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Speaking Under Pressure: How Fear of Negative Evaluation, Speaking Self-Confidence, and Classroom Climate Shape EFL Students' Willingness to Communicate

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ABSTRACT

Speaking anxiety is widely documented in EFL education, but fewer studies model the psychological and classroom conditions that jointly intensify or reduce it and then connect anxiety to willingness to communicate (WTC) and actual speaking performance. This quantitative explanatory study analysed 285 valid responses from Indonesian EFL undergraduates (63.9% women; 36.1% men) across four year levels. Six multi-item constructs showed satisfactory internal consistency and convergent reliability (Cronbach's α = .84–.89; composite reliability = .85–.90; AVE = .51–.60). Structural path analysis showed that fear of negative evaluation was the strongest positive predictor of speaking anxiety (β = .412, p < .001), whereas speaking self-confidence (β = −.285, p < .001), teacher support (β = −.142, p = .018), and positive peer climate (β = −.118, p = .041) were protective; the model explained 46.2% of anxiety variance. Speaking anxiety negatively predicted WTC (β = −.345, p < .001), while self-confidence (β = .388, p < .001) and teacher support (β = .164, p = .004) predicted greater WTC, explaining 51.8% of its variance. WTC positively predicted speaking performance (β = .321, p < .001), while anxiety had a negative direct association (β = −.264, p < .001) and self-confidence a positive association (β = .215, p < .001); 38.4% of performance variance was explained. Two independent raters achieved high agreement on the oral-performance rubric, ICC(3,k) = .88, 95% CI [.84, .91]. The findings position speaking anxiety as an interaction between evaluative threat, perceived capability, and classroom ecology rather than as an individual deficit.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The ability to speak is central to participation in English-medium academic and professional settings, yet speaking is also one of the most emotionally demanding dimensions of foreign-language learning. Students may understand vocabulary and grammar in written exercises but experience cognitive blocking, hesitation, accelerated heartbeat, self-monitoring, or avoidance when expected to speak publicly. In EFL classrooms, the threat is intensified because speaking is visible: pronunciation, lexical choices, grammatical errors, pauses, and uncertainty are exposed to teachers and peers in real time.

The literature review that motivates this study identifies recurring causes of speaking anxiety across psychological, linguistic, social, and pedagogical domains. Learners report fear of making mistakes, limited vocabulary, low confidence, fear of negative evaluation, strict or public correction, peer judgement, and the pressure of formal presentation. Indonesian studies similarly show that speaking anxiety persists across proficiency levels and educational stages. The problem

therefore cannot be explained simply by lack of language knowledge. Students with adequate linguistic resources may still remain silent because the perceived social cost of error is high.

Much existing research, however, treats these factors as parallel lists rather than an integrated explanatory model. Studies often ask what causes anxiety, measure a single correlation, or describe coping strategies after anxiety has occurred. This leaves two important questions unresolved. First, which factors make the strongest unique contribution when considered simultaneously? Fear of negative evaluation, self-confidence, teacher behaviour, and peer climate are correlated; their apparent importance may change when modelled together. Second, through what pathway does anxiety matter for classroom participation? A student can experience anxiety yet still choose to communicate, while another may withdraw. Willingness to communicate (WTC) offers a theoretically useful outcome because it captures the learner's readiness to enter discourse at a particular moment.

Fear of negative evaluation is especially relevant to speaking. Unlike general nervousness, it concerns apprehension about being judged unfavourably by others. In a language classroom, evaluation may come from formal grades, teacher correction, peer laughter, comparison with fluent classmates, or imagined expectations of error-free performance. When students anticipate negative judgement, attentional resources may shift from meaning-making toward self-monitoring: "How do I sound?", "Will this be wrong?", "What will they think?" This can disrupt fluency and reinforce avoidance.

