ANXIETY ON ENGLISH SPEAKING TEST PERFORMANCE: A STUDY OF STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES IN ISLAMIC HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

This study aims to determine what types of anxiety students face in speaking test performance and how anxiety impacts students' speaking test performance. The research methodology is a descriptive qualitative method. The research subjects were 15 students of the English Education department in the third semester with the Advanced Listening subject. The data were collected by doing interviews, observations, and documentation. Interviews were done to collect data about types of anxiety, and observations were done to collect data about the impact of students' anxiety on speaking test performance. The findings were that there were 3 types of anxiety found in this study, namely cognitive, somatic, and behavioral anxiety. Cognitive anxiety is experienced by 11 students, somatic anxiety is experienced by 10 students, and behavioral anxiety is experienced by 7 students. The impact of anxiety on speaking class performance namely reduced fluency and coherence, limited use of vocabulary and grammar, limited use of vocabulary and grammar.

Keywords: *Cognitive anxiety, somatic anxiety, behavioral anxiety, speaking test*

INTRODUCTION

English proficiency is one of the vital skills for the current globalized world, where it plays a key role in academic, professional, and social aspects. Speaking is a crucial component of second language learning because it requires the real-time integration of vocabulary, grammar, and communication skills (Yan et al., 2024). In Islamic higher education institutions, strong English-speaking skills are essential for academic presentations, international collaboration, and accessing scholarly resources written in English. However, despite its significance, a large number of students encounter considerable difficulties in mastering English speaking (Suleimenova, 2013). Among the stated problems, anxiety is identified as a significant factor, which deteriorates the students' performance in the speaking tests. Language anxiety, which is a type of test anxiety, is mentioned as the main factor that affects their confidence, fluency, and ability to speak properly are affected (Roos et al., 2021). In the case of Islamic higher education, where students are expected to follow certain cultural and academic rules, the impact of anxiety on English-speaking performance is even more profound.

According to Tanveer (2008), speaking anxiety is one of the most pervasive problems among language learners, often leading to reduced participation and a lack of confidence during speaking tests. While the speaking tests are meant to measure

students' language-speaking skills, often, anxiety becomes an overbearing factor that they cannot control, and hence, it distorts a true reflection of their abilities (Suratin & Sribayak, 2025). Islamic higher education students felt nervousness, fear of judgment, and self-doubt when they confronted the test. The latter is further exhibited by their timidity in using sophisticated vocabulary in real-life situations, too. Anxiety significantly affects the oral proficiency of language learners, causing hesitation, limited vocabulary use, and reduced fluency (Donate, 2022).

Previous studies have shown that although anxiety does have a detrimental effect on language learning, it has not been explored substantially, especially concerning dealing with English-speaking performance in the context of Islamic higher education. Gaining an understanding of the role of anxiety in speaking test performance is of utmost importance if we want to find strategies that would help students achieve better results and promote a positive learning climate (Dewi, 2024). Minimizing language anxiety is crucial for developing speaking skills, as it allows students to focus on communication rather than the fear of mistakes (Gkonou et al., 2017). Therefore, this study aims to determine what types of anxiety students face in speaking test performance and how anxiety impacts students' speaking test performance.

Student's speaking test performance is a broad term used in cases where students suffer from different types of anxiety, which often has a considerable negative influence on their ability to communicate appropriately. According to Gkonou et al. (2017), kinds of anxiety are divided into cognitive, somatic, and behavioral. The problem of negative thought patterns and self-doubt characterizes cognitive anxiety. Regularly, students who face this anxiety are afraid of making mistakes, being exposed to a judgmental environment, or disappointing due to cognitive barriers (Alrabai, 2015). Their cognitive overload is likely to interrupt their ability to remember words, join sentences, and deliver a coherent discourse. Conversely, somatic nervousness is associated with bodily reactions, such as sweating, shaking, or a fast heartbeat (Dewaele & Alfawzan, 2018). These physical responses could be a barrier to their speech fluency and pronunciation, which makes it very hard for them to communicate their thoughts properly.

Behavioral anxiety is a significant type of anxiety that students experience and that affects their speaking performance. It usually triggers avoidance behaviors like skipping the preparation or delaying due to the fear of getting into the speaking test. During the test, this kind of anxiety may be responsible for the frequent pauses, the responses that are too general, or the clarity in the way they present the answers. Understanding these types of anxiety is crucial for developing strategies to help students manage their fears and perform to the best of their abilities.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design, aiming to explore the types of anxiety experienced by students during speaking test performance and how such anxiety affects their performance (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research was

conducted among 15 third-semester students enrolled in the Advanced Listening course of the English Education Department. These participants were selected purposely to represent learners who had undergone formal speaking assessments and were likely to experience various forms of test-related anxiety. There were three forms of data collected through this study, namely (1) verbal data, namely data from interviews with students to find out the types of anxiety students face in speaking test performance, (2) subject behavior (informants), namely data obtained from observations to obtain how anxiety impacts students' speaking test performance and (3) documentation analyzing facts that were arranged logically from written and unwritten documents that contain instructions. The technique of analyzing data was data reduction, data display, and conclusion (Miles et al., 2014).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the study, addressing two research questions: (1) the types of anxiety students experience during speaking tests, and (2) the impact of anxiety on their speaking test performance. The results of this study were obtained by analysing interviews conducted with 15 students of the English Education Department in the third semester and the results of observations made during speaking test performance in the classroom.

