

# ***External Factors Triggering Speaking Anxiety In The Academic Setting***

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**Abstract.** In a number of English classes I have taught, a common phenomenon I found is that most students were silent during the class. Even when they are instructed to talk, they are often hesitant to start. A potential factor leading to the phenomena is the existence of speaking anxiety. The aim of this research is to unfold external factors promoting speaking anxiety among EFL Learners in an Indonesian university. I employed a qualitative case study and purposively invited thirty EFL students who I found hesitant to talk in my class although they got a good score in the speaking test. Data to answer the research question were gathered through reflective journal, focus group discussion, and interviews. Data were coded and grouped before I withdrew a conclusion. I concluded that there are five external conditions which are believed promoting the students speaking anxiety consisting of the politeness norm of students' cultural background, the inability to speak English with someone sharing similar first language, the Indonesian students' cultural belief that teacher is the person who knows everything about the subject, the students' need to maintain their positive face and feeling afraid for decreasing or losing the speaking partner's positive face through inappropriate joke.

**Keywords :** *EFL, Speaking, anxiety, external factors*

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## INTRODUCTION

To begin with, in the western education culture, it is highly believed that the activeness of the students to talk in the classroom is the key success of the learning (Mackinnon and Manathunga, 2003). Idrus (2022) mentioned that students' silence in the classroom especially in the second language learning can inhibit the acquisition of the target language. Furthermore, Petress (2001) stated that students' silence in the classroom is unbeneficial not only for themselves but also for other students since they could not share their ideas or what they know about the subject being discussed/taught. In short, each student is expected to actively involve speaking to share their ideas related to the subject in order to maximize the learning process and output.

However, in a number of English classes I have taught, a common phenomena I found is that most students were silent during the class. Even when they are instructed to talk, they are often hesitant to start. The condition seems mirroring many studies in the classroom communication context indicate that most Asian students are well known as the silent student (e.g. Cheng, 2000; Nakane, 2007). Many researchers (e.g. Cheng, 2000 and Kim, 2006) mentioned that the use of non-native language, English, as the learning medium has been recognised as one major factor promoting this condition. This fact is very interesting considering that in the speaking class, they could perform well. A potential factor leading to the phenomena is the existence of speaking anxiety. Horwitz (2005) argued that anxiety does attack not only lower learner, but also advanced student.

Many studies have consistently concluded that foreign language learning is a complex process which does involve not only the mastery of linguistic component (e.g. vocabulary, grammar) but also includes socio-contextual aspect (Schumann, 2003) and affective factor (Krashen, 1985). The most substantial variable of the latter component is anxiety (Brown, 1987; Chastain, 1976; MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991).

In the study of foreign language anxiety, whether anxiety is facilitating or debilitating the foreign language learning, the study conducted resulted in varied findings. While facilitating anxiety promotes positive effect on second language learning, negative anxiety act as a barrier in foreign language study (Idrus, 2022). Some old studies (e.g. Chastain, 1975; Kleinmann, 1977; Scovel, 1978) found that anxiety supports a foreign language proficiency. For example, Kleinmann (1977) found students who experienced a high level of anxiety try to use English structure correctly more frequently than their native language peers. However, some other studies confirmed that anxiety tends to be supporting when the amount is quite small. Alpert and Haber (1960), after employing Achievement Anxiety Test (AAT) withdrew a conclusion which stated that anxiety does not always negatively affected the-the second language ability. A low degree of anxiety will produce a low performance and on the contrary, when the anxiety increases too highly, it could damage a performance. Some years before that study conducted, Scovel (1978) has suggested that the main reason lies of this inconsistency lie on the lack validity of the definition and anxiety measurement. Therefore, a new Foreign Language Communicative Anxiety (FLCA) measurement was designed by Horwitz (2005), which was then upgraded to be a more systematic questionnaire to measure the anxiety occurring in a speaking practice in the class by Young (1990). After occupying the FLCA scale, the finding of studies in this area tend to show the anxiety as a debilitating factor in language learning. Horwitz (2005), for example, found anxiety facilitate the learners

on a very simple task in learning, yet not with a subject which is more challenging like language learning.

