



# ENGLISH LINGUISTICS, LITERATURE, AND LANGUAGE TEACHING IN A CHANGING ERA

Edited by

Suwarsih Madya, Willy A. Renandya, Masaki Oda,  
Didi Sukiyadi, Anita Triastuti, Ashadi, Erna Andriyanti  
and Nur Hidayanto P.S.P



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# English Linguistics, Literature, and Language Teaching in a Changing Era

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## EFL adult learners' perceptions of language anxiety toward speaking performance

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**ABSTRACT:** A considerable number of foreign as well as second language learners suffer from language anxiety when they step into the language classroom. This research drew on a small study which was carried out at a private university in Yogyakarta to understand the factors that affect English as a Foreign Language (EFL) adult learners' language anxiety toward speaking performances. The purpose of this study is to report findings from the qualitative interview data on the factors of EFL adult learners' language anxiety toward speaking performance. The participants were six postgraduate students who were chosen randomly. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews guided by an interview protocol. The demographic data were analyzed descriptively while the interview data were transcribed and analyzed line by line to generate and develop codes and themes. An analysis of the interview data revealed five major themes, including (1) linguistic difficulties, (2) cognitive challenges, and (3) lack of practice in speaking English. Some ways to deal with language anxiety are also explained and suggestions for future study are provided.

**Keywords:** Perceptions, language anxiety, speaking performance

### 1 INTRODUCTION

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) has been challenging for Indonesian students. The positive thing is that learners are motivated to learn English because it is the official language of many international and professional organizations. But, unfortunately, it is not easy for Indonesian students to learn English because they have some challenges in learning it, including anxiety. Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope [1] defined anxiety as 'the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system' (p. 125). They discussed foreign language anxiety as 'a distinct complex of self-perception, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process' (p. 128). This means that language anxiety is an awkward feeling and psychological pressure that learners experience when learning a language or accomplishing a task [2]. Even students at a higher level of education may have anxiety around foreign language learning.

Factors that could contribute to speaking anxiety are linguistic difficulties, cognitive challenges, a lack of information in the first language, competitiveness, and the role of teachers. The study conducted by Kayaoğlu and Sağlamel [3] among Turkish students stated that students' language anxiety is caused by linguistic difficulties including: vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar and sentence structure; cognitive challenges including fear of failure (failing to communicate, failing in exams, making mistakes, and failing in front of others); lack of information in the first language; competitiveness; the teacher's role, which leads students to have a high level of anxiety and low confidence in their language performance. Motivation can be another reason for being anxious. Tanveer's study showed that anxiety can be caused by intrinsic motivation. Accordingly, students' beliefs, opinions and lack of language instruction



can lead to a higher level of anxiety. Other factors such as the social and cultural environments can also be reasons for anxiety-provoking situations [3]. Students' anxiety might also be related to gender: a survey of previous studies showed that gender influences the level of foreign language anxiety among learners [4,5,6,7,8,9].

With regard to the effects of anxiety, students might face some challenges or difficulties in expressing themselves in the language with effects that may be academic, cognitive, social or personal [9]. These kinds of effects may produce negative feelings in learners when they come to communicate in the target language and can affect their performance, especially when speaking. In one study, Aydin [10] stated that there are some negative correlations between achievement and anxiety. Firstly, EFL students may suffer from language anxiety provoked by factors including: not being prepared for classroom activity; being apprehensive about communicating with teachers, peers, and native speakers; teachers' questions and corrections in the classroom environment; assessments and negative attitudes towards English courses. Secondly, language anxiety is caused by the feeling of being afraid of being evaluated by others. This consists of fear of negative judgments by others, of making an unfavorable impression on others, of making verbal or spelling mistakes, and of displeasing others. Being afraid of negative evaluation is a general factor of foreign language anxiety. This negative evaluation leads to the fear of being called on in class; assessment anxiety; communication apprehension with peers, native speakers, and teachers; fear of making mistakes while speaking; negative attitudes towards language learning, and feeling anxious when teachers ask questions and make corrections of their performance.

Language anxiety can affect students' speaking performance in many ways. A study conducted by Kayaoğlu and Sağlamel [3] among Turkish students stated that students are visibly different when they are anxious. They believe that some differences occur when they feel anxious, and these effects can be physical, psychological, cognitive, linguistic, and behavioral.

