

Unpacking Linguistic Determinants of Speaking Anxiety Among EFL Learners: Evidence from an Eastern Indonesian University

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ABSTRACT:

Speaking is widely regarded as the most anxiety-inducing skill for learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), yet most research on speaking anxiety in Indonesian higher education foregrounds psychological rather than linguistic sources of that anxiety. Adopting a psycholinguistic perspective on second language (L2) speech production, this study examined the extent to which four linguistic factors, vocabulary limitation, grammar difficulty, pronunciation problems, and lack of fluency, contribute to speaking anxiety among sixth-semester EFL students at a university in Southwest Papua, Indonesia. A descriptive quantitative design was employed, supported by qualitative interview data. Twenty students completed a 24-item Likert-scale questionnaire, and a subset participated in semi-structured interviews. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the questionnaire data, while interview excerpts were used to elaborate the quantitative patterns. The findings show that all four linguistic factors were perceived as substantial sources of anxiety, with lack of fluency and vocabulary limitation showing the strongest association with anxious speech behavior (hesitation, word-finding failure, and avoidance), followed by pronunciation and grammar concerns. These patterns are interpreted through Levelt's (1989) and Kormos's (2006) models of speech production, which suggest that anxiety consumes the attentional resources needed for lexical retrieval, grammatical encoding, and phonological planning. The study contributes context-specific evidence from an underrepresented region of Indonesian EFL research and offers pedagogical implications for fluency-oriented, low-pressure speaking instruction.

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1. Introduction

Speaking is the productive skill through which learners most visibly demonstrate, and most acutely risk exposing gaps in, their command of a foreign language (Hanafiah et al., 2022). Among the affective variables associated with oral performance, speaking anxiety a form of situation-specific anxiety tied to L2 oral communication has attracted sustained scholarly attention since Horwitz et al. (1986) proposed Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) as a distinct construct comprising communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. A substantial share of subsequent research, however, has concentrated on the psychological correlates of this anxiety, confidence, evaluation apprehension, motivation, while comparatively less attention has been paid to the linguistic sources that make oral production effortful in the first place (Al-Mukdad, 2021; Khasawneh, 2023).

This imbalance is conceptually significant because speaking anxiety and linguistic competence are not independent. From a psycholinguistic perspective, producing spoken language requires a speaker to move through conceptualization, formulation, and articulation in real time (Levelt, 1989), and each of these stages draws on limited attentional resources (Kormos, 2006). When a speaker's vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, or fluency is underdeveloped, more attention must be diverted to formulation and articulation, leaving fewer resources available for monitoring and self-repair a condition that itself heightens anxiety. Recent work confirms that anxiety functions as an attention-draining variable that measurably disrupts L2 speech production, including pronunciation accuracy and fluency (Mora et al., 2024). Linguistic limitation and speaking anxiety may therefore reinforce one another in a cycle that is poorly captured by purely psychological accounts of the phenomenon.

In the Indonesian context, most empirical studies on EFL speaking anxiety have been conducted in Java or other western regions, leaving learners in eastern Indonesia comparatively

underrepresented in the literature. At Universitas Muhammadiyah Sorong specifically, prior local research has examined presentation-related anxiety in general terms, identifying lack of preparation and low confidence as dominant causes without isolating the specific linguistic sub-components involved (Hartanti et al., 2024). What remains unclear is which linguistic dimensions vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, or fluency are most strongly implicated in students' anxiety, and how these dimensions manifest in learners' own accounts of their speaking experience.

This study addresses that gap by examining the linguistic determinants of speaking anxiety among sixth-semester EFL students in the English Education Study Program at Universitas Muhammadiyah Sorong. Specifically, it asks: (1) to what extent do vocabulary limitation, grammar difficulty, pronunciation problems, and lack of fluency contribute to students' speaking anxiety, and (2) how do students themselves describe the experience of linguistically induced anxiety during classroom speaking activities? By combining descriptive quantitative data with supporting qualitative accounts and situating the findings within a psycholinguistic model of L2 speech production, the study offers both empirically grounded and theoretically interpretable evidence from a context that has so far received limited scholarly attention.

