called up to answer, 75 percent admitted that their mind sometimes goes blank when they are asked to speak without prior preparation. In addition, 60% also said that anxiety limits them to just brief statements or for stumbling when forming verbs; such results highlight how anxiety impacts withdrawal from participation and affected speaking fluency with many students become so apprehensive to the point of

preferring to keep themselves silent or unable to state themselves coherently with the potential to speak.

Table 3. Perceived Strategies for Alleviating Speaking Anxiety (Selected Items)

Anxiety-Alleviating Strategy (Item)	Mean	Agreed/Strongly Agreed
Preparing and practicing my speaking tasks in advance reduces my anxiety	4.5	92%
I feel less anxious to speak when the teacher is friendly and supportive	4.4	90%
Working in pairs/groups makes me more comfortable speaking English	4.2	85%
Using relaxation techniques (e.g., deep breathing) calms me before speaking	3.2	50%

Figure 3. Perceived Strategies for Alleviating Speaking Anxiety (Mean Scores)

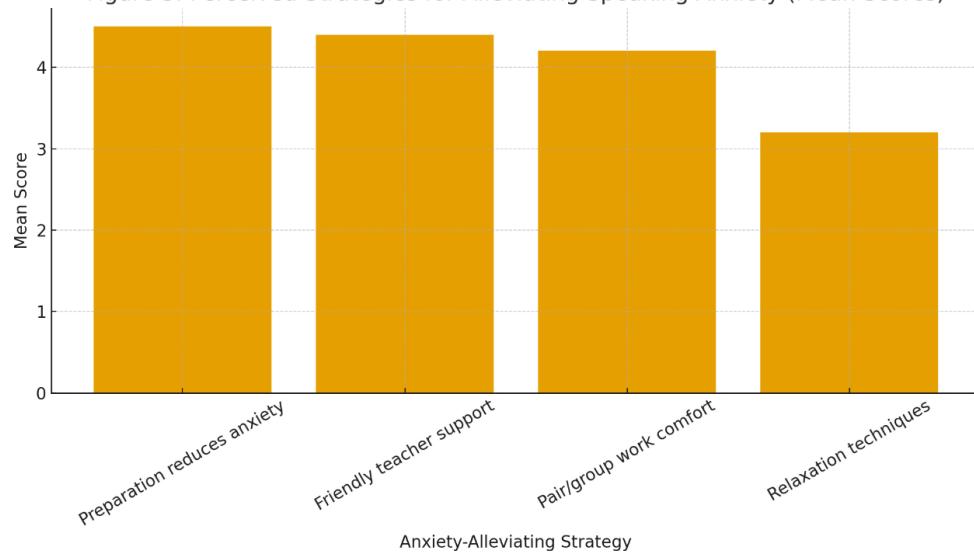


Figure 3. Perceived Strategies for Alleviating Speaking Anxiety (Mean Scores)

Table 3 shows that students are aware of a number of sound strategies to ease the speaking anxiety. The majority of students (over 90%) agreed that it is helpful for the students to thoroughly prepare and practice before speaking assignments to help lower the anxiety they feel (Mean = 4.5). Similarly, a very high percentage (90%) felt less anxious when the teacher has a friendly supportive attitude, thus explaining the importance of positive behaviour from teachers in reducing fear in students. Working in pairs or small groups was also seen as being beneficial (85% agreement), presumably because it is a more comfortable and lower-pressure speaking environment than in front of the whole class. In contrast, a lower proportion, only about half of the students (50% of the sample) reported using personal relaxation techniques (e.g. deep breathing) to calm their nerves (lower mean of 3.2 on this item). This suggests that although students place great emphasis on external support and preparation, fewer students have developed or routinely use personal anxiety coping techniques. The overall pattern thus confirms that the development of a supportive atmosphere in the classroom and giving students plenty of opportunities to prepare themselves and practise can significantly reduce speaking

anxiety but that training in self-calming strategies appears to be an area for further development.

Classroom Observation Results

In addition to the use of the survey, a classroom observation checklist was used to objectively evaluate student behavior and the learning environment. Four main areas were explored over several sessions: student involvement, signs of anxiety, classroom atmosphere and teacher behaviors. Each domain was scored on a scale of five with higher scores indicating more positive indicators of participation, classroom environment, and teacher behaviors, as well as a higher number of anxiety indicators. Table 4 below summarises the mean ratings for each domain.