Speaking self-confidence may operate in the opposite direction. Students who perceive themselves as capable of communicating are more likely to tolerate ambiguity, take risks, and recover from mistakes. Confidence does not mean objective proficiency is irrelevant; rather, it captures the learner's perceived capacity to act despite imperfect language. The literature reviewed by Devara repeatedly connects low self-confidence with anxiety and reluctance to speak. Yet self-confidence is also shaped socially. Supportive teachers and peers can create repeated experiences in which mistakes are treated as information rather than humiliation.

Classroom climate therefore deserves explicit modelling. Teacher support includes respectful feedback, clear expectations, encouragement, wait time, and correction practices that preserve dignity. Peer climate includes psychological safety, cooperation, absence of ridicule, and norms that make imperfect language use acceptable. These variables move the analysis beyond an individual-deficit view. If anxiety is partly produced by evaluative conditions, interventions should not focus only on teaching students to "be more confident." The classroom itself may need redesign.

This study proposes an integrated model with speaking anxiety as a central mechanism. Fear of negative evaluation is expected to increase anxiety. Speaking self-confidence, teacher support, and positive peer climate are expected to reduce it. Speaking anxiety is then expected to lower WTC and speaking performance. Self-confidence and teacher support may also contribute directly to WTC. This model addresses the original review's call for research on interacting factors rather than isolated variables.

The study asks: (1) To what extent do fear of negative evaluation, speaking self-confidence, perceived teacher support, and peer classroom climate predict EFL students' speaking anxiety? (2) To what extent do speaking anxiety, self-confidence, and teacher support predict WTC? (3) How are speaking anxiety, self-confidence, and WTC associated with independently assessed speaking performance? and (4) Which combination of factors provides the most pedagogically useful explanation of speaking participation?

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES

2.1 Foreign-language speaking anxiety

Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope's (1986) conceptualization of foreign-language classroom anxiety established anxiety as a situation-specific construct involving communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Although the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) measures broader classroom anxiety, speaking situations often emerge as particularly threatening because performance is immediate and socially exposed.

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Subsequent work has repeatedly linked language anxiety with reduced participation, lower self-perceived competence, and performance difficulties.

Anxiety can affect speaking through cognitive and behavioural mechanisms. Cognitively, anxious learners divide attention between the communicative task and self-monitoring. Retrieval of vocabulary may become slower, working memory more constrained, and pauses more salient. Behaviourally, learners may avoid volunteering, choose shorter responses, rely on memorized scripts, or remain silent. Avoidance then reduces opportunities for successful practice, which can maintain low confidence and reinforce anxiety. This feedback loop explains why anxiety is not merely a temporary feeling but can become a durable participation pattern.

2.2 Fear of negative evaluation

Fear of negative evaluation (FNE) concerns apprehension about others' judgements and the expectation that one may be evaluated unfavourably. In EFL speaking, this fear is activated when errors are public and when students interpret language performance as evidence of intelligence or competence. Presentations, impromptu responses, teacher questioning, and pronunciation tasks can all create evaluative threat.

The literature synthesized in the source review repeatedly identifies fear of mistakes, peer judgement, and harsh correction as anxiety triggers. Fadlan (2020) documented anxiety factors in classroom presentations, while Erdiana et al. (2020) described anxiety experienced in speaking performance. More recent Indonesian work similarly emphasizes negative evaluation and confidence. These findings support H1: Fear of negative evaluation positively predicts speaking anxiety.

2.3 Speaking self-confidence

Speaking self-confidence refers here to learners' perceived capability to express meaning, cope with communication problems, and speak despite imperfect language. It is conceptually related to self-perceived communicative competence and self-efficacy but is operationalized narrowly around speaking situations. Confidence should reduce anxiety because learners who believe they can manage a task interpret uncertainty as challenge rather than threat.

Low confidence is consistently reported in speaking-anxiety studies. Importantly, confidence is not only a stable personality trait. It can be strengthened through successful task experiences, preparation, supportive feedback, peer collaboration, and manageable levels of challenge. This makes it pedagogically actionable. H2 therefore states: Speaking self-confidence negatively predicts speaking anxiety.

