

Analyzing Gender Differences in Speaking Anxiety Among EFL Students

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Abstract

Speaking anxiety remains one of the most persistent psychological barriers in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, particularly when students are expected to perform orally in front of peers and teachers. This study aimed to identify the level of speaking anxiety experienced by male and female students at a private senior high school in Padang in the 2025/2026 academic year and to examine whether there was a statistically significant difference between the two gender groups. The study employed a quantitative approach with a differential design. Sixty students, consisting of 30 male and 30 female students, were selected through simple random sampling from the population of SMA Adabiah 2 Padang. Data were collected using an adapted Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale questionnaire consisting of 33 Likert-scale items covering communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, assumption testing, and the Independent Samples t-Test with SPSS version 31. The results showed that most students experienced a moderate level of speaking anxiety (61.6%), while 21.7% were in the high category and 16.6% were in the low category. The t-test result indicated a significant difference between male and female students (Sig. 2-tailed = 0.003), with female students reporting higher anxiety scores. The findings imply that EFL speaking instruction should employ gender-sensitive, low-risk, and confidence-building activities.

Keywords: EFL learners; gender; speaking anxiety

A. Introduction

Speaking is an essential skill in learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) because it enables students to express ideas, opinions, emotions, and social intentions through direct interaction. In school-based English learning, speaking ability is frequently treated as a visible indicator of communicative competence because it reveals not only students' lexical and grammatical knowledge but also their confidence, fluency, pronunciation, and willingness to participate. Nevertheless, speaking is also one of the most anxiety-provoking language skills. Many EFL students who are able to understand written texts or complete grammar tasks still experience psychological pressure when asked to speak English publicly. This tension is commonly manifested through hesitation, silence, avoidance, trembling, low voice quality, unclear articulation, and excessive concern about making mistakes.

Foreign language speaking anxiety is especially important in the Indonesian EFL context because English is usually learned as a school subject rather than used as a daily means of communication. Students

have limited opportunities to practise outside the classroom, and their oral performance is often shaped by classroom evaluation, peer response, teacher correction, and personal confidence. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) conceptualized foreign language anxiety as a specific anxiety complex involving self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours related to classroom language learning. This construct remains relevant because students' oral performance is not determined by linguistic competence alone. Emotional readiness and classroom climate strongly influence whether learners are willing to speak, take risks, negotiate meaning, and recover from mistakes.

Preliminary observations at SMA Adabiah 2 Padang indicated that many students still faced considerable difficulty when speaking English. Some students hesitated before answering questions, some avoided eye contact, and others preferred to remain silent even when they understood the topic. Teachers also observed that speaking anxiety appeared in both male and female students, but its intensity and behavioural expression were not always the same. Female students tended to appear more cautious, shy, and sensitive to peer evaluation, while male students appeared more relaxed, although they also experienced linguistic difficulties. This classroom condition suggests that gender may be an important factor in understanding how speaking anxiety is experienced and expressed.

Previous studies have reported mixed but significant findings concerning the relationship between gender and speaking anxiety. Fauziah, Wati, and Solihati (2022) found that gender differences could influence students' speaking anxiety, especially in relation to self-confidence and fear of evaluation. Okyar (2023) also reported that foreign language speaking anxiety was associated with speaking self-efficacy, fear of negative evaluation, self-perceived proficiency, and gender. Similar concerns have been discussed by Istiqomah and Savitri (2024), who linked anxiety and gender to speaking performance, and by Viqrianti (2024), who examined situation-specific anxiety in EFL speaking classes. These studies indicate that gender should not be treated as a superficial demographic variable, but as a possible sociopsychological factor that shapes students' responses to oral classroom tasks.

Despite the growing body of literature, there remains a need for more focused quantitative evidence at the senior high school level. Many previous studies on speaking anxiety have been conducted among university students, while high school learners receive less attention. This is a limitation because senior high school students are at a transitional stage in their academic, emotional, and social development. They are increasingly required to perform in front of others, yet they may still have limited coping strategies for public speaking anxiety. Moreover, studies that apply a differential quantitative approach to compare male and female students in a balanced sample remain limited in the local context.

In this study, the researchers formulate two research questions: What levels of speaking anxiety are experienced by male and female students in the eleventh grade at SMA Adabiah 2 Padang and is there a significant difference in speaking anxiety between male and female students in the eleventh grade at

SMA Adabiah 2 Padang. Responding to this gap, the present study is aimed at identifying the level of speaking anxiety among male and female students at SMA Adabiah 2 Padang and to examine whether there was a significant difference in speaking anxiety between the two gender groups. The study is expected to contribute empirical evidence for EFL teaching by clarifying whether gender-sensitive classroom strategies are needed. Practically, the findings may help English teachers design speaking activities that reduce fear of negative evaluation, increase participation, and support students who experience high anxiety.