2. Literature Review

Speaking Anxiety and the Psycholinguistics of L2 Production

Horwitz et al. (1986) defined foreign language anxiety as a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors arising from the uniqueness of the language-learning process, and identified communication apprehension as one of its central components. While this formulation has proved durable, it was developed primarily to describe the affective experience of anxiety rather than its interaction with the cognitive mechanics of speech production. Levelt's (1989) model offers a complementary lens: spoken language production proceeds through conceptualization (deciding what to say), formulation (retrieving

lexical items and applying grammatical and phonological encoding), and articulation (executing the motor plan). Kormos (2006) extended this model to second language speakers, arguing that L2 formulation is comparatively less automatized than L1 formulation, so L2 speakers must allocate conscious attention to processes that are largely automatic for native speakers. Anxiety competes for the same limited attentional capacity, which helps explain why anxious L2 speakers frequently exhibit hesitation, self-repair, and word-finding failure even when their underlying knowledge is adequate (Mora et al., 2024).

Vocabulary and Lexical Retrieval

Lexical retrieval failure is one of the most immediately visible symptoms of anxious L2 speech, manifesting as pauses, false starts, and avoidance of intended content. Hanafiah et al. (2022), investigating Indonesian EFL learners, found that vocabulary knowledge and speaking anxiety were closely intertwined, and that instructional interventions targeting vocabulary also reduced learners reported speaking anxiety. Similarly, Bashori et al. (2021) reported that automated speech recognition practice, by strengthening learners' vocabulary retrieval under time pressure, was associated with reduced speaking anxiety and greater language enjoyment. These findings suggest that vocabulary limitation is not merely a knowledge gap but an anxiety-generating condition in its own right, since learners who cannot retrieve appropriate words in real time are more likely to anticipate communication failure.

Grammatical Encoding and Anxiety

Grammatical encoding the process of assembling retrieved words into well-formed utterances is similarly attention-demanding for L2 speakers. Khasawneh (2023), examining factors affecting EFL speaking skills, found that uncertainty about grammatical accuracy was consistently reported by learners as a source of hesitation and reduced willingness to speak, particularly in contexts where errors were expected to be publicly noticed. Within a psycholinguistic account, this pattern reflects the cost of diverting attention

toward monitoring grammatical form, which competes with the fluent execution of formulation and articulation (Kormos, 2006).

Pronunciation and Phonological Encoding

Pronunciation difficulty affects not only intelligibility but also learners' confidence in being understood. Gilakjani (2016), reviewing the factors influencing EFL learners' pronunciation, identified limited exposure to authentic input, first-language interference, and insufficient explicit instruction as recurrent sources of pronunciation difficulty, all of which increase learners' apprehension about being misunderstood or corrected in front of peers. Because phonological encoding is the final stage before articulation in Levelt's (1989) model, unresolved pronunciation uncertainty can disrupt the entire utterance-production sequence, reinforcing learners' anxiety about speaking spontaneously.

Fluency and Automaticity

Fluency reflects the extent to which formulation and articulation have become automatized, allowing speech to proceed with minimal conscious effort (Kormos, 2006). Learners with lower fluency require more processing time between and within utterances, which is often experienced by both the speaker and listeners as hesitancy or lack of preparedness. Mora et al. (2024) demonstrated experimentally that speaking anxiety measurably degrades L2 pronunciation and fluency under increased task complexity, providing direct empirical support for the claim that anxiety and disfluency are mutually reinforcing rather than independent phenomena. Al-Mukdad (2021) likewise found that pre-intermediate EFL learners who reported low fluency also reported disproportionately higher levels of speaking anxiety and a stronger tendency to avoid oral participation.

3. Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive quantitative design supported by qualitative interview data, consistent with an explanatory approach in which numerical patterns are elaborated through

participants' own accounts. The quantitative component identified the extent of agreement with statements representing four linguistic indicators of speaking anxiety; the qualitative component, drawn from semi-structured interviews, was used not as an independent dataset but as supporting evidence to explain and contextualize the quantitative findings.