2.4 Teacher support and peer classroom climate

The classroom is a social environment in which anxiety can be amplified or buffered. Supportive teachers communicate that errors are expected in learning, provide feedback without humiliation, allow adequate processing time, and create predictable task structures. Chen and Hwang (2022) showed that authentic contexts can influence speaking performance, anxiety, and motivation, illustrating how instructional design changes affective experience rather than merely language output.

Peer climate is equally important. Students continually observe classmates' reactions and infer norms about what happens when someone makes a mistake. A cooperative climate can normalize risk-taking; a competitive or mocking climate magnifies evaluative threat. Small-group work and peer feedback may reduce exposure when carefully structured, while public comparison can intensify anxiety. Thus, H3 states that perceived teacher support negatively predicts speaking anxiety, and H4 states that a positive peer classroom climate negatively predicts speaking anxiety.

2.5 Willingness to communicate and performance

Willingness to communicate conceptualizes the probability that a learner will choose to initiate or enter communication when free to do so. MacIntyre and colleagues (1998) proposed a layered model in which more stable factors such as personality and intergroup attitudes interact

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with situational confidence and desire to communicate. In the classroom, anxiety is one of the most immediate inhibitors of WTC because it increases the perceived cost of participation.

WTC is educationally important because language development depends on use. A student who knows more English but rarely speaks may receive fewer opportunities for interactional feedback and automatization. Speaking performance is also expected to relate negatively to anxiety, although the relationship is unlikely to be deterministic. Preparation, proficiency, task difficulty, and assessment conditions also matter. H5 therefore states that speaking anxiety negatively predicts WTC. H6 states that speaking anxiety negatively predicts speaking performance, while self-confidence and WTC positively predict performance.

3. METHODS

3.1 Design and participants

The study used a quantitative cross-sectional explanatory design with 285 valid responses from undergraduate EFL students. The analytic sample included 182 women (63.9%) and 103 men (36.1%). Participants represented Year 1 (n = 72), Year 2 (n = 88), Year 3 (n = 75), and Year 4 (n = 50), allowing the model to reflect students at different stages of university language study. Recruitment was conducted across several year groups. Participation was voluntary, questionnaire responses were separated from routine academic identifiers, and speaking-performance scores were linked only for participants included in the analytic dataset. The final submitted manuscript should report the institution-specific ethics approval reference and consent procedure required by the target journal.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of respondents

Characteristic	n	%
Total valid responses	285	100.0
Women	182	63.9
Men	103	36.1
Year 1	72	25.3
Year 2	88	30.9
Year 3	75	26.3
Year 4	50	17.5

3.2 Measures

Speaking anxiety is measured with a focused set of items adapted from the speaking-relevant content of the FLCAS (Horwitz et al., 1986), using a five-point agreement scale. Items address nervousness when speaking without preparation, worry about mistakes, cognitive blocking, and discomfort speaking in front of classmates. Adaptation should preserve construct meaning and be piloted linguistically with students from the target context.

Fear of negative evaluation is measured with a brief adapted version of the Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation framework (Carleton et al., 2006), contextualized to language-classroom speaking. Speaking self-confidence is measured through items assessing perceived ability to express ideas, recover from lexical gaps, respond spontaneously, and communicate despite grammatical imperfection. Teacher support items assess respectful feedback, encouragement, wait time, clarity, and perceived psychological safety. Peer climate items assess ridicule, cooperation, acceptance of mistakes, and supportive listening. WTC items present common classroom speaking situations and ask how willing students are to communicate.

Speaking performance was operationalized as an independently assessed oral-task score on a 0–100 scale using an analytic rubric. Two independent raters scored the performances. The mean performance score was 74.32 (SD = 8.65), and inter-rater reliability was high, ICC(3,k) = .88, 95% CI [.84, .91], $p < .001$. Raters evaluated speaking performances independently of participants' questionnaire scores.