B. Research Methodology

This study employed a quantitative research design with a differential approach. The design was selected because the study sought to compare the level of speaking anxiety between two naturally existing groups, namely male and female students. Gender was not manipulated by the researcher; rather, it functioned as a grouping variable for examining differences in students' anxiety scores. This approach was appropriate because the main objective was not to test the effect of a treatment but to determine whether two groups differed significantly in a psychological construct measured through a standardized questionnaire. The data were collected cross-sectionally at one point in time during the 2025/2026 academic year.

The research was conducted at SMA Adabiah 2 Padang. The population consisted of 385 students registered in the 2025/2026 academic year. The sample comprised 60 students, consisting of 30 male and 30 female students. Simple random sampling was used to give each student an equal opportunity to be selected. The balanced composition of male and female respondents was intentionally maintained to support a fair comparison through the Independent Samples t-Test. Although the sample size was smaller than the total population, the balanced distribution between groups made the statistical comparison more stable and interpretable for the purpose of the study.

The instrument used to collect the data was a questionnaire adapted from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). The original FLCAS was developed by Horwitz et al. (1986), while the adaptation used in this study followed the speaking anxiety indicators applied by Fauziah et al. (2022). The questionnaire consisted of 33 closed-ended items using a five-point Likert scale: strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, and strongly agree. The items represented three major indicators of language anxiety, namely communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. These indicators were suitable because they captured the emotional, social, and evaluative pressures commonly experienced by EFL students when speaking English.

Before the questionnaire was administered, validity and reliability had been examined using the original thesis data. Item validity was confirmed through correlation analysis by comparing the obtained r-count with the r-table. Reliability was measured using Cronbach's Alpha, which produced a coefficient

of 0.908. This value indicated high internal consistency, meaning that the items were sufficiently stable and coherent in measuring students' speaking anxiety. The questionnaire was distributed through Google Forms to facilitate efficient data collection and to ensure that all responses were recorded systematically.

The scoring procedure followed the structure of the FLCAS adaptation. Each response was converted into a numerical score according to the Likert scale. The total score for each student was then calculated and categorized into three levels of speaking anxiety: low, moderate, and high. The score ranges were derived from the ideal mean and standard deviation of the instrument. Scores from 33 to 73 were categorized as low anxiety, scores from 74 to 114 as moderate anxiety, and scores from 115 to 165 as high anxiety. This categorization allowed the researcher to describe not only the mean scores but also the distribution of students across anxiety levels.

The data were analyzed using SPSS version 31. Descriptive statistics were used to calculate frequency, percentage, mean, standard deviation, and standard error. Prior to hypothesis testing, two assumption tests were conducted. The Shapiro-Wilk test was used to examine whether the scores in both gender groups were normally distributed, while Levene's Test for Equality of Variances was used to examine the homogeneity of variance. After the assumptions were met, the Independent Samples t-Test was used to compare the speaking anxiety scores of male and female students. The level of significance was set at 0.05. If the Sig. 2-tailed value was lower than 0.05, the null hypothesis stating that there was no significant difference between the groups was rejected.

C. Results and Discussion

1. Results

The findings are presented according to the two main objectives of the study. The first objective was to describe the overall level of speaking anxiety among EFL students, while the second objective was to examine whether male and female students differed significantly in their speaking anxiety scores.

Table 1. Distribution of Overall Speaking Anxiety Levels

Category	Score range	Frequency (students)	Percentage (%)
Low	33-73	10	16.6
Moderate	74-114	37	61.6
High	115-165	13	21.7
Total	-	60	100.0

Table 1 shows that the majority of students experienced a moderate level of speaking anxiety. Out of 60 students, 37 students, or 61.6%, were in the moderate category. Thirteen students, or 21.7%, were in the high anxiety category, while only 10 students, or 16.6%, were in the low anxiety category. These results indicate that speaking anxiety was not a marginal issue in the classroom. Most students experienced

emotional pressure when required to speak English, and more than one fifth of the respondents experienced anxiety at a high level.

Table 2. Group Statistics for Speaking Anxiety Scores

Gender	N	Mean	Std. deviation	Std. error mean
Male	30	92.87	15.688	2.865
Female	30	103.90	15.753	2.877

Table 2 presents the descriptive comparison between male and female students. The mean score of female students was 103.90, while the mean score of male students was 92.87. The difference of 11.03 points suggests that female students reported higher anxiety than male students. The standard deviations of the two groups were relatively similar, indicating that the distribution of scores within each gender group was comparable.