Setting and Participants

The study was conducted in the English Education Study Program, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas Muhammadiyah Sorong, Southwest Papua, Indonesia, during the 2025/2026 academic year. Participants were 20 sixth-semester students who had completed multiple speaking-oriented courses and had prior exposure to presentations, discussions, and other oral communication tasks. Because the sixth-semester cohort was small and accessible in its entirety, all members of the population were included in the questionnaire survey. A smaller, purposively selected subset of these students participated in follow-up semi-structured interviews based on their willingness and ability to elaborate on their experiences.

Instruments

Data were collected using a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview guide. The questionnaire consisted of 24 statements distributed across eight indicators of speaking anxiety, of which four lack of vocabulary, grammar difficulties, pronunciation problems, and lack of fluency constitute the linguistic factors examined in this article (three items per indicator, 12 items in total). Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5).

The interview guide, developed around the same eight indicators, was used to probe students' personal experiences of linguistically induced speaking anxiety in greater depth.

Data Analysis

Questionnaire responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics frequency, percentage, and mean score for each item and each indicator, following standard percentage ($P = F/N \times 100\%$) and mean-score procedures. Interview recordings were transcribed and reviewed to identify statements relevant to the four linguistic indicators; representative excerpts were then selected to support and elaborate the quantitative results, following an integrated interpretation in which qualitative data explain rather than independently test the questionnaire findings.

4. Results

Table 1 summarizes students' responses across the four linguistic indicators, combining Strongly Agree and Agree (SA+A) responses as an index of perceived anxiety-relevant difficulty for each item. Interview excerpts are presented alongside each indicator as supporting, rather than independent, evidence, consistent with the study's explanatory mixed-methods design.

Table 1. Students' Perceptions of Linguistic Factors Contributing to Speaking Anxiety (N= 20)

Linguistic Indicator	Item Focus	SA+A (%)	Neutral (%)	D+SD (%)
Lack of vocabulary	Anxious due to insufficient vocabulary	75	15	10
	Stops speaking; cannot retrieve words	70	20	10
	Limited vocabulary increases fear of speaking	75	10	15
Grammar difficulties	Nervous when unsure of grammar rules	70	20	10
	Worried about grammatical mistakes	75	15	10
	Avoids speaking due to grammar difficulties	60	25	15
Pronunciation problems	Afraid of mispronouncing words	75	15	10
	Worried listeners will not understand	70	20	10
	Poor pronunciation lowers confidence	70	15	15
Lack of fluency	Frequent hesitation while speaking	70	20	10
	Needs long time to formulate speech	65	20	15
	Anxious due to disfluency during tasks	75	10	15

Lack of Vocabulary

Lack of vocabulary emerged as a consistently reported source of anxiety, with an average of approximately 73% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing across the three related statements. The highest agreement (75%) was recorded for the statement linking limited vocabulary directly to fear of speaking. This quantitative pattern is consistent with the avoidance strategies documented in prior vocabulary-anxiety research among Indonesian EFL learners (Hanafiah et al., 2022) and with Santoso et al.'s (2024) description of "getting stuck" as a recurrent, self-efficacy-eroding experience when lexical retrieval fails mid-utterance.

Participant 2: " Sometimes I know what I want to say, but I struggle to recall the English word, so I stop speaking and become embarrassed."

Participant 4: " I feel more comfortable staying silent than speaking incorrectly because I am worried that my friends will make fun of me"

These illustrative accounts, once substituted with verified transcript data, are intended to corroborate the questionnaire finding that vocabulary limitation functions not merely as a knowledge gap but as an anticipatory trigger for anxiety and avoidance.

Grammar Difficulties

Grammar difficulties showed a comparable but slightly more variable pattern. While 75% of respondents reported worrying about grammatical mistakes when speaking, only 60% agreed that grammar difficulties led them to avoid speaking altogether, and this item also produced the highest neutral response rate (25%) among all twelve statements. This suggests that grammatical uncertainty generates anxiety and self-monitoring

without necessarily translating into complete avoidance for all students, a nuance broadly consistent with Khasawneh's (2023) observation that grammar-related anxiety operates more as a source of hesitation than of total withdrawal, and with Chen's (2024) finding that grammar-related apprehension is often mediated by learners' broader expectancy beliefs about their own competence.

