



The Correlation Between Students' Speaking Anxiety and Their Speaking Ability: A Quantitative Study at Islamic Junior High School Sunan Giri

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Abstract

This study investigates the correlation between students' speaking anxiety and their speaking ability in an English as a foreign language (EFL) context, focusing on seventh grade learners at MTs Sunan Giri, Kediri. The problem addressed in this research is the persisting assumption that higher levels of anxiety negatively affect learners' oral performance, while limited empirical evidence exists in Indonesian lower secondary school settings. The objective of the study is to measure students' anxiety levels using a speaking anxiety questionnaire and to assess their speaking ability through a rubric based speaking test in which students presented either a poster or the topic "part of the house." Using a quantitative correlational design, data from fourteen students were analyzed using descriptive statistics and Pearson's product-moment correlation. The results show that the students had moderate levels of speaking anxiety ($M = 62.14$; $SD = 4.61$) and moderate speaking ability scores ($M = 45.36$; $SD = 9.30$). Pearson's analysis revealed a moderate positive correlation between speaking anxiety and speaking ability, $r = 0.502$, $p = 0.067$, while Spearman's rho yielded a similar result ($\rho = 0.522$, $p = 0.055$). Although the correlation did not reach statistical significance at the 0.05 level, the positive direction of the relationship suggests that in this small sample, higher anxiety scores were associated with higher speaking performance, a pattern that differs from most theoretical predictions. These findings highlight the importance of reexamining the complexity of classroom anxiety, task type, and learner characteristics, particularly in small group settings. The study contributes to the growing literature on affective factors in EFL speaking and suggests the need for larger scale research to confirm the trend observed in this study.

Keywords: Speaking Anxiety; Speaking Ability; EFL Learners; Correlation; Affective Factors

Introduction

Speaking is a crucial component of learning English since it enables students to communicate, engage with others, and develop their communicative skills. However, despite its importance, many students experience emotional barriers that hinder their ability to speak confidently and effectively in English. In MTs Sunan Giri, classroom observations show that many seventh-grade students hesitate to speak even when they have sufficient linguistic knowledge. They often feel nervous, shy, or afraid of making mistakes, and this emotional tension affects their speaking performance.

These conditions are consistent with Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope's (1986) theory of foreign language classroom anxiety, which explains that communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety can interfere with learners' oral performance. Speaking ability itself is multidimensional, involving fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and content (Brown, 2004), making it highly susceptible to affective disturbances such as anxiety.

The knowledge of how anxiety affects EFL learners' oral performance is strengthened by recent empirical research. Speaking anxiety is common among EFL students of all ages and cultural backgrounds, according to numerous studies. For example, Alshahrani (2016) and Hamouda (2013) discovered that one of the primary reasons students refrain from speaking in foreign language classes is nervousness. Anxiety may lower students' speaking fluency, accuracy, and general confidence, according to studies conducted in a variety of EFL contexts, including those by Cheng (2020), Mahmud (2018), and Toubot and Sadiq (2018).

While Mukminin, Noprival, and Haryanto (2019) identified anxiety as a persistent emotional barrier that shapes students' strategies and participation during speaking tasks, Kurniawati and Widiati (2021) focused on Indonesian learners and highlighted that speaking anxiety significantly affects students' performance. The long-held belief that worry tends to impede oral proficiency is supported by a more recent study by Karim (2024) that found a substantial negative association between speaking anxiety and speaking performance.

Despite the broad findings, several gaps remain in the literature. First, there are few research that particularly look at speaking anxiety in seventh grade students in Indonesian Islamic school contexts, where classroom dynamics, cultural norms, and peer expectations may generate a distinct emotional milieu. Second, the majority of previous research has been on high school or college students rather than early adolescents, who may feel anxiety differently due to their developmental sensitivity to peer criticism.

Third, little research has been done on how task type affects anxiety. Compared to spontaneous speaking, structured tasks like poster presentations or descriptive tasks like "part of the house" may have a distinct effect on anxiety. Finally, there is methodological space for improvement because only a small number of studies combine a validated anxiety scale with an analytical speaking

rubric, despite the fact that numerous studies examine anxiety or speaking skill independently.