Chastain (1976) categorized factors provoking speaking anxiety into external and internal domains. This study focused on discovering the external factors

## **L2 Speaking Anxiety and Culture**

Bonvillain (2010) claimed culture as the ground of someone's language and identity. Some studies have found that the intensity of speaking language anxiety occurring differently among different cultural groups. Horwitz (2005) found Asian learners (especially Koreans) are the most anxious, followed by American students and with their European counterparts as the least anxious. Because this study is conducted in Indonesian context which (as far my knowledge) seems has not been studied yet before about its communities shock culture usually find in international interaction, a study carried out with Japanese which is geographically speaking, located quite close is reviewed here.

A qualitative case study was conducted by Ohata (2004) to describe and to explore how culture and personal aspects promoting speaking anxiety to seven Japanese during their lives in a various sociocultural context in the US. It was found that the seven research participants struggled with psychological and emotional difficulties in their journey to adapt and acculturate with the local people. They also face a profound psychological dilemma to use the language spoken in their new area as a form of retaining their original cultural identity.

Furthermore, another challenge the Japanese in that study experiencing is the significance of maintaining positive face. Goffman (2003) defined positive face as the need to be appreciated to maintain or to enhance the public image that every member wants to claim for himself. Specifically to Ohata's (2004) study, the involvement of face is tied with the Japanese culture concerning the way they perceive the face which is more dependent on the others. Majorly, the Japanese believe possible threatening their positive image when they underestimate their competency concerning their second language. As additional information, in many other earlier studies, for example the one which was conducted by Liu (2001), it was also found that sometimes students prefer to silent as a way to hide their low speaking ability to maintain their positive face.

Although the studies discussed above were not conducted in the Indonesian second language speaker's' context, it might be valuable to be taken as supporting insights in analysing the data identified correlated with such aspects.

## **Joke and Culture**

In the Oxford dictionaries, joke is defined as words that is said to bring amusement or laughter, especially a story with a funny punchline. Apte (1988) stated that telling joke is a cooperative effort in which it requires an agreement of understanding between the speaker and the listener on a form of meaning of a narrative. Therefore, if the both parties are successful to get the similarity on the way they perceive the meaning, a joke might be successful. In contrast, if it does not, it might be not perceived funnily by the listener, and even it is possible offending the listener. The possible challenge to be successful in telling joke is the view mentioned by Attardo (2008). He stated that joke is labelled as a culturally marked form of communication in which both parties have to understand its real world background (Attardo, 2008). Similarly, Davies (2003) stated that an interaction with joking is the most complex

communication form in which tied to the situation for its interpretation. Therefore, when it is delivered to a listener from a different cultural background, it might be difficult to be understood or even can offend the listener.

Moreover, due to the complexity of the use of joke in conversation, [Davies \(2003\)](#) suggested that it might be the last component that a language learner to be able to practice when interacting with native speaker. Since the conversation they conducted are among or between people with different cultural background and based on the either FGD or personal interview conducted to them about their duration using that language in the real world which is relatively short, it is well reasoned if students involving in this study face such difficulties in using joke when speaking.

### **Eastern Classroom Culture**

The comparison between the classroom culture between western and non-western countries has attracted the attention of the scholars for some decades. There are three aspects differing the perspective learning of western and non-western students mentioned by [Merriam et al. \(2007\)](#). First, western learning model emphasises the independence of students so they can be more ready to control their life and more responsible to the society. On the other hand, the non-western learning approaches focusing on the development and the enhancement of identity, self-concept, and self-esteem only in relation to others. Western teacher learning paradigm is regarded more isolated while the non-western teaching model is interdependence. The following community tends to see that all of them holds the responsibility to teach and to learn.