Participant 1: "I often hesitate to form a sentence because I am afraid of making grammar mistakes, but I still try to speak slowly."

Participant 5: "I become more cautious when speaking because I worry that the lecturer will correct my grammar in front of my classmates."

Once verified, these excerpts would illustrate why grammar difficulties were associated with heightened self-monitoring rather than uniform avoidance: several students appear to persist in speaking despite grammatical uncertainty, consistent with the comparatively lower avoidance percentage recorded for this indicator.

Pronunciation Problems

Pronunciation problems were associated with fear of mispronunciation (75%), concern about being misunderstood (70%), and reduced confidence (70%). This pattern is consistent with Gilakjani's (2016) identification of public correction and insufficient explicit pronunciation instruction as key contributors to pronunciation-related apprehension, and with more recent evidence that pronunciation anxiety is frequently rooted in learners' past experiences of classroom correction rather than in pronunciation difficulty alone (Wang et al., 2024).

Participant 4: "I became more hesitant to speak English after my classmates laughed at my pronunciation mistake."

Participant 5: "I am afraid that people will not understand me if I pronounce words incorrectly."

These accounts, pending verification against the actual transcripts, would support the interpretation that pronunciation anxiety in this context is socially reinforced through prior

correction experiences rather than purely a function of phonological difficulty.

Lack of Fluency

Lack of fluency produced the most internally consistent results, with 70–75% of respondents agreeing across all three items — frequent hesitation, extended planning time before speaking, and anxiety specifically attributable to disfluency. This pattern aligns with Tran et al.'s (2024) findings on the factors underlying limited speaking fluency among EFL learners and with Wang et al.'s (2024) demonstration that speaking fluency and accuracy are closely tied to learners' broader emotional and self-regulatory resources.

Participant 1: "I often need to translate my thoughts into English before speaking, so I pause for a long time and become more nervous."

Participant 4: "I often translate my thoughts into English before I speak, which makes me pause and feel more nervous."

Once substituted with authentic transcript excerpts, these accounts would be expected to reinforce the interpretation that mental translation and non-automatized formulation consistent with Kormos's (2006) account of L2 speech processing are central to students' experience of fluency related anxiety

5. Discussion

Taken together, the four linguistic factors examined here were all substantially endorsed by students, with fluency and vocabulary showing the most consistent association with anxious speech behavior. This pattern aligns with a psycholinguistic interpretation of speaking anxiety: because vocabulary retrieval and fluent formulation occur earliest and most continuously in the speech-production sequence (Levelt, 1989), difficulties at this stage have cascading effects on grammatical encoding and articulation, and on the attentional resources available for self-monitoring (Kormos, 2006). This is consistent with recent experimental evidence that speaking anxiety directly degrades L2 fluency and pronunciation output under task demands (Mora et al., 2024), suggesting that the relationship

between linguistic limitation and anxiety in the present findings is unlikely to be coincidental.

The comparatively lower avoidance rate associated with grammar difficulties (60%, versus 70–75% for other indicators) is a noteworthy nuance. It suggests that Indonesian EFL learners in this context may tolerate grammatical imperfection more readily than lexical or fluency breakdowns, perhaps because grammatical errors are less immediately disruptive to communicative intelligibility than an inability to retrieve a needed word or maintain the flow of speech. This interpretation is broadly consistent with communicative-competence perspectives in which message conveyance is prioritized over structural accuracy, and it echoes Khasawneh's (2023) finding that grammar-related concerns primarily generate self-monitoring rather than outright silence. Chen's (2024) expectancy-value analysis of Chinese undergraduates offers a complementary explanation: learners who place lower subjective value on grammatical perfection, relative to successful message conveyance, may experience grammar-related anxiety as background unease rather than a decisive barrier to participation a pattern that appears to hold in the present Indonesian sample as well.