Based on these gaps, this study aims to address the following research questions: (1) What is the level of students' speaking anxiety at MTs Sunan Giri? (2) How is their speaking performance? and (3) Is there a significant correlation between students' speaking anxiety and their speaking ability? Accordingly, the objectives of this study are: (1) to identify the level of students' speaking anxiety, (2) to measure their speaking performance through a rubric based speaking test, and (3) to determine whether there is a significant relationship between the two variables.

The novelty of this study at adolescent EFL learners in an Islamic school setting, combines an analytical speaking rubric with a theoretical anxiety questionnaire, and focuses on task types that are rarely studied in other studies. This study advances our knowledge of the relationship between anxiety and speaking performance in young EFL learners by presenting actual data from MTs Sunan Giri.

Method

A quantitative correlational methodology was used in this study to examine the connection between students' speaking anxiety and their speaking proficiency. Since the goal of the study was to determine the degree of relationship between the two naturally occurring variables speaking anxiety and speaking performance rather than to change variables, a correlational design was chosen. One complete seventh grade class participated in the study, which was carried out in November 2025 at MTs Sunan Giri. Because students often participate in speaking exercises in class, this setting was selected as a suitable setting for investigating the impact of affective elements on speaking performance.

The participants of this study consisted of fourteen seventh grade students selected through convenience sampling. The class was accessible to the researcher and met the criteria for the study. All students participated voluntarily and completed both the speaking anxiety questionnaire and the speaking performance assessment. The relatively small class size enabled more detailed observation and individualized scoring using an analytic speaking rubric. The participants represented early adolescents; a group known in previous research to be particularly susceptible to speaking anxiety.

Data were collected through two primary instruments: a speaking anxiety questionnaire and a rubric based speaking test. The speaking anxiety questionnaire was adapted from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986). The items were modified to fit the learning context of secondary school students while maintaining the core components of communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. Students responded using a Likert Scale, and their total scores represented their overall anxiety levels. Speaking ability was measured through an

oral performance task in which students presented either a poster or a “part of the house” description. In addition, their speaking ability was evaluated using an analytic speaking rubric based on Brown’s (2004) components of speaking, including pronunciation, fluency, vocabulary, grammar, and content. Each component contributed to a total speaking performance score.

Descriptive and inferential processes made up the data analysis process. Students' speaking performance and anxiety levels were first assessed using descriptive statistics, which included mean, median, standard deviation, minimum, and maximum scores. The first two research questions were addressed by these findings. Second, since both speaking anxiety and speaking ability were measured on continuous numerical scales generated from summed Likert responses and analytic rubric scores, Pearson's product moment correlation was used to investigate the link between the two variables. To aid in interpretation, an additional non parametric analysis was also taken into consideration. SPSS was used for all analyses, and the correlation coefficient's strength, direction, and significance were used to interpret the findings.

Results

The results of the study based on the examination of students' speaking performance and speaking anxiety scores are shown in this section. Descriptive statistics, the levels of each variable, and the correlation analysis performed to ascertain the link between the two variables are utilized to display the results. SPSS and additional statistical calculations were used to produce all of the results.

Descriptive Results of the Data

The descriptive analysis was conducted to understand the general distribution of students' speaking anxiety and speaking performance scores. Fourteen students participated in the study, and their complete scores were used for analysis. Speaking anxiety scores ranged from 56 to 70, while speaking performance scores ranged from 30 to 60. Table 1 presents the summary of descriptive statistics.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables

Variable	N	Mean	Median	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Speaking Ability	14	45.36	50.00	9.29	30	60
Speaking Anxiety	14	62.14	62.00	4.61	56	70

The results show that the mean speaking ability score ($M = 45.36$) falls within the moderate range, indicating that most students demonstrated average oral performance during the speaking task. Meanwhile, the mean speaking anxiety score ($M = 62.14$) also indicates a moderate level of anxiety, suggesting that many students experienced noticeable nervousness or fear during English speaking activities.