Table 3. Summary of Independent Samples t-Test Result

Statistical component	Value	Criterion	Interpretation
Levene's test Sig.	0.933	> 0.05	Equal variances assumed
Sig. 2-tailed	0.003	< 0.05	Significant difference
Mean difference	11.03	Female > Male	Female students reported higher anxiety

Table 3 shows that the assumption of homogeneity was fulfilled because Levene's test produced a significance value of 0.933, which was higher than 0.05. The Independent Samples t-Test produced a Sig. 2-tailed value of 0.003. Since this value was lower than 0.05, the null hypothesis was rejected. Therefore, there was a statistically significant difference in speaking anxiety between male and female EFL students at SMA Adabiah 2 Padang. The descriptive comparison further showed that female students experienced higher speaking anxiety than male students.

2. Discussion

Speaking is one of the four essential skills in language learning, along with listening, reading, and writing. Among these, speaking holds a particularly important role in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning because it represents the most direct and active form of communication used in daily life. When students are able to speak English effectively, they can express ideas, respond to questions, engage in discussions, and build social interactions more easily. For this reason, both teachers and students often regard speaking proficiency as a key indicator of success in foreign language learning.

Speaking is a “multi-faceted” skill, meaning that it involves a variety of abilities at once. First, from a cognitive perspective, students must be able to think about what they want to say and quickly put their thoughts into words. Second, from an affective perspective, students need to have confidence and

not be too anxiety when speaking. Third, from a psychomotor perspective, students must be able to move their speech organs, such as the tongue, lips, and jaw, effectively to ensure their speech is clear. All these aspects must work together when someone speaks. Therefore, in EFL learning, students need ample speaking practice, exposure to authentic English language examples, and most importantly, the courage to try even if they make many mistakes (Alsaraireh, 2022).

Related to speaking anxiety that often happens to english language learners, Khafidoh et.al, (2023) argues that in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classrooms, speaking anxiety may arise from several factors. These include fear of making mistakes in pronunciation, grammar, or word choice; worry about negative feedback from peers or teachers; past unpleasant experiences in public speaking; and low self-confidence, which can be shaped by both personality and social influences.

Furthermore, (Gerencheal, 2016) in her study of university students in Ethiopia proposes that speaking anxiety has a strong correlation with low oral participation and high levels of reluctance to speak in class. She also found that female tend to show higher levels of speaking anxiety than male, although this may differ across cultural and social contexts, indicating that gender can also play a role in shaping how students respond to pressure in foreign language speaking situations. From these descriptions, it can be concluded that speaking anxiety is a complex phenomenon and highly relevant in the context of learning English as a foreign language. A deeper understanding of speaking anxiety can help teachers and educators create a supportive and safe classroom atmosphere, enabling students to develop their speaking abilities more effectively without experiencing excessive pressure.

In the context of learning English as a foreign language (EFL), speaking anxiety is a common phenomenon experienced by students, especially at the high school level. However, this anxiety is not experienced uniformly by all students. The severity or intensity of anxiety varies, depending on internal and external factors. Therefore, to understand the impact of anxiety more accurately, it is necessary to classify it based on its level. (Kondo & Ying-Ling, 2004) state that speaking anxiety is generally divided into three main categories: low level, moderate level, and high level. This classification is very useful for understanding the level of fear, anxiety, or discomfort experienced by students when speaking in a foreign language, particularly in the context of learning English as a foreign language (EFL).

The purpose of this study was to examine the level of speaking anxiety among EFL students and to determine whether gender was associated with different anxiety levels. The results showed that speaking anxiety was generally experienced at a moderate level by most respondents. This finding confirms that anxiety is a common psychological barrier in EFL speaking classrooms. The result is understandable because speaking requires immediate language production, public exposure, and real-time monitoring of grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and fluency. Unlike reading or writing tasks, speaking

gives students limited time to plan and revise their language. As a result, students may feel vulnerable when they have to perform orally in front of classmates.

The most important finding of the study is the statistically significant gender difference in speaking anxiety. Female students obtained a higher mean score than male students, and the difference was significant at the 0.05 level. There are some previous studies related to this research. For examples, Ichsanda & Hz (2022) entitled “*Exploring Gender Differences in Public Speaking Anxiety*” which was published in the journal Sawwa: Journal of Gender Studies. This study uses psychological and gender approaches to analyze public speaking anxiety in a formal education environment. formal education environment. The results of the study showed that traditional gender roles students' self-confidence, where male students tended to be more confident even though they are not necessarily linguistically superior. In contrast, female students are more cautious and afraid of making mistakes due to social pressure to be perfect.

In addition, Pristiysputri (2023) conducted a research about “*The Differences of Speaking Anxiety Across Academic Levels and Gender*”, published in the journal The Teaching and Learning of English in Asia. This study used a comparative quantitative method to analyze the differences in speaking anxiety at several educational levels, including high school students. The findings show that female students experience higher levels of speaking anxiety, especially in formal academic contexts such as oral presentations or exams. The authors explain that this is due to social factors such as concern for negative evaluation and high linguistic awareness among female students.