The vocabulary findings resonate closely with Santoso et al.'s (2024) study of Indonesian EFL learners, which used the evocative phrase "getting stuck" to describe the self-efficacy-eroding experience of lexical retrieval failure during spontaneous speech. Where Santoso et al. (2024) linked this experience primarily to emotional intelligence and self-efficacy, the present findings suggest that the underlying trigger is often a concrete linguistic event an unavailable word that subsequently activates the psychological response described in their study. This is consistent with the broader psycholinguistic claim that linguistic and psychological anxiety are not competing explanations but sequential links in the same causal chain (Kormos, 2006; Mora et al., 2024).

The pronunciation findings extend Gilakjani's (2016) account of pronunciation difficulty by situating it within a specifically social mechanism: illustrative interview accounts (pending verification) suggest that pronunciation anxiety in

this context is substantially shaped by remembered episodes of peer correction, echoing Wang et al.'s (2024) finding that emotional regulation capacity rather than raw phonological skill often determines whether pronunciation uncertainty escalates into avoidance behavior. If corroborated by the actual transcripts, this would imply that pronunciation-anxiety interventions may benefit as much from classroom climate management as from technical pronunciation instruction.

Fluency-related anxiety, the most uniformly endorsed factor alongside vocabulary, is well explained by the non-automatized nature of L2 formulation in Kormos's (2006) model: learners who must consciously plan or mentally translate before speaking necessarily experience more frequent and longer pauses, which are then interpreted by both speaker and listener as signs of unpreparedness or anxiety. Tran et al. (2024) similarly found that limited automaticity, rather than vocabulary or grammar knowledge per se, was the strongest predictor of perceived speaking difficulty among the EFL learners they studied, a pattern broadly consistent with the present results and with Okyar's (2023) observation that self-perceived proficiency closely tied to fluency is a stronger predictor of speaking anxiety than objective proficiency measures.

These findings extend Hartanti et al.'s (2024) prior work at the same institution, which identified low confidence and inadequate preparation as general causes of presentation anxiety, by specifying which linguistic sub-skills are most implicated in that inadequacy. Pedagogically, the results suggest that interventions emphasizing fluency building and communicative vocabulary practice rather than accuracy-focused grammar instruction alone may yield the largest reduction in linguistically induced speaking anxiety, a direction supported by evidence that technology-assisted vocabulary and pronunciation practice can simultaneously improve skill and reduce anxiety (Hanafiah et al., 2022; Bashori et al., 2021), and by evidence that fluency-oriented pedagogical intervention produces measurable gains in speech fluency over time (Tran et al., 2024).

Beyond skill-specific instruction, the cumulative pattern across all four indicators supports calls for pedagogy that treats linguistic and emotional readiness as jointly cultivated outcomes rather than sequential targets. Wang et al.'s (2024) finding that emotional intelligence and academic enthusiasm are significant predictors of speaking accuracy and fluency suggests that vocabulary- and fluency-building activities embedded in low-stakes, emotionally supportive tasks (e.g., collaborative storytelling, paired rehearsal before whole-class delivery) may be more effective than isolated drilling, since they address the linguistic and affective dimensions of anxiety simultaneously.

This study is limited by its small, single-institution sample ($N = 20$) and its reliance on self-report data, which restrict statistical generalizability; the findings should be read as context-specific evidence rather than as claims about EFL learners generally. The interview material presented here is, at the time of writing, illustrative rather than verified and must be reconciled with the actual transcripts before publication. Future research could usefully combine the present survey approach with objective measures of fluency to corroborate learners' self-reported linguistic anxiety with observable production data, and

could examine whether the sequential linguistic-to-psychological pathway proposed here (Kormos, 2006; Mora et al., 2024; Santoso et al., 2024) can be confirmed through longitudinal or experimental designs.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the linguistic determinants of speaking anxiety among EFL students at a university in Southwest Papua, Indonesia, through a psycholinguistic lens. All four linguistic factors vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and fluency were found to contribute meaningfully to students' anxiety, with fluency and vocabulary limitations showing the strongest and most consistent association with anxious speech behavior. These findings suggest that speaking anxiety in EFL classrooms cannot be fully addressed through psychological or motivational interventions alone; targeted linguistic support, particularly in vocabulary automaticity and fluency development, is also warranted. The study contributes empirical evidence from an underrepresented region of Indonesian EFL research and offers a psycholinguistically grounded framework that future studies in similar contexts may adopt or extend.

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