A number of previous studies have investigated language anxiety for EFL students at university level [3,10,11,12,13,14,15,16]. This study is an attempt to explore how language anxiety affects EFL adult learners' speaking performance. It aims to answer the research question on the perceptions of EFL adult learners about language anxiety regarding speaking performance. This research question then leads to two supplementary questions: How does language anxiety affect EFL adult learners' speaking performance? How do EFL adult learners deal with language anxiety?

## 2 RESEARCH METHOD

Our investigation used a qualitative approach because it involved a small-scale study and looked at EFL adult learners' perceptions and interpretations of the factors in language anxiety regarding speaking performance. This was useful and practical because it allowed the researcher to conduct an in-depth analysis of the data [15]. The study was conducted at an Indonesian private university in Yogyakarta with six EFL students who were in the first year of a postgraduate program in English education. A purposeful sampling with a convenient case strategy was used, following what Creswell [17] described as 'the concept of purposeful sampling used in qualitative research. This means that the inquirer selects individuals and sites for the study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problems. . . ' (p. 125) and 'convenience cases, which represent sites or individuals from which researchers can access and easily collect data' (p. 126).

A semi-structured interview was used to collect the data and was carried out in April 2018. The process of collecting the data involved recruiting the participants first, then conducting the research by doing an interview which lasted between 10 and 15 minutes. The interview was recorded with the researcher's mobile phone. The demographic data were then analyzed descriptively in the form of data transcription of the information given by the participants. The interview data were transcribed and analyzed line by line to identify the categories among the data. In order to guarantee the trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, cited in [18]) of this study and to verify the accuracy of the data, findings, and interpretations [19], the



Table 1. Participants' background information.

No.	Name	Gender	Age	Major	Current Status
1	Lisa	Female	24	English Education	First-year study
2	Feby	Female	24	English Education	First-year study
3	Tania	Female	25	English Education	First-year study
4	Akbar	Male	24	English Education	First-year study
5	Fendi	Male	25	English Education	First-year study
6	Indra	Male	26	English Education	First-year study

researcher then returned the interview data transcriptions to each participant to ensure that the data remained valid and had not been manipulated.

### 3 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study was intended to report on some of the factors of English language anxiety regarding speaking performance as experienced by EFL adult learners at a private university in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. The analysis and discussions were organized according to the participants' accounts, feelings, and thoughts regarding the factors of English language anxiety that they experienced. An analysis of the interview data revealed three main categories that related to EFL adult learners' perceptions: (1) linguistic difficulties, (2) cognitive challenges, (3) lack of practice in speaking English.

It cannot be denied that many EFL students experienced difficulties using the English language, especially when speaking. The finding has also shown, in terms of the first supplementary research question, that there are some obstacles faced by EFL adult learners, especially when speaking English in public. At the start of language learning, a learner will face some difficulties with the language learning process, understanding grammar and other language aspects. If that student becomes anxious about this, then they become uncomfortable in making errors, resulting in anxiety. Thus, the first factor, and possibly the most significant aspect for EFL adult learners, is linguistic difficulties due to speaking anxiety. Although the learners are in higher level education, the study shows that they still face difficulties in speaking English, especially anxiety. Of the linguistic difficulties, vocabulary and pronunciation were reported to have the strongest effect on students' speaking performance. Most of the participants stated that it was vocabulary and mispronunciation of words (P1, P2, P3, P4 and P6) that made it challenging for them to speak in front of others because they didn't have enough vocabulary to speak fluently. Grammar (P1, P2, P3 and P4) was also reported as a linguistic difficulty due to language anxiety around speaking performance [3].

From the interviews carried out during the study, linguistic difficulties appeared to be one of the factors in the language anxiety which influenced students' speaking performance. Participants stated that they felt anxious about English due to a variety of problems. Five of the participants admitted that difficulties in pronunciation, lack of vocabulary and grammatical knowledge were the main factors that led them to feel anxious or hesitant in speaking English. Comments they made included:

'In English, I felt difficulty in translating because I do not know the vocabulary and the grammar for speaking; I think it is hard for me' [P1/Lisa]

Table 2. Themes of factors in EFL adult learners' speaking anxiety.