1. Types of Students' Anxiety in Speaking Test Performance.

Anxiety is a feeling of worried, afraid, panic and other negative feelings. There are 3 types of anxiety which cognitive, somatic and behavioural anxiety. The responses of the participants in the interview have showed their types of anxiety in speaking test performance.

a. Cognitive Anxiety

Cognitive anxiety relates to negative thoughts and concerns about self-judgment when speaking. This was the most frequently reported type of anxiety among the participants. In this study, it was found that 11 out of 15 students (73%) had this anxiety. They were worried about making mistakes during the speaking test and felt that their speaking skills were not as good as the other friends. These thoughts made them unfocused and unconfident. Students described experiencing negative thoughts and self-doubt during speaking tests. Many students worried about making grammatical mistakes or mispronunciations. This fear caused them to second-guess their answers and lose fluency (Daymiel et al., 2022).

Most of students felt about not meeting the lecturer's expectations which made frequent pauses as students appeared to overthink their responses. They felt that lecturer was critically evaluating their abilities. This affects disrupted their focus and ability to construct coherent responses. This fear heightened their self-consciousness and made them hesitant to speak.

> *"I often worry during speaking tests, especially when stringing words together and also forgetting what to say to the speaker. I feel anxious*

when the examiner stares at me and watches me answer questions, which makes me often fail to focus." (Husnil Khotimah)

Therefore, most students experienced recurring thoughts about the possibility of making mistakes, fear of criticism, and concerns about their ability to speak English. This often inhibits their ability to speak fluently and confidently. Cognitive anxiety becomes the highest anxiety experienced by students; this feeling of anxiety may influence students' mental performance while in speaking performance.

Among the 15 participants in the study, four students were not experiencing cognitive anxiety during their speaking test performance. These students exhibited a level of confidence and mental clarity that allowed them to focus on their performance without being distracted by negative thoughts or fears of judgment.

"I did not worry because I prepared my speaking test perfectly." (Habib)

These students expressed strong confidence in their speaking abilities, which they attributed to consistent practice and familiarity with the language. They had positive mindset, considering mistakes as part of the learning process rather than failures. This attitude minimized the fear of judgment, which is a primary component of cognitive anxiety.

b. Somatic Anxiety

Somatic anxiety refers to the physical symptoms that arise due to stress or nervousness, particularly in high-pressure situations such as speaking tests. Different from cognitive anxiety, which involves negative thoughts and self-doubt, somatic anxiety manifests physically and can interfere with a student's ability to perform. These symptoms are the body's natural response to stress, often making students feel overwhelmed and less in control (Roos et al., 2021).

In this study, it was found that 10 out of 15 students (67%) had somatic anxiety during their speaking test performance. This type of anxiety was the second most common among students. Students said a variety of physical symptoms that inhibit their ability to perform effectively during speaking tests. Many students felt their heart pounding uncontrollably, which made it difficult to focus. Some students also felt excessive sweating, especially on the palms and forehead.

"I would sweat excessively, especially on my hands, because I was nervous, and my heart would beat faster." (Riski Ramadani)

The overwhelming physical sensations prevented students from concentrating fully on their responses. Besides that, the physical discomfort distracted students, causing them to hesitate or lose their train of thought.

While the rest of the students who did not or slightly experienced somatic anxiety due to a higher level of physical composure. For students who experienced somatic anxiety occasionally, the symptoms were mild and short-lived and often disappeared after the first few moments of the test. They believed the nerves were a natural response and not disruptive to their performance.

"Sometimes I feel my heart race a little at the beginning, but once I start talking, it goes away." (Ririn Ariani).

The students felt confident, prepared, and had effective coping strategies in reducing physical stress responses. Their experiences suggest that addressing somatic anxiety involves not only managing immediate physical symptoms but also fostering a mindset that normalizes and mitigates these reactions.

c. Behavioral Anxiety

Behavioral anxiety refers to the observable actions or behaviors that individuals exhibit as a response to anxiety. The behaviors often manifest as avoidance, withdrawal, or a lack of engagement, which can directly impact performance. In the context of speaking tests, students with behavioral anxiety may avoid preparation, minimize their verbal output, or exhibit signs of reluctance during the test (Atifnigar, 2024).

In this study, 7 out of 15 students (46%) showed clear signs of behavioral anxiety during speaking tests. Their behaviors often stemmed from their underlying cognitive or somatic anxiety, influencing how they approached and performed in the test environment.