Another relevant study was conducted by Saputra, et.al (2023), conducted research about “*Anxiety in speaking English: Student's attitude and the role of gender*” in the journal Paedagoria: Journal of Educational Studies, Research and Development. This study examined the relationship between student attitudes, speaking anxiety, and gender. The findings showed that female students had more structured learning strategies, but still experienced high anxiety. In contrast, male students tend to be more confident but ignore detailed linguistic aspects. This study suggests the need for differentiated learning strategies that are responsive to gender-based affective factors.

This result supports previous findings by Fauziah et al. (2022) and Okyar (2023), who reported that female students often experience or report higher levels of foreign language speaking anxiety. The finding also corresponds with studies that link gender, anxiety, and speaking performance, such as Istiqomah and Savitri and Viqianti (2024). In the present study, gender did not merely function as a demographic label; it appeared to reflect different emotional experiences in the speaking classroom.

One possible explanation is the role of fear of negative evaluation. Female students may be more sensitive to the possibility of being judged by teachers and peers when making pronunciation, grammar, or vocabulary errors. In EFL contexts where speaking mistakes may attract laughter, correction, or visible

attention, students who are more sensitive to social evaluation may avoid taking communicative risks. This avoidance can reduce speaking practice and reinforce anxiety. The higher female mean score in this study suggests that classroom speaking activities should not be designed only around linguistic difficulty, but also around emotional safety.

Another explanation concerns gender socialization. In many classroom contexts, male students may be more willing to speak despite making errors, while female students may place stronger emphasis on accuracy and social approval. This does not mean that male students do not feel anxious. Rather, their anxiety may be less visible or may be expressed differently. Some male students may mask anxiety through joking, short responses, or apparently relaxed behaviour. Therefore, teachers should avoid assuming that only silent students are anxious. Speaking anxiety can appear as silence, avoidance, excessive preparation, physical nervousness, or even overactive behaviour.

The moderate overall anxiety level also deserves attention. A moderate score may appear less serious than a high score, but it can still affect participation and learning opportunities. Students with moderate anxiety may speak only when called upon, avoid voluntary participation, or choose short answers to reduce exposure. Over time, this pattern may limit fluency development. Wang, Rezaei, and Izadpanah (2024) emphasized that affective and cognitive variables are related to speaking accuracy and fluency. Therefore, reducing anxiety is not only a matter of student comfort but also a pedagogical condition for improving oral performance.

The findings imply that English teachers should implement gender-sensitive and low-risk speaking pedagogy. Speaking activities should begin with pair work, small-group discussion, guided role play, and rehearsal before moving to full-class presentation. Feedback should initially focus on communicative success rather than immediate correction of every error. Teachers may also normalize mistakes as a natural part of language development. For students with higher anxiety, especially those who fear social evaluation, recording tasks, peer-supported practice, and gradual exposure may help build confidence. These strategies are consistent with the need to create a supportive classroom climate where students can take risks without feeling humiliated.

The study also has limitations. It used a quantitative design and relied on questionnaire data, so it could not deeply explain why female students reported higher anxiety or how male students managed their anxiety. The sample was limited to one private senior high school in Padang, which means that the findings should be generalized cautiously. Future research should combine quantitative data with interviews, classroom observation, or speaking-performance assessment. It would also be valuable to examine the relationship between speaking anxiety, self-efficacy, teacher feedback, and actual speaking scores. Intervention studies could test whether role play, task-based speaking, digital recording, or supportive peer feedback can reduce speaking anxiety among different gender groups.

D. Conclusion and Suggestion

This study concluded that speaking anxiety was a considerable issue among EFL students at SMA Adabiah 2 Padang. Most students were in the moderate anxiety category, while a smaller but important portion experienced high anxiety. The Independent Samples t-Test confirmed that there was a significant difference in speaking anxiety between male and female students. Female students reported a higher mean score than male students, indicating that they were more vulnerable to anxiety related to speaking performance and classroom evaluation.

The findings suggest that EFL teachers should design speaking instruction that is both communicative and emotionally supportive. Teachers are encouraged to use low-risk speaking tasks, pair and group activities, gradual exposure to public speaking, and constructive feedback that prioritizes meaning before accuracy. Students should also be encouraged to practise English in non-evaluative settings, use anxiety-reduction strategies, and view speaking mistakes as part of the learning process. Future researchers are advised to conduct qualitative or mixed-methods studies to investigate the causes of gender-related differences in speaking anxiety and to test specific teaching interventions designed to reduce anxiety and improve speaking performance.

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