



# How EFL University Students Overcome Anxiety and Build Confidence in Classroom Public Speaking: A Qualitative Study at an Indonesian University

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| Article Info                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | Abstract                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
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| <p><b>Received:</b> 2026-05-30</p> <p><b>Revised:</b> 2026-06-17</p> <p><b>Accepted:</b> 2026-06-17</p> <p><b>Keywords:</b><br/>EFL students,<br/>public speaking anxiety,<br/>confidence building,<br/>speaking self-efficacy,<br/>classroom presentations,<br/>qualitative study</p> <p><b>DOI:</b><br/>10.24256/ideas.v14i1.10927</p> <p><b>Corresponding Author:</b><br/>sheva syawaludin<br/><a href="mailto:shevasyawaludin2@gmail.com">shevasyawaludin2@gmail.com</a><br/>Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris,<br/>Universitas Muhammadiyah<br/>PROF. DR. HAMKA</p> | <p><i>Public speaking is widely recognized as one of the most challenging activities for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, particularly in higher education contexts where students are expected to demonstrate both linguistic competence and communication skills. This study investigates how EFL university students overcome anxiety and build confidence when delivering public speaking presentations in classroom settings. The research employed a qualitative descriptive design involving nine students from the English Education Study Program at Universitas Muhammadiyah Prof. DR. HAMKA (UHAMKA), Indonesia, who had completed a Public Speaking course. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews and analyzed using the Miles and Huberman interactive model consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings reveal that students experience various manifestations of Public Speaking Anxiety (PSA), including rapid heartbeat, trembling, overthinking, fear of forgetting content, and concerns about negative evaluation from lecturers and peers. To manage these challenges, students employ several coping strategies such as repeated practice, deep material mastery, preparation of presentation outlines, positive self-talk, deep breathing exercises, strategic pauses, utilization of visual aids, improvisation, code-switching, and seeking social support. Furthermore, positive classroom interactions, particularly supportive peer responses and constructive lecturer feedback,</i></p> |

*significantly contribute to strengthening students' confidence and speaking self-efficacy. The study highlights that confidence development is not solely influenced by language proficiency but is also shaped by psychological resilience, preparation strategies, and the learning environment. These findings provide pedagogical implications for creating supportive classroom climates that foster EFL students' willingness to communicate and public speaking competence.*

## 1. Introduction

Public speaking is an essential component of communication competence in higher education and professional life. In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, public speaking serves not only as a means of demonstrating language proficiency but also as an opportunity for learners to develop confidence, critical thinking, and interpersonal communication skills. University students enrolled in English language education programs are frequently required to deliver presentations, participate in discussions, and engage in public speaking activities as part of their academic responsibilities. Consequently, the ability to communicate effectively before an audience has become a crucial competence that supports both academic achievement and future professional success.

Despite its importance, public speaking remains one of the most anxiety-provoking tasks for EFL learners. Many students experience considerable fear and nervousness when required to present in English before classmates and lecturers. Unlike native speakers, EFL learners face the dual challenge of organizing ideas while simultaneously managing linguistic accuracy, pronunciation, vocabulary selection, and grammatical correctness. This combination of communicative and linguistic demands often creates psychological pressure that hinders students' performance. As a result, students may experience difficulties expressing ideas clearly, maintaining concentration, and engaging confidently with their audience.

Public Speaking Anxiety (PSA) has been widely recognized as a major obstacle affecting students' oral communication performance. PSA refers to the fear, nervousness, or apprehension individuals experience when speaking before an audience. Previous studies have identified PSA as one of the most common forms of social anxiety among university students. In EFL contexts, PSA becomes even more complex because it intersects with Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), a specific form of anxiety associated with learning and using a second or foreign language. According to Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), FLA consists of three primary

dimensions: communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. These dimensions collectively influence students' willingness and ability to communicate in English.

Among the factors contributing to PSA, fear of negative evaluation has consistently emerged as one of the strongest predictors of speaking anxiety. Students often worry about making grammatical mistakes, mispronouncing words, or failing to deliver their presentations effectively. Such concerns are amplified when students perceive themselves as being judged by lecturers or peers. Research has shown that EFL learners frequently associate language mistakes with personal inadequacy, leading to reduced confidence and avoidance of speaking opportunities. Consequently, many students choose to remain silent, limit participation, or rely heavily on memorized scripts rather than engaging in spontaneous communication.

The consequences of public speaking anxiety extend beyond temporary discomfort. Students experiencing high levels of anxiety may suffer from cognitive impairments such as difficulty concentrating, forgetting important information, and struggling to organize ideas coherently. Physiological symptoms, including increased heart rate, trembling, sweating, and dry mouth, further complicate their performance. These symptoms can create a vicious cycle in which anxiety reduces performance quality, leading to negative self-evaluation and reinforcing future anxiety. Therefore, understanding how students manage these challenges is essential for improving speaking instruction and supporting learner development.