Distribution of Speaking Anxiety Levels

Further inspection of individual scores revealed that most students scored between 58 and 67 on the anxiety scale, indicating that the majority experienced moderate anxiety. A few students scored as high as 70, reflecting higher levels of apprehension. No students fell within the low anxiety range, showing that anxiety was present to some degree among all participants.

Distribution of Speaking Performance Scores

The speaking performance scores showed more variation than the anxiety scores. Some students achieved scores of 55 and 60, indicating strong speaking ability, while several others scored between 30 and 40. This suggests that the class had a wide range of performance levels, with some students demonstrating higher proficiency in pronunciation, fluency, vocabulary, grammar, and content, while others struggled with one or more components of the rubric.

Correlation Between Speaking Anxiety and Speaking Ability

To answer the third research question, Pearson's product moment correlation was conducted. Table 2 summarizes the correlation results.

Table 2. Correlation Between Speaking Anxiety and Speaking Ability

	Speaking Ability	Anxiety Score
Speaking Ability	1	.502
Anxiety Score	.502	1

N = 14; p = .067

The correlation coefficient of $r = 0.502$ indicates a moderate positive relationship between speaking anxiety and speaking ability. However, because the significance value $p = 0.067$ is above the 0.05 threshold, the correlation is not statistically significant. This means that although the two variables show a moderate degree of association, the relationship cannot be confirmed as reliable within this sample size.

Summary of Key Findings

Based on the analyses, three findings emerge:

1. Students generally showed moderate speaking anxiety levels, with no students scoring in the low anxiety category.
2. Students' speaking performance scores were moderately distributed, with notable variation among individuals.
3. The correlation between speaking anxiety and speaking ability was moderate and positive but not statistically significant, suggesting that the relationship observed may not be generalizable beyond this sample.

These findings provide a clear picture of the students' anxiety and performance tendencies and form the basis for further discussion in the subsequent section.

Discussion

Interpretation of Students' Speaking Anxiety Levels

The results of the study show that the majority of seventh grade students at MTs Sunan Giri experienced moderate levels of speaking anxiety. This finding aligns with the well-established concept introduced by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), which states that language learners commonly experience communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation in foreign language classrooms. The consistency of the students' scores mostly ranging between 58 and 67 indicates that anxiety is a shared emotional condition among early adolescent learners.

This age group is developmentally sensitive to peer judgment, and classroom speaking tasks are often perceived as public performance, which heightens anxiety. Therefore, the presence of moderate anxiety across all students reinforces the theoretical claim that speaking anxiety is a prevalent phenomenon in EFL classrooms, especially among young learners.

Interpretation of Students' Speaking Performance Levels

The speaking performance scores showed wider variation compared to the anxiety scores. While some students demonstrated strong speaking skills with scores reaching 55 and 60, others scored between 30 and 40, indicating difficulties in fluency, vocabulary selection, grammatical accuracy, pronunciation, or content organization. According to Brown (2004), these components represent the key elements of effective speaking performance, and variation among learners is common when tasks require spontaneous production. In this study, the speaking tasks poster presentation or describing specific parts of the house required students to integrate multiple speaking components. Students with stronger mastery of vocabulary and fluency performed well, while those struggling with

anxiety, self-confidence, or language control demonstrated lower performance.

Relationship Between Speaking Anxiety and Speaking Ability

The correlation analysis revealed a moderate positive relationship between speaking anxiety and speaking ability ($r = .502$), although the result was not statistically significant ($p = .067$). This finding differs from the conventional expectation suggested by previous studies, including Karim (2024), who reported a significant negative correlation, indicating that higher anxiety tends to lower speaking performance. The positive correlation in the present study suggests a more complex interaction between affective factors and speaking skills. One possible explanation is that some students with higher anxiety may compensate by preparing more thoroughly, practicing more, or exerting extra effort during speaking tasks. In addition, the small sample size ($N = 14$) may have influenced the stability of the correlation coefficient, making it difficult to generalize the findings.