No.	Theme	Participants (N = 6)
1	Linguistic difficulties	5
2	Cognitive challenges	5
3	Lack of practice in speaking English	3



'Yeah, of course, it is about pronunciation, grammar and also vocabularies' [P2/Feby]

'... First, less of vocabulary, then lack of pronunciation, yeah, I think those are the basis of factors that make me feel anxious, lack of vocabulary and afraid of mispronouncing and nervous to confront the audience' [P3/Tania]

'Of course, it is about the misspelling, grammatical errors, and lack of vocabulary' [P4/Akbar]

'Lack of vocabulary mastery and mispronounce, and also lack of practicing speaking English' [P6/Indra]

The data above indicates that the participants were challenged in speaking English due to a lack of vocabulary and grammar. Some of them stated that they could not speak English because they did not know how to spell the words and use the vocabulary appropriately. They said they required more time to think about the vocabulary and grammar, which made it hard for them to speak freely in front of others. This finding supports Pratolo's [20] study which identified that lack of vocabulary could cause a language learner to feel anxious. One of his student participants confessed that she would get stuck, and that if she forgot an English word while speaking in English with an English native speaker then she wouldn't be able to think of anything. Pratolo's research participant, who was also an EFL adult learner, believed that to be able to communicate well with people, she had to know every single word that she spoke and heard. Failure in this endeavor would inevitably lead to language anxiety.

Participants also reported that cognitive challenges such as being scared of negative responses from others and a lack of confidence would disturb their speaking performance. They cited fear of negative responses from others, including being disparaged by friends (P1) and being interrupted by the lecturer (P3), as crucial factors that make students feel anxious when speaking or presenting in front of the class [3]. Cognitive challenges were reported as the next factor that influences students' speaking performance and were split into four categories: speaking unsuccessfully in front of the audience; failure in delivering a message; worry about making mistakes; lack of confidence. Three of these – speaking unsuccessfully in front of the audience, failure in delivering a message, and worry about making mistakes in front of the audience – can be grouped as 'being frightened of negative responses from others'. The participants in this study reported fear of negative responses from others as making them feel anxious when speaking in front of others. Five of the participants reported that they had felt anxious or afraid when they tried to communicate or perform in front of the class, especially in front of their friends and the lecturer. Two students shared their perspectives about being frightened of negative responses from others, commenting:

'I think because my English is not good, they became more attentive to me, and sometimes I feel that my friends underestimated me, and I also worry that my lecturer will interrupt me when I am speaking. This will make me nervous' [P1/Lisa]

'Yeah, of course, especially when I talk or speak to a person who is smarter than me. And I love it more to speak English directly to native speakers because they appreciate us more than Indonesian people' [P1/Lisa]

'Sometimes I am afraid to speak in front of the class, I am afraid for making mistakes in my words or mispronounce some pronunciation, and it might be interrupted by the lecturer or friends' [P3/Tania]

'... Because I am so nervous. And I am afraid that the audience (friends and lecturer) will not understand what I am presenting about' [P6/Indra]

Consequently, fearing negative responses from others was one of the things that made students worried or hesitant to speak English. Being disparaged was a crucial reason why they were nervous about speaking English. In addition, they sometimes thought that their friends were smarter than them. This kind of feeling makes participants afraid of being disparaged by



their friends or the lecturer when they make mistakes in speaking in front of the class. It also showed that the students were scared to use their English because they were afraid of making mistakes and that they would be interrupted by the lecturer.

Lack of confidence due to the informal or formal situation can be another factor leading to cognitive challenges. Three *students shared their perspectives*:

'I am still afraid to speak to my friends and lecturers, feel doubt, and lack of confidence ...' [P1/Lisa]

'For the informal situation such as speaking English with my friend for just making some jokes I do not feel anxious at all but for the formal situation such as for doing a presentation in front of lecturer I feel a little bit anxious, even sometimes I feel nervous' [P4/Akbar]

'So, I felt anxious when I want to speak English because I am not confident with my vocabulary use' [P6/Indra]