While anxiety represents a significant challenge, students are not passive recipients of stress. They actively employ various coping strategies to regulate emotions and maintain communication during presentations. Lazarus and Folkman's coping theory distinguishes between problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. Problem-focused coping involves efforts to address the source of stress directly, such as preparing thoroughly, practicing presentations, improving language skills, and organizing content effectively. Emotion-focused coping, on the other hand, aims to regulate emotional responses through techniques such as deep breathing, positive self-talk, relaxation exercises, and cognitive reframing. Both forms of coping have been shown to contribute to reduced anxiety and improved speaking performance among EFL learners.

Another important concept in understanding students' confidence development is self-efficacy. Bandura (1997) defines self-efficacy as an individual's belief in their ability to perform tasks successfully and achieve desired outcomes. In public speaking contexts, speaking self-efficacy refers to students' confidence in their ability to communicate effectively, manage audience interactions, and cope with presentation-related challenges. Research suggests that students with higher levels of speaking self-efficacy are more likely to participate actively in classroom communication and demonstrate greater willingness to communicate in English. Self-efficacy is shaped through mastery experiences, observation of successful

peers, verbal encouragement, and the interpretation of emotional and physiological states.

The classroom environment also plays a crucial role in shaping students' confidence and communication behavior. Supportive learning environments characterized by positive peer interactions, constructive feedback, and non-judgmental classroom cultures can significantly reduce anxiety and enhance learners' confidence. Conversely, competitive or highly evaluative environments may intensify fear of negative evaluation and discourage participation. Therefore, understanding how social interactions influence students' confidence is essential for designing effective pedagogical interventions.

Within Indonesian higher education contexts, particularly in English teacher education programs, public speaking courses are designed to prepare future educators who must communicate effectively in professional settings. Students are expected to demonstrate not only linguistic competence but also confidence and leadership in front of audiences. However, despite the importance of public speaking, many students continue to struggle with anxiety and self-confidence issues. These challenges raise important questions regarding how students negotiate psychological barriers and what strategies they employ to become more confident speakers.

This study seeks to explore how EFL university students overcome anxiety and build confidence during classroom public speaking activities. Specifically, it aims to investigate the coping strategies students use to manage speaking anxiety and examine how preparation, language proficiency, and classroom interactions influence their confidence. By focusing on students' lived experiences, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of confidence-building processes in EFL public speaking contexts. Furthermore, the findings are expected to provide practical insights for educators seeking to create supportive learning environments that promote students' communication competence and psychological well-being.

## **2. Method**

### *Research Design*

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to explore how EFL university students overcome public speaking anxiety and develop confidence during classroom presentations. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study aimed to understand participants' lived experiences, perceptions, emotions, and coping strategies rather than testing hypotheses or establishing statistical relationships. The descriptive qualitative framework enabled the researcher to obtain rich and detailed insights into students' psychological and behavioral responses when engaging in public speaking

activities.

### *Research Setting and Participant*

The study was conducted in the English Education Study Program of the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education at Universitas Muhammadiyah Prof. DR. HAMKA (UHAMKA), Jakarta, Indonesia. The participants consisted of nine seventh-semester students who had successfully completed the Public Speaking course. Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who met the predetermined criteria, namely students with varying levels of confidence and experience in classroom presentations

*The participants represented diverse experiences regarding public speaking performance, anxiety management, and confidence development. This diversity provided a comprehensive understanding of how EFL learners negotiate challenges and develop strategies for effective oral communication.*

### *Data Collection*

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews. This method allowed participants to describe their experiences freely while ensuring that discussions remained aligned with the research objectives. The interview protocol consisted of eight open-ended questions addressing students' physical and emotional states before presentations, causes of speaking anxiety, preparation strategies, coping mechanisms, peer influences, and preferred classroom environments.

Each interview was conducted individually and focused on eliciting detailed descriptions of participants' experiences during English presentations. The interviews explored both cognitive and emotional dimensions of public speaking, enabling the researcher to identify recurring patterns and emerging themes.

In addition to interviews, documentation was used as supporting data. Relevant documents included presentation materials, public speaking course records, and other learning artifacts that provided contextual information regarding participants' experiences.

### *Data Analysis*

The collected data were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's interactive model consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. During data reduction, interview transcripts were carefully reviewed and coded to identify meaningful statements related to anxiety management and confidence building. Similar responses were grouped into thematic categories.

The data were then displayed in thematic matrices to facilitate comparison across participants. This stage enabled the researcher to identify common patterns, similarities, and differences among participants' experiences.