Second, non-western tradition honours a holistic approach which includes the spirit, mind, body, and emotional components of learning (or some of those). This community also integrates the morality and spirituality to create a better person. In contrast, [Merriam et al. \(2007\)](#) stated that the western education system tends to separate secular and sacred knowledge and thus see the knowledge as not unitary.

Last, Comparing to the western education think of learning set in a formal classroom, with a teacher teaches material based on a curriculum, non-western education paradigm is that learning is primarily informal, arranged in everyday life and is lifelong. The material mainly comes from the community problem or issue which needs attention. However, the regulation applied by di educational ministry of Indonesian since 2008 to study at least until for nine years or finishing junior high school shows that such paradigm is not applicable in the Indonesian context. Therefore, it could be argued that this point is not counted as one of some aspects which differ Indonesian learning to the western countries.

A more precise description of the Asian education culture was pointed by [Lin \(2012\)](#) and [Wintergerst et al \(2003\)](#). While in the western class teacher acts as a facilitator ([Lin, 2012](#)), [Wintergerst et al. \(2003\)](#) stated that in Asian culture, teachers are generally regarded as the primary resources of all knowledge that the students need. Therefore, the learning process tends to be teacher centred. Particularly in Indonesian context, it has been mentioned by some scholars (e.g. [Bjork, 2005](#); [Buchori, 2001](#)) that the teacher-centred based instruction has rooted in the teaching and learning tradition at most school in that country. This tradition, as well as some conditions previously mentioned, can be predicted as the major factor promoting the hesitance of Indonesians to speak much in the classroom.

## RESEARCH METHOD

The aims of this research are to unfold external factors promoting speaking anxiety among EFL Learners in an Indonesian university. I employed a qualitative case study to widely explore students' subjective feeling related to their personal experience on the speaking anxiety (Dornyei, 2007). Since this study aims to explore people and their social worlds in their natural setting and to learn how they understand their situations and account for their behaviour (Gibbs, 2007; Creswell, 2009), the methodology selected is a case study. This type of research is appropriate to shed light on a bounded system for one individual, although the unit(s) under particular focus were not perfectly representative of the population (Gerring, 2007; Creswell, 2009; Croker, 2009).

The research participants were selected purposively. I invited thirty EFL students who I found hesitant to talk in my class although they got a good score in the speaking test. Data to answer the research question were gathered through reflective journal, focus group discussion, and interviews. Data obtained from those steps were coded and grouped before I withdrew conclusion.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Data we obtained from reflective journals, FGD, and interviews were categorized into four categories as presented and discussed below:

### 1. Politeness norm in students' cultural background

It was mentioned by Student 1 that a reason that she believed makes her less active speaking during the lecturer section comparing to her other friends is before sharing her idea while the lecturer is talking, she believe if she must ask a prior permission.

*"Sometimes I want to interrupt the lecturer, but I believe that I must asking permission first." (S1)*

It seems Kay regards herself for being impolite when giving a direct interruption to the teacher. This condition might confirm the finding of the research conducted by Liu (2001) which indicated that Asian students who are in general, regarded as not brave as the western students to do interruption while a lecturer speaking are promoted by the cultural background. Furthermore, it is explained that within the classroom setting, students' silence is expected and is encouraged as a sign of respect for their teachers and classmates in Asian cultures (Liu, 2001). Although such action will be perceived normal even positively by the western cultural education (Liu, 2001) in where they are currently studying, such believe seems has made the respondents feeling anxious to share their idea or raising question in the middle of the teacher's talk.