The data above showed that participants are willing to speak according to the situation. However, most of the participants are not confident about speaking in front of others, especially in formal situations and for academic purposes, such as presenting something. They even felt anxious about speaking in front of an audience. Some of the students also believed that language is for communication (P6). Failing to communicate can lead to a substantial decrease in motivation [13]. The findings revealed that even students at a higher level could be less motivated when they felt anxious. Several factors are predicted as sources of foreign language anxiety, such as age, academic accomplishment, a previous high school experience with foreign languages, and students' current language course [16]. It was found that older students had higher language anxiety than younger ones. Some changes become obvious when learners get anxious. As the result of cognitive challenges, students were afraid to speak, nervous, and they felt anxious. Language anxiety can affect students in many ways and have various effects, such as physical and psychological, cognitive, linguistic, and behavioral [3].

Another factor influencing English language anxiety within the EFL adult learners' speaking performance as reported by the participants in this study was 'lack of practice in speaking English', especially for practicing English speaking performance [16]. The findings revealed that some students have a reduced speaking performance not only because of linguistic difficulties and cognitive challenges but also because of the lack of practice in speaking English. Not having a partner to speak with or being in a particular learning environment may also lead to this problem [3]. Within this categorization, some students reported that they felt anxious to speak due to less practice in speaking English. Three students shared their perspectives:

'It was rare because at that time the class was so boring, make me feel bored, and the learning process was monotonous' [P1/Lisa]

'It was rare because I have limited partners to speak English' [P5/Fendi]

'Less practicing and lack of support from my friends' [P5/Fendi]

'It is rare. I think the teachers were boring and my friends, they are passive in English and only one or two students are active in class' [P6/Indra]

'Lack of vocabulary mastery and mispronounce, and also lack of practicing speaking English' [P6/Indra]

Based on the experiences shared by the participants above, a number of facts are revealed. It was found that the participants felt anxious due to lack of practice in speaking English because they don't have much experience in speaking English. They shared that they rarely speak English because they have no chance to speak it. They stated that the learning environment made it hard for them to practice English. They felt that the learning environment was boring and the teachers and students (and/or friends) were not especially active in speaking English.



We have already mentioned that language anxiety could be affected by gender [4,5,6,7,8]. In fact, this concept is confusing. While there are many studies that still consider the effect of gender on language anxiety within speaking performance debatable, this present study has revealed one fact: based on the interview and the information gained from the participants, we conclude that there were no significant differences of language anxiety between male and female students. Both sexes have the same feeling of language anxiety toward speaking performance.

All of the students noted that they felt anxious when they speak publicly. They stated that there are many factors that impact their performance. To answer the second supplementary research question, many ways have been offered to deal with language anxiety. The participants also have their own ways to cope with it. Some of them mentioned that it's important to keep practicing and to make friends to learn English or just to have a partner for speaking with (P1, P3 and P6). According to Jones [21], language anxiety can be considered as part of a culture-based syndrome. It is the condition in which students feel humiliated or embarrassed when they are interacting with others. Making friends or being with friends who have the same culture or study background as them somehow helps students to deal with language anxiety. Some other participants mentioned doing some physical exercise (P1, P2 and P4), while one mentioned listening to English music and watching motivational videos to improve their motivation for learning English (P5). Physical exercise, in particular, is seen to help students refresh their minds and reduce anxiety.

#### 4 CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

A number of reasons, effects, and ways to cope with language anxiety were examined from the students' perceptions obtained in the interviews. The study revealed that linguistic difficulties (vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation), cognitive challenges (fear of negative responses from others and lack of confidence), and a lack of practice in English were considered as factors that could affect language anxiety, leading to a failure in speaking performance. The students did find some ways to deal with language anxiety, but this issue still needs more attention, especially in terms of the cognitive challenges of language anxiety. Thus, teachers should pay more attention to these students. They should be aware that students are sensitive to being judged by other students. They should arrange the learning environment in such a way that students can feel more comfortable and relaxed. The most important thing is that teachers give students more time for speaking exercises, for example, by drilling the students to practice speaking in every lesson. In short, they should be given more opportunities for speaking practice. For students to be successful in the future, they should also increase their confidence in speaking. They should practice public speaking because it will help them improve their speaking skills. Students can learn from native speakers or through videos on YouTube. Overall, students need to be more proactive.

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