Finally, conclusions were drawn by interpreting the relationships among themes and connecting the findings to existing theoretical frameworks, particularly Public Speaking Anxiety (PSA), Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), coping strategies, and self-efficacy theory.

#### *Trustworthiness*

To ensure the credibility of the findings, triangulation techniques were employed. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing responses from participants with different confidence levels. Methodological triangulation was achieved through the integration of interview and documentation data. Additionally, member checking was conducted by verifying interview interpretations with participants to ensure the accuracy and authenticity of the findings.

### **3. Results**

The analysis of interview data revealed two major themes: (1) strategies used by EFL students to overcome public speaking anxiety and (2) factors contributing to confidence development during classroom presentations.

#### *Theme 1: Strategies for Overcoming Public Speaking Anxiety*

##### *Physical and Emotional Reactions Before Presentations*

Nearly all participants reported experiencing anxiety before delivering presentations. The most frequently mentioned physical symptoms included rapid heartbeat, cold hands, dry throat, trembling, and stomach discomfort. Mentally, students described overthinking, fear of forgetting content, and concerns about making mistakes.

Several participants acknowledged that anxiety was strongest immediately before the presentation began. However, once they started speaking and became engaged with the content, the intensity of nervousness gradually decreased.

These findings suggest that anxiety is not a permanent condition but rather a dynamic emotional state that fluctuates throughout the presentation process.

##### *Thorough Preparation as the Primary Coping Strategy*

Preparation emerged as the most dominant strategy for reducing anxiety. Participants consistently emphasized the importance of understanding the material, practicing repeatedly, and organizing presentation content beforehand.

Many students practiced in front of mirrors, recorded themselves speaking, or rehearsed with friends. Others focused on mastering key points rather than

memorizing entire scripts. This approach allowed them greater flexibility during delivery and reduced the likelihood of forgetting prepared content.

The findings indicate that preparation functions as a problem-focused coping strategy that enhances students' sense of control over the speaking situation.

#### *Strategic Responses to Communication Breakdowns*

When participants forgot information or lost their train of thought, they employed various communication strategies to maintain presentation flow.

Several students reported pausing briefly to regain composure and recall information. Others used simpler vocabulary or paraphrased ideas to compensate for lexical gaps. Some participants relied on presentation slides or small notes to trigger memory retrieval.

Interestingly, a number of participants described using what may be termed a looping strategy. They repeated previous statements or reformulated ideas while mentally searching for the next point. This technique allowed them to avoid prolonged silence and maintain audience engagement.

#### *Emotional Regulation Techniques*

Students also utilized emotion-focused coping strategies to manage nervousness. Deep breathing was the most frequently reported technique. Participants described consciously slowing their breathing to reduce physical tension and regain concentration.

Positive self-talk was another common strategy. Students encouraged themselves mentally with affirming statements such as "I can do this" or "It is okay to make mistakes."

Some participants attempted to reduce pressure by incorporating humor into their presentations. Making small jokes or engaging casually with the audience helped create a more relaxed atmosphere and reduce anxiety.

#### *Code-Switching and Adaptive Communication*

Several participants acknowledged occasionally switching between English and Indonesian when experiencing severe linguistic difficulties. Rather than remaining silent, they prioritized communication effectiveness and audience understanding.

This adaptive behavior demonstrates students' willingness to maintain interaction despite language limitations, reflecting a practical approach to communication management.

## *Theme 2: Factors Influencing Confidence Development*

### *Fear of Negative Evaluation*

One of the strongest themes emerging from the data was fear of negative evaluation. Participants frequently expressed concern about making mistakes and being judged by lecturers or classmates.

Interestingly, peer evaluation appeared to exert a stronger influence on confidence than lecturer assessment for many participants. Students reported feeling particularly sensitive to classmates' reactions because peers represented an immediate audience whose responses were directly observable.

### *Positive Peer Responses as Confidence Builders*

Participants consistently highlighted the importance of positive peer reactions. Gestures such as smiling, nodding, maintaining eye contact, and listening attentively contributed significantly to their confidence.

Students interpreted these non-verbal signals as evidence that the audience understood and appreciated their message. Consequently, they felt more secure and became more willing to continue speaking.

### *Supportive Classroom Environment*

A supportive classroom atmosphere emerged as another critical factor influencing confidence development. Participants preferred learning environments where mistakes were treated as natural aspects of language learning rather than indicators of incompetence.

Several students emphasized the importance of lecturers who provided constructive feedback and encouraged participation without excessive criticism. Small-group presentations, peer discussions, and scaffolded speaking activities were viewed as effective ways to build confidence gradually.

### *Growth of Speaking Self-Efficacy*

Repeated speaking experiences contributed to increased self-efficacy among participants. Students reported becoming more confident after successfully completing presentations and receiving positive feedback.