Behavioral anxiety also manifested as hesitation to speak or reluctance to elaborate on answers during the test. It means that means that students who experienced behavioral anxiety often displayed a lack of confidence or willingness to participate fully in the speaking test. This behavior made students were unsure or delayed in starting their responses to questions. This hesitation stemmed from anxiety, making them overthink their answers or fear making mistakes.

> *"I find it hard to start answering. I feel like the examiner is waiting for me to fail." (Wulandari)*

Students often avoided looking directly to the lecturer, choosing instead to look down, around the room, or at their notes. This behavior reflected their discomfort and lack of confidence, as they felt intimidated by direct interaction.

2. The Impact of Students' Anxiety to Their Speaking Test Performance.

The findings revealed that anxiety significantly impacted students' ability to perform in speaking tests, with varying degrees and types of impact depending on the individual. The impacts can be seen as follows:

1. Reduced Fluency and Coherence

Students with high levels of anxiety often struggled to maintain fluency during their speaking tests. They hesitated frequently, paused mid-sentence, and found it difficult to structure coherent responses. This was not only disrupted their communication but also gave the impression of uncertainty or lack of preparation to the examiner. This hesitation often led to frustration, further exacerbating their anxiety and reducing their confidence as the test progressed.

2. Limited Use of Vocabulary and Grammar

Anxiety caused students to rely on basic vocabulary and avoid using more complex grammatical structures, even when they were capable of doing so. This limited the richness of their responses, making their answers appear less sophisticated and detailed. Instead of demonstrating their full linguistic ability, students opted for safer, simpler language to minimize the risk of making mistakes.

This choice often led to repetitive phrases and a lack of variety in sentence construction, which negatively impacted their overall performance. Furthermore, their reluctance to take risks in using more advanced structures reflected their fear of judgment or failure, preventing them from showcasing their true potential.

3. Less Pronunciation and Articulation

Anxiety led to trembling voices, mispronunciations, and unclear articulation, which affected their ability to communicate effectively. These physical manifestations of anxiety often distracted both the students and their listeners, making it harder for their intended message to be understood. Trembling voices gave an impression of uncertainty, while mispronunciations disrupted the natural flow of their speech, causing misunderstandings. Unclear articulation further compounded the problem, as words became slurred or difficult to comprehend. Together, these factors undermined the students' confidence and made their communication appear less polished, even if they had prepared extensively or had a strong grasp of the material.

The findings of this study align with previous research highlighting the pervasive role of anxiety in second language speaking performance. Suratin & Sribayak (2025) similarly identified cognitive anxiety, particularly fear of negative evaluation, as a major barrier to speaking fluency. Likewise, Fu et al. (2023) emphasized the cognitive overload caused by anxiety, which impairs real-time language production. Compared to Kaye and Harrison's (2019) findings, the present study corroborates that somatic symptoms, such as sweating and increased heart rate, are strong indicators of stress in speaking evaluations. Additionally, consistent with Bai (2023), the manifestation of behavioral anxiety, such as avoidance and hesitation, was observed to reduce speaking performance substantially. However, this study provides a more contextualized perspective by focusing on Islamic higher education, where cultural expectations around communication may intensify anxiety. Students' fear of making mistakes was often linked to broader concerns about maintaining social and academic reputations within a culturally sensitive environment (Dewi, 2024).

These findings imply that educators in Islamic higher education institutions should develop specific pedagogical interventions to minimize speaking anxiety. For instance, incorporating low-stakes speaking activities, providing consistent positive feedback, and creating a supportive classroom atmosphere can reduce cognitive and somatic stressors. Assessment practices should also consider anxiety as a factor influencing performance and should be designed to capture students' true speaking abilities rather than their reactions to test pressure. Moreover, raising students' awareness about anxiety management techniques, such as deep breathing, positive self-talk, and incremental exposure to public speaking, can further empower them to improve their performance.

In conclusion, addressing students' speaking anxiety requires not only understanding its types and impacts but also implementing teaching and assessment strategies that

foster resilience, confidence, and effective communication skills in Islamic higher education contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to identify the types of anxiety students face in speaking test performance and examine how anxiety impacts their performance. The findings revealed that students experienced three types of anxiety—cognitive, somatic, and behavioral—with cognitive anxiety being the most prevalent, followed by somatic and behavioral anxiety. These anxieties negatively affected students' speaking test performance, leading to reduced fluency and coherence, limited use of vocabulary and grammar, and poor pronunciation and articulation. As a result, students were often unable to demonstrate their true speaking abilities. Based on these findings, this study highlights the need for an anxiety-sensitive approach in teaching and assessing speaking skills, especially within Islamic higher education contexts. Educators are encouraged to create supportive environments, implement strategies to reduce anxiety, and design assessments that accurately reflect students' language competence without amplifying test-related stress.

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