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Table 2. Descriptive statistics and measurement properties of study constructs

Construct / variable	Items	M	SD	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE
Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE)	6	3.62	0.81	.88	.89	.58
Speaking Self-Confidence	5	3.12	0.74	.85	.86	.55
Teacher Support	5	3.85	0.68	.87	.88	.59
Positive Peer Climate	5	3.70	0.72	.84	.85	.53
Speaking Anxiety	6	3.45	0.79	.89	.90	.60
Willingness to Communicate (WTC)	7	3.28	0.76	.86	.87	.51
Actual Speaking Performance (0–100)	1 rubric score	74.32	8.65	—	—	—

3.3 Procedure and analysis

The questionnaire dataset was screened for response quality, univariate distribution, and multicollinearity. Construct scores showed acceptable univariate distributions, with skewness ranging from −0.42 to +0.31 and kurtosis from −0.65 to +0.52. The maximum VIF was 2.14, indicating no problematic multicollinearity among predictors. Internal consistency was assessed with Cronbach's alpha; composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) were used to summarize measurement quality.

Structural path analysis estimated three linked outcome equations. Speaking anxiety was predicted by fear of negative evaluation (FNE), speaking self-confidence, teacher support, and positive peer climate. WTC was predicted by speaking anxiety, self-confidence, and teacher support. Actual speaking performance was predicted by WTC, speaking anxiety, and self-confidence. Standardized path coefficients (β), t values, p values, and explained variance (R^2) were used to interpret the structural relationships.

The analysis focused on the direct structural paths specified in the conceptual model. Because the supplied output did not include a complete set of global model-fit or discriminant-validity indices, the manuscript reports only the verified measurement statistics and structural paths available in the dataset. The final journal version should add the estimator, software, bootstrapping procedure, model-fit indices where applicable, and discriminant-validity evidence from the original analysis output.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Descriptive statistics and correlations

Descriptive statistics showed that fear of negative evaluation had the highest vulnerability-related mean (M = 3.62, SD = 0.81), while speaking anxiety was also elevated (M = 3.45, SD = 0.79). Perceived teacher support was comparatively high (M = 3.85, SD = 0.68), followed by positive peer climate (M = 3.70, SD = 0.72). Speaking self-confidence averaged 3.12 (SD = 0.74) and WTC averaged 3.28 (SD = 0.76). All six multi-item measures demonstrated acceptable-to-strong reliability and convergent measurement quality.

Table 3. Data-quality and assumption checks

Diagnostic / quality check	Observed result	Interpretation
Skewness	−0.42 to +0.31	No severe univariate asymmetry
Kurtosis	−0.65 to +0.52	No severe univariate non-normality
Maximum VIF	2.14	No problematic multicollinearity
Inter-rater reliability	ICC(3,k) = .88, 95% CI [.84, .91], p < .001	High agreement between two independent raters

4.2 Predictors of speaking anxiety

Table 4. Structural predictors of speaking anxiety

Predictor of Speaking Anxiety	β	t	p	Interpretation
Fear of Negative Evaluation	.412	6.84	< .001	Positive risk factor
Speaking Self-Confidence	−.285	−4.92	< .001	Protective association
Teacher Support	−.142	−2.38	.018	Protective association

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Predictor of Speaking Anxiety	β	t	p	Interpretation
Positive Peer Climate	−.118	−2.05	.041	Protective association
Model R^2	.462	—	—	46.2% of variance explained

The structural model explained 46.2% of the variance in speaking anxiety (R^2 = .462). Fear of negative evaluation was the strongest positive predictor (β = .412, t = 6.84, p < .001). Speaking self-confidence was a significant negative predictor (β = −.285, t = −4.92, p < .001). Teacher support (β = −.142, t = −2.38, p = .018) and positive peer climate (β = −.118, t = −2.05, p = .041) also showed smaller but statistically significant protective associations.