### 2. Battling with their native language as identity

Student 2 who is basically could speak english fluently, admitted that sometimes he felt anxious to speak with his classmate because he knew that all of students there shared the same native language. In the FGD, he mentioned that:

Student 2 : *"Sometimes I cannot speak English with my classmates because I think like "why should I speak English?" if in fact, we have another language that we can use better"*



Furthermore, in the personal interview conducted with Student 2 for following up this FGD, he mentioned that it is because he believes if it is a must to use the language when using it with Indonesian people Student 2 Here, there is an indication that because Dee has perceived Indonesian language is not just his first language, but also is an identity attached to him, it is the favour language to use for communication. When the first language has been perceived as identity, language learners may not feel like themselves or may feel like different person when speaking or writing the target language because of the feelings of the loss of L1 identities in the foreign language context (Huang, 2014). Since when in communicating with his international friend there is no other choice beside English, he has to use it. And because of that reason, he is quite comfortable and not feeling anxious to use that language. However, when meeting Indonesian, he might believe that there is no reason to use that English. As consequent, he is hesitate even unconsciously unable to use his English.

### 3. Belief that the lecturer knows everything

In the similar data which was used in the former point, “negative self-perceived competence”, it seems Student 3 prefer to not deliver any opinion during the lecturing is not only caused by his self-perceived competence, but also a belief rooted in his mind that lecturer is the one who understand everything.

*“I’m just, all the lecturer say that in... ok, so like that, ... I accept that because if... if I just have the argument, umm, that’s ... (a) new method or new ... knowledge. ... because I didn’t have the knowledge, I haven’t known truly the knowledge. ... because I’m zero, you know... I don’t –I don’t have knowledge .... So, what they gave –what they give to me, I appreciate that.” (S3).*

This finding confirms the Wintergerst et al.’s (2003) statement that in the Asian culture, teachers are given the responsibility to provide all the knowledge and material the students need in the learning process. This cultural belief seems bringing effect on how Student 3 thinks how far he could his deliver his idea and which negatively affect his speaking amount. Because he believes that while the delivering the knowledge is the teacher’s role, as student, his role is accepting that knowledge only, he is always feeling anxious to debate or confirm what the lecturer is explaining.

### 4. Maintaining positive face

Basically, as has been discussed in the literature review, in the majority findings of previous studies (e.g. Liu, 2001), it was found that generally, the student’s positive face was threatened by their belief to be not able to speak English perfectly or as well as their idealized standard which refers to the students negative perceived on their competence.

Elli for example, admitted that:

*“I know it is just for training but I don’t know, sometimes I am still afraid that others will mock me if I make a mistake.” (Student 4)*

### 5. Afraid for offending the listener through inappropriate joke

The use of joke in conversation was an insight of condition and factor promoting anxiety pointed by Students 5 and 6. Student 5 mentioned if he sometimes feeling anxious to speak because of anticipating a joke which may negatively perceived by their friends.

"I am afraid if I make a joke and they don't understand or get offended. ... May be for us that's funny, but it may be inappropriate for them, so I don't feel comfortable on that." (Student 5)

While the former point indicates that speaking anxiety might appear when students have the need to maintain their own positive face, it appears in that point that the students could be also feeling anxious to speak when afraid to treat their listener positive face through an inappropriate joke they might speak. Based on the data obtained in this study, this condition was happen in the one-to-one based conversation only. It might be because such kind of oral interaction majorly categorised as informal speaking in which students found occasion in which they could actually insert a joke in their speaking. Therefore, when there is no important topic to discuss, rather than conducting conversation for making joke, some participants prefer to not speak at all.

## CONCLUSION

Based on findings and discussion above, I concluded that there are five external conditions which are believed promoting the students speaking anxiety consisting of the politeness norm of students' cultural background, the inability to speak English with someone sharing similar first language, the Indonesian students' cultural belief that teacher is the person who knows everything about the subject, the students' need to maintain their positive face and feeling afraid for decreasing or losing the speaking partner's positive face through inappropriate joke.

Theoretically, the findings can contribute to the development of the second language anxiety theory, especially speaking. In its practical contribution, it could become an insight to the second language teacher related to how they might treat the students to prevent them from the occurrence of speaking anxiety when their students use the target language in the real world. Furter researchers should involve more participants to get wider knowledge about factors causing anxiety among EFL learners

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