As their confidence grew, they became less focused on linguistic perfection and more concerned with communicating ideas effectively. This shift reflects the development of stronger beliefs in their ability to handle public speaking situations successfully.

#### 4. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that EFL students experience significant public speaking anxiety, supporting previous studies that identify PSA as one of the most common challenges in foreign language learning contexts. Consistent with Horwitz et al.'s Foreign Language Anxiety framework, participants' anxiety was strongly associated with fear of negative evaluation, communication apprehension, and performance-related concerns.

Fear of negative evaluation emerged as a particularly influential factor. Students worried about being judged for grammatical mistakes, pronunciation errors, and presentation quality. This finding aligns with recent studies indicating that evaluative concerns remain one of the strongest predictors of speaking anxiety among EFL learners.

The results also reveal the important role of coping strategies in mitigating anxiety. Students employed both problem-focused and emotion-focused coping mechanisms, reflecting Lazarus and Folkman's theoretical framework. Preparation, rehearsal, and material mastery represented problem-focused approaches aimed at reducing uncertainty and increasing competence. These strategies enhanced students' perceived control over presentation situations and reduced anxiety levels.

Emotion-focused strategies such as deep breathing, positive self-talk, and humor helped students regulate emotional responses without changing the presentation requirements themselves. These findings suggest that successful public speaking performance depends not only on language proficiency but also on effective emotional regulation.

Another important contribution of this study concerns communication strategies used during moments of difficulty. Participants frequently relied on paraphrasing, repetition, code-switching, and simplification to overcome linguistic limitations. Such adaptive behaviors support previous research indicating that strategic competence plays a crucial role in maintaining communication under pressure.

The findings further highlight the significance of self-efficacy in public speaking performance. According to Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, self-efficacy develops through mastery experiences, verbal persuasion, vicarious experiences, and physiological interpretations. All four sources were evident in participants' experiences.

Successful presentations served as mastery experiences that strengthened confidence. Positive feedback from lecturers and peers functioned as verbal persuasion. Observing classmates successfully complete presentations provided vicarious experiences that inspired confidence. Furthermore, students gradually learned to reinterpret physiological symptoms such as nervousness and increased heart rate as manageable aspects of performance rather than signs of impending

failure.

The role of peer responses deserves particular attention. Positive non-verbal cues from classmates significantly influenced students' confidence levels. These findings support social cognitive perspectives emphasizing the importance of environmental factors in shaping human behavior and self-beliefs.

Supportive classroom environments were found to facilitate confidence development by reducing fear of negative evaluation. Students preferred learning contexts where mistakes were normalized as part of the learning process. Such environments encouraged experimentation, risk-taking, and active participation in communication activities.

The findings suggest important pedagogical implications. First, educators should prioritize creating psychologically safe learning environments where students feel comfortable making mistakes. Second, public speaking instruction should include explicit training in coping strategies and emotional regulation techniques. Third, gradual exposure through scaffolded speaking activities may help students develop confidence progressively rather than confronting high-stakes presentations immediately.

Ultimately, confidence development among EFL students appears to be a multidimensional process influenced by preparation, coping strategies, social support, and repeated speaking experiences. Public speaking competence should therefore be viewed not merely as a linguistic achievement but as the outcome of complex interactions among cognitive, emotional, and social factors.

## **5. Conclusion**

This study explored how EFL university students overcome anxiety and build confidence during classroom public speaking activities. The findings reveal that public speaking anxiety remains a significant challenge for many learners, manifesting through physical symptoms, cognitive disruptions, and concerns regarding negative evaluation. Fear of making mistakes, forgetting content, and being judged by peers and lecturers were identified as major sources of anxiety.

To address these challenges, students employed a variety of coping strategies. Problem-focused strategies included thorough preparation, repeated practice, material mastery, and the use of communication techniques such as paraphrasing and simplification. Emotion-focused strategies involved deep breathing, positive self-talk, humor, and other forms of emotional regulation. These approaches enabled students to maintain communication effectiveness despite anxiety and linguistic difficulties.

The study also highlights the critical role of social support in confidence development. Positive peer responses and supportive classroom environments significantly enhanced students' speaking self-efficacy and willingness to

communicate. Constructive lecturer feedback and gradual speaking opportunities further contributed to confidence growth.

These findings suggest that successful public speaking performance in EFL contexts is influenced by more than language proficiency alone. Psychological resilience, strategic coping abilities, and supportive learning environments are equally important factors in fostering confidence and communication competence.

Therefore, educators should design public speaking instruction that not only develops linguistic skills but also addresses students' emotional and psychological needs. By creating supportive classroom cultures and equipping learners with effective coping strategies, educational institutions can help students become more confident, resilient, and competent communicators in English.

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