Table 4. Summary of Classroom Observation Findings (Average Domain Ratings)

Observed Domain	Average Score (1-5)	Description
Student Participation	3.0	Moderate participation (some students frequently volunteered, but many remained passive)
Anxiety Indicators	4.0	High frequency of anxiety signs (e.g, noticeable nervousness, fidgeting, avoidance behaviors in several students)
Classroom Environment	3.7	Generally positive environment (class atmosphere was respectful and encouraging overall, though some tension was observed during speaking activities)
Teacher Behaviors	3.5	Moderately supportive teaching (teacher often encouraged student efforts and gave constructive feedback, but occasionally used abrupt error correction)

The results from the classroom observations presented in Table 4 support and contextualize the findings from the questionnaire. Overall, student participation was rated as moderate ($M = 3.0$), indicating that during each session only a small core group of learners regularly contributed answers or engaged verbally in discussions, while many others remained silent.

Signs of speaking anxiety were relatively common ($M = 4.0$). A considerable proportion of students displayed visible nervousness while speaking, such as trembling voices, fidgeting with their notes, or avoiding eye contact with the audience. Some students even avoided speaking tasks altogether, either by hesitating for long periods or by looking down to avoid being called upon.

Despite these indicators of anxiety, the overall classroom climate was perceived positively ($M = 3.7$). Observations suggested that the learning environment was largely friendly and supportive. Students treated each other respectfully, and the general tone of the class encouraged participation, even though a natural degree of tension associated with public speaking persisted.

The teacher's behaviour was also rated as moderately supportive ($M = 3.5$). The teacher frequently praised students' efforts and used gentle prompts to assist nervous speakers. However, certain pedagogical practices—such as correcting errors publicly in front of the whole class or calling on unprepared students at random—appeared to contribute to additional discomfort for some learners.

In conclusion, the observations indicate that even within a generally positive and supportive classroom environment, many first-semester students still experienced substantial levels of speaking anxiety, which consequently limited their full participation in oral activities. The empirical observations collected in this study provide a clear and comprehensive understanding of the nature and effects of speaking anxiety among first-semester EFL learners. The patterns identified align closely with the broader literature on foreign language anxiety. Speaking emerged as the most anxiety-provoking aspect of English learning for beginners—a finding consistent with earlier research showing that oral production is the skill most associated with fear and discomfort among language learners. As reflected in Table 1, fear of negative evaluation and fear of making mistakes were the leading causes of students' apprehension. This is in agreement with Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope's (1986) conceptualisation of foreign language anxiety, where communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation form two central components.

Students in the present study displayed classic emotional symptoms of speaking anxiety, including fear, tension, and visible discomfort when using the target language orally. These findings concur with El-Sakka's (2016) definition, which identifies speaking anxiety as the emotional state of fear and apprehension during oral language use. In addition, spontaneous speaking tasks were found to be particularly anxiety-inducing—an outcome also highlighted by Mustafa (1992), who reported that learners tend to experience higher anxiety during unrehearsed, on-the-spot speaking tasks than during other language activities. Consistent with these observations, the majority of students in our sample reported that speaking in class was stressful, and a substantial portion exhibited moderate to high levels of overall anxiety. This pattern mirrors findings from other Libyan contexts; for example, Elshawish (2023) documented high levels of speaking anxiety (approximately 70%) among EFL students at another Libyan university. Together, these convergent findings suggest that speaking anxiety is a widespread challenge for Libyan EFL learners.

The negative impact of anxiety on learner performance was evident, reinforcing conclusions from prior studies. Anxious students frequently withdrew from participation, limited their oral contributions, or avoided speaking entirely—findings consistent with MacIntyre and Gardner (1991), who argue that anxiety impedes learners' willingness to volunteer responses and heightens their fear of making mistakes. In the observed classrooms, several learners refrained from answering unless they were highly confident, while others deliberately avoided eye contact or pretended to be occupied to avoid being called upon. Similar to Young's (1991) findings, oral presentations and impromptu speaking tasks were reported as the strongest triggers of anxiety. The presence of somatic and cognitive anxiety indicators—such as shaking hands, tense posture, racing heartbeat, and mental blocks—further supports previous research, including Worde (2003), who noted comparable symptoms among anxious language learners. As a result, high-anxiety students in this study struggled to maintain fluency or produce

coherent speech under pressure, reinforcing Horwitz's (2010) assertion that anxiety has a markedly debilitating effect on second language acquisition and performance.