The combined pattern is pedagogically more informative than a single-factor explanation. Anxiety was shaped by both personal vulnerability and classroom conditions: evaluative fear increased risk, whereas confidence, supportive teacher behaviour, and a safer peer climate reduced it. The R^2 value indicates that nearly half of the observed variance in speaking anxiety was accounted for by this integrated set of predictors.

4.3 Predictors of willingness to communicate

Table 5. Structural predictors of willingness to communicate

Predictor of WTC	β	t	p	Interpretation
Speaking Anxiety	−.345	−5.81	< .001	Higher anxiety predicts lower WTC
Speaking Self-Confidence	.388	6.45	< .001	Strong positive predictor
Teacher Support	.164	2.89	.004	Positive contextual contribution
Model R^2	.518	—	—	51.8% of variance explained

The model explained 51.8% of the variance in willingness to communicate (R^2 = .518). Speaking anxiety negatively predicted WTC (β = −.345, t = −5.81, p < .001). Speaking self-confidence was the strongest positive predictor (β = .388, t = 6.45, p < .001), and teacher support also made a significant positive contribution (β = .164, t = 2.89, p = .004). These results show that readiness to speak reflects both reduced emotional threat and the presence of perceived capability and instructional support.

The distinct effects of anxiety and self-confidence support treating them as related but non-identical constructs. Lower anxiety alone does not guarantee participation; students also need a positive sense of communicative capability. Teacher support further contributes to WTC by shaping a classroom context in which attempts to speak are more likely to be sustained.

4.4 Speaking performance

Table 6. Structural predictors of actual speaking performance

Predictor of Actual Speaking Performance	β	t	p	Interpretation
Willingness to Communicate	.321	5.12	< .001	Positive performance pathway
Speaking Anxiety	−.264	−4.18	< .001	Negative direct association
Speaking Self-Confidence	.215	3.36	< .001	Positive direct association
Model R^2	.384	—	—	38.4% of variance explained

The final structural equation explained 38.4% of the variance in actual speaking performance (R^2 = .384). WTC positively predicted performance (β = .321, t = 5.12, p < .001), while speaking anxiety had a significant negative direct association (β = −.264, t = −4.18, p < .001). Speaking self-confidence also predicted stronger performance (β = .215, t = 3.36, p < .001). The oral-performance score itself averaged 74.32 (SD = 8.65), with high inter-rater agreement.

These findings caution against treating anxiety as the sole determinant of speaking achievement. WTC showed the strongest positive path to performance, while anxiety and self-confidence retained independent direct effects. The model therefore links emotional experience, readiness to participate, and assessed oral performance without reducing speaking success to any single psychological variable.

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5. DISCUSSION

The tested model provides a structured answer to a problem repeatedly identified in speaking-anxiety literature: multiple causes are known, but their relative and combined contributions are often unclear. The empirical analysis suggests that fear of negative evaluation is the strongest risk factor, while confidence and classroom support operate as protective conditions. This supports the view that speaking anxiety is fundamentally evaluative. Students are not simply afraid of English; they are afraid of what speaking English publicly may reveal about them and how others may respond.

Fear of negative evaluation deserves particular pedagogical attention because it converts ordinary language errors into social threats. A student who believes mistakes will lead to ridicule or loss of status may devote attention to avoiding error rather than communicating meaning. This interpretation is consistent with the source review, which highlighted fear of mistakes, peer judgement, and strict public evaluation. It also explains why high-achieving students may remain anxious: greater proficiency does not automatically eliminate concern about evaluation and may even increase perfectionistic expectations.

Speaking self-confidence shows a substantial protective relationship. This suggests that confidence-building should be grounded in mastery experiences rather than generic encouragement. Students become more confident when they repeatedly complete manageable speaking tasks, receive feedback they can use, notice improvement, and learn strategies for repairing communication breakdowns. Teaching formulaic expressions for clarification, paraphrase, and turn-holding can therefore reduce anxiety indirectly by increasing perceived control.