Possible Factors Influencing the Unexpected Correlation Trend

Several contextual factors may help explain why anxiety in this study showed a positive tendency toward speaking ability. First, the speaking tasks required structured preparation, allowing students to rehearse and rely on visual aids such as posters, which may have boosted performance despite feelings of anxiety. Second, some students with naturally higher achievement motivation may experience higher anxiety due to their desire to perform well but still produce strong results. Third, the limited classroom environment where students knew one another well may have reduced the negative impact of anxiety compared to unfamiliar or formal testing conditions. These factors indicate that anxiety may not always suppress performance; rather, in some cases, it may serve as a mild motivator that enhances task engagement.

Comparison With Previous Studies and Theoretical Implications

The present findings partially diverge from previous research that consistently reports negative correlations between anxiety and speaking proficiency. For example, many studies confirm that anxiety interferes with cognitive processing and reduces oral fluency. However, the positive correlation found in this study suggests that anxiety is not exclusively debilitating; instead, it may function differently depending on task type, learner characteristics, and assessment format. Theoretically, this supports the notion that anxiety exists on a continuum and can be either facilitative or debilitating. Although Horwitz et al. (1986) emphasized the disruptive potential of anxiety, they also acknowledged that not all forms of anxiety necessarily weaken performance. The present study provides empirical evidence that supports this broader theoretical perspective, especially within a small class of early adolescents.

Summary of Key Interpretations

Overall, the findings of the study indicate that while the students experienced moderate levels of speaking anxiety and demonstrated a wide range of speaking performance abilities, the relationship between the two variables was not statistically significant. The moderate positive correlation observed suggests that anxiety may not always function as an impediment to speaking performance. Instead, it may play a more nuanced role, depending on individual learner differences, preparation opportunities, and the nature of the classroom task. These findings contribute to the continuing discussion about the complexity of affective variables in EFL learning and highlight the need for further investigation with larger samples and varied task types.

Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between students' speaking anxiety and their speaking ability among fourteen seventh grade students at MTs Sunan Giri, Kediri. The findings showed that the students generally experienced moderate levels of speaking anxiety, indicating that anxiety was a common emotional condition within the group. Their speaking performance scores also fell within the moderate range, with noticeable variation among students in pronunciation, fluency, vocabulary, grammar, and content.

The correlation analysis revealed a moderate positive relationship between speaking anxiety and speaking ability; however, the result was not statistically significant. This means that although students with higher anxiety tended to obtain higher speaking scores in this sample, the relationship cannot be generalized to a wider population. The unexpected direction of the correlation suggests that anxiety may not always inhibit performance and may, in some cases, act as a motivating factor, depending on individual learner characteristics and task conditions.

This study has several limitations. The sample size was relatively small, which limits the statistical power of the findings. The study also used a single class from one school, reducing the generalizability of the results. In addition, the speaking task types were limited to poster presentations and descriptive tasks, which may influence how anxiety affects performance differently. Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insight into the nuanced role of speaking anxiety among early adolescent EFL learners.

Suggestions

Based on the findings, several suggestions can be offered for future research and educational practice. First, future studies should involve larger and more diverse samples to obtain a more reliable understanding of how anxiety influences speaking ability. Including students from multiple schools or grade levels could help strengthen the generalizability of the findings. Second, researchers may explore different types of speaking tasks or assessment formats, as anxiety may

behave differently in spontaneous conversation, role play, debates, or high stakes testing situations. Third, qualitative approaches such as interviews, classroom observations, or learner diaries can be incorporated to capture the emotional processes behind students' anxiety and performance.

For teachers, the findings imply the importance of creating supportive classroom environments that help students manage their anxiety constructively. Teachers may incorporate confidence building strategies, reduce excessive evaluation pressure, and provide structured preparation time before speaking tasks. Additionally, future researchers are encouraged to investigate the potential facilitative role of moderate anxiety and how it can be leveraged to improve students' speaking performance. Overall, this study highlights the need for continued exploration of affective variables in EFL learning and their implications for teaching practices.

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