



Exploring the Manifestations of English-Speaking Anxiety in a Drama Performances

Salsabila Balqis¹, Suciana Wijirahayu²

^{1,2}Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris, Universitas Muhammadiyah Prof. DR. HAMKA

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Corresponding Author:

Salsabila Balqis

salsbilablqss@gmail.com

Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris,
Universitas Muhammadiyah Prof.
DR. HAMKA

Abstract

This study investigates students' speaking anxiety in drama-based speaking tasks in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, focusing on its multidimensional manifestations and impact on performance. Using a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, data were collected from eleventh-grade students through questionnaires, classroom observations, and semi-structured interviews. The findings reveal that speaking anxiety manifests across emotional, cognitive, physical, and behavioral dimensions, with cognitive anxiety being the most dominant. Students frequently experienced memory lapses, loss of concentration, and reduced fluency during performance. In addition, anxiety persisted after the performance, particularly during video reflection. These findings indicate that while drama activities can enhance engagement, they may also intensify performance-related anxiety. Therefore, it is important for teachers to implement supportive strategies that address both cognitive and emotional aspects of anxiety to improve students' speaking performance.

1. Introduction

Speaking remains a central component of EFL learning because it allows learners to convey meaning and engage in authentic communication (Hawraa, Hameed, & Jawad, 2024; Leong & Ahmadi, 2000). Despite this importance, many students still encounter difficulties in performance-based speaking tasks, particularly drama activities, where the pressure of public performance may heighten speaking challenges (Anugrawan & Samad, 2025; Elbalqis & Pradana, 2022). Such difficulties are closely associated with speaking anxiety, an affective factor that affects learners' confidence, fluency, and overall performance (Sari, 2020; Wijirahayu, Roza, & Praptiningsih, 2025).

Speaking anxiety typically appears through emotional, cognitive, physical, and behavioral reactions, often triggered by the fear of negative evaluation and self-consciousness when speaking before others (Horwitz et al., 1995; MacIntyre, 2007). While drama-based instruction has shown potential for enhancing motivation and communicative competence (Kumar, Sattam, Abdulaziz, Science, & Sulail, 2022; Nguyen, 2023), prior research tends to emphasize its pedagogical benefits rather than learners' psychological responses during performance. Because drama requires memorization, embodiment, and public presentation, it may further intensify communication apprehension, yet this aspect remains insufficiently addressed in the literature (Galante, A., & Thomson, 2017).

Existing studies on speaking anxiety and drama-based instruction are growing but still limited in examining anxiety within performance-oriented contexts such as drama (Atas, 2015). Research rarely integrates the emotional, cognitive, physical, and behavioral dimensions of anxiety into a single analytical framework, and mixed-methods investigations that capture both measurable anxiety levels and lived experiences remain scarce. This gap indicates the need for a more comprehensive understanding of how anxiety manifests and affects learners' speaking performance in drama activities (Putri, Muhayyang, & Aeni, 2018).

To address this gap, the present study investigates students' speaking anxiety during drama performances by analyzing its emotional, cognitive, physical, and behavioral dimensions through a mixed-methods approach. Specifically, this study examines how this anxiety dimensions emerge and influence students' oral performance.

The research questions guiding this study are:

1. How does speaking anxiety manifest in students' drama performances in terms of emotional, cognitive, physical, and behavioral dimensions?
2. How does speaking anxiety influence students' speaking performance during drama activities?

The novelty of this study lies in its integration of multidimensional anxiety analysis within a performance-based speaking context using a mixed-methods design, offering a more holistic understanding of learners' psychological experiences during drama performances an area that remains underexplored.

2. Method

Research Design

This study used a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, meaning that quantitative and qualitative data were collected at the same time and later brought together during the interpretation stage. In this model, each type of data is first examined separately, and then the results are compared and combined to provide a more complete picture of students' speaking anxiety during their English drama performances. This approach aligns with the mixed-methods framework, which emphasizes the balanced and complementary roles of numerical and narrative data (Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017).

Participants

A total of 72 eleventh-grade students from two different classes in a public high school in East Jakarta took part in the study. Purposive sampling was used to ensure that all participants already had experience with drama-related speaking activities in their English classes, making them suitable for the research focus (Palinkas et al., 2016). Students worked in groups of four to five members, and each group created a video-recorded English drama as part of their speaking performance assignment.

Instruments

Quantitative data were gathered through a questionnaire developed by the researcher, which contained 20 multiple-choice questions and five open-ended items. The multiple-choice section captured students' general anxiety levels, perceived difficulties, and confidence when performing drama, while the open-ended questions allowed them to share their thoughts in more detail. The questionnaire was reviewed by two EFL specialists to ensure that the items were clear and appropriate in terms of (Taherdoost, Business, Sdn, Group, & Lumpur, 2016). Descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages were used to highlight common patterns in the responses.

Qualitative data came from classroom observations, students' reflective essays, and the analysis of their drama videos. Observations conducted during rehearsals and the final performance helped identify visible signs of anxiety, including hesitation, reduced fluency, avoidance of eye contact, stiff body language, and nervous gestures. The reflective essays offered deeper insights into students' emotional, cognitive, physical, and behavioral reactions to speaking anxiety. In addition, the recorded drama performances were assessed using a rubric that evaluated pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, comprehension, and

confidence.

Data Collection Procedures

Data were gathered over the course of three weeks.

1. In the first week, students completed the questionnaire.
2. The second week focused on rehearsals, during which observations were carried out.
3. In the final week, students submitted their drama recordings and reflective essays, describing how they felt before, during, and after performing.
- 4.

Data Analysis

Qualitative analysis followed a descriptive approach. Observation notes, students' essays, and recorded performances were coded and grouped into categories to draw out recurring patterns related to different types of anxiety (Braun, V., & Clarke & Psychology., 2006).

To strengthen the credibility of the findings, the study used method triangulation by comparing results from the questionnaire, observations, and student reflections. Data-source triangulation was also applied by examining perspectives from students with various anxiety levels. Combining both sets of data made it possible to identify overlapping, supporting, and contrasting insights, offering a clearer understanding of students' speaking anxiety in drama-based tasks (Hasselgreen et al., 2018)

3. Results

Manifestations of Speaking Anxiety

Table 1. Manifestations of Speaking Anxiety Experienced by Students.

Manifestation Indicator	Agree + Strongly Agree (%)
Nervousness before and during speaking	38.9
Physical symptoms (shaking, fast heartbeat)	37.5
Cognitive disturbance (forgetting lines, losing focus)	41.7
Avoidance behavior (avoiding camera, stiffness)	33.6
Post-performance anxiety (watching recorded video)	70.8

Table 1 shows the types of speaking anxiety experienced by students during the drama task. Cognitive disturbance was reported most frequently (41.7%), followed by nervousness (38.9