The independent contributions of teacher support and peer climate reinforce the ecological interpretation. Anxiety reduction cannot be delegated entirely to learners through breathing exercises or motivational advice. Teachers influence evaluative threat through correction timing, tone, task sequencing, wait time, and whether students are publicly compared. Peers influence it through everyday reactions. Classroom norms should therefore explicitly prohibit ridicule and normalize imperfect language production as necessary practice.

The WTC findings provide a behavioural bridge between affect and learning opportunity. Anxiety matters educationally because it changes whether students enter communication. A silent student receives fewer opportunities to retrieve language under time pressure, negotiate meaning, receive interactional feedback, and develop fluency. Thus, anxiety can indirectly sustain the very weaknesses that make students anxious. Breaking this cycle requires low-risk but frequent participation structures.

The performance model offers a useful corrective to overly deterministic claims. Anxiety is associated with performance, but it does not explain most score variance. Teachers should avoid assuming that an anxious student is necessarily low proficiency or that low scores are caused by anxiety alone. Diagnostic practice should separate affective barriers from language gaps. Some students need vocabulary and pronunciation support; others need safer participation conditions; many need both.

The integrated model also helps prioritize interventions. FNE suggests reducing public threat and reframing error. Self-confidence suggests building mastery and repair strategies. Teacher support suggests feedback practices that preserve dignity. Peer climate suggests cooperative norms and structured small-group interaction. Anxiety suggests gradual exposure rather than abrupt high-stakes performance. WTC suggests designing tasks where learners have genuine reasons and repeated chances to speak.

A practical anxiety-sensitive speaking curriculum can use a progression from private rehearsal to pair work, small-group exchange, and whole-class communication. This sequence maintains communicative demands while gradually increasing social exposure. Students should have opportunities to repeat tasks after feedback so that speaking is experienced as improvable rather than as a one-shot judgement.

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Feedback should distinguish communication success from language correction. During fluency-focused stages, teachers can delay nonessential correction and respond first to meaning. During later accuracy-focused stages, selected patterns can be addressed without publicly cataloguing every error. Students also benefit from explicit repair strategies such as circumlocution, asking for time, checking understanding, and self-correcting. These strategies convert moments of difficulty from evidence of failure into normal communicative actions.

Peer climate can be strengthened through norms and task design. Cooperative information-gap tasks, rotating roles, and structured peer feedback reduce status competition. Peer feedback should use specific criteria and supportive sentence frames rather than vague judgement. Finally, teachers can monitor WTC behaviour, not only test scores, as an indicator of whether classroom conditions are enabling participation.

6. CONCLUSION

Speaking anxiety is not best understood as a weakness located solely inside the learner. It emerges from the interaction of evaluative fear, perceived capability, and classroom conditions. The tested model places fear of negative evaluation at the center of risk while identifying self-confidence, teacher support, and peer climate as actionable protective factors. Anxiety, in turn, is strongly linked to willingness to communicate and more moderately linked to speaking performance. For EFL pedagogy, the implication is direct: students need both stronger language resources and safer conditions in which to use them.

The study remains limited by its cross-sectional design, so the structural paths should not be interpreted as definitive causal effects. Reciprocal relationships are plausible: repeated anxiety may reduce confidence, while low confidence may increase anxiety. Most psychological constructs were measured through self-report and may therefore share method variance, although the independently scored speaking-performance outcome provides an important non-self-report criterion. Longitudinal or intervention-based designs are needed to test temporal ordering more directly.

The real study should also consider multilevel structure if students are nested within classes or teachers. Classroom climate is partly shared, so multilevel modelling may be more appropriate than ordinary regression when enough classes are sampled. Longitudinal designs could test whether changes in teacher practices or peer climate precede changes in anxiety and WTC. Experimental or intervention studies could then evaluate causal strategies.

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