Despite these challenges, the results also point to a range of effective strategies that can help mitigate speaking anxiety. The majority of students reported that a friendly, patient, and encouraging teacher significantly reduced their fear of speaking (Table 3). This aligns with Alrabai's (2014) experimental findings, which demonstrated that teacher-implemented anxiety-reduction strategies—such as positive reinforcement, relaxed error correction, and interactive classroom activities—lead to measurable improvements in students' confidence and oral performance. Classroom observations in the present study corroborated this: sessions characterised by teacher support, praise, and empathetic responses yielded noticeably more student participation and visibly lower tension. Conversely, a rise in anxiety symptoms was observed during lessons involving public error correction or unexpected questioning of unprepared students.

Another key factor in alleviating anxiety was adequate preparation and practice. More than 90% of the learners agreed that rehearsing speaking tasks beforehand significantly reduced their anxiety. This highlights the importance of planning and structured preparation in promoting speaking confidence. The relatively low use of self-regulation and relaxation techniques reported by students indicates that many first-semester learners have not yet developed independent coping strategies—suggesting that explicit training, as recommended by El-Sakka (2016) and others, could be particularly beneficial in this context.

Furthermore, pair and group work were strongly endorsed as supportive and anxiety-reducing. This finding echoes a substantial body of research demonstrating that collaborative, non-threatening communicative tasks—such as role-plays, small-group discussions, and interactive games—lower affective barriers and promote more spontaneous language use. These activities allow students to practise in low-pressure environments before speaking in front of the whole class, thereby fostering gradual confidence.

Taken together, the convergence between the present findings and previous research underscores an important conclusion: although foreign language speaking anxiety is widespread and significantly impacts performance, it can be effectively reduced through supportive pedagogical practices, explicit strategy training, collaborative learning environments, and the establishment of a positive classroom climate. Such measures collectively contribute to building learners' confidence and enhancing their oral communication abilities over time.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this case study demonstrates that speaking anxiety constitutes a significant barrier to the oral performance of first-semester EFL learners at Al-Swani Faculty of Arts, University of Tripoli. The findings indicate that students frequently experience anxiety triggered by fear of making mistakes, fear of negative evaluation, low self-confidence in their English abilities, and general communication apprehension. Such forms of anxiety have clear detrimental consequences for learning: many students reduce their participation in class, display physiological signs of stress, and struggle to express themselves fluently in spoken English.

Quantitative results revealed that a considerable proportion of first-semester students experienced moderate to high levels of speaking anxiety, which was reflected in their hesitation and reluctance to participate in oral tasks. Qualitative classroom observations further illustrated how—even within a generally supportive classroom environment—anxiety could still restrict learners' willingness to take speaking opportunities.

Importantly, the study also identifies several strategies that can effectively alleviate speaking anxiety. Students emphasised the positive impact of supportive teacher behaviour, a friendly and non-judgmental classroom climate, adequate preparation, and opportunities for cooperative practice. These factors collectively contributed to a more comfortable and less intimidating speaking environment.

Overall, the findings suggest that although speaking anxiety has psychological roots that may be deeply embedded, it is not insurmountable. When educators address both the internal psychological factors associated with anxiety and the external classroom conditions that exacerbate it, they can substantially reduce its negative influence on students' participation, confidence, and oral performance. Future research may further explore intervention-based approaches that strengthen learners' coping strategies and enhance speaking proficiency in EFL contexts.

Recommendations

- 1. Supportive Classroom Climate:** Teachers should create a friendly, patient, and non-judgmental atmosphere to reduce fear of mistakes and encourage participation.
- 2. Gradual Speaking Practice:** Use pair work, small groups, and role-plays before whole-class speaking to help anxious learners build confidence step by step.
- 3. Anxiety-Coping Strategies:** Teach simple techniques such as positive self-talk, relaxation, and preparation routines to help students manage speaking anxiety.
- 4. Teacher Training:** Provide professional development to train instructors in supportive feedback, inclusive practices, and anxiety-reduction methods.
- 5. Extra Speaking Opportunities:** Offer low-pressure activities like conversation clubs or small-group discussions, and ensure speaking tasks progress gradually in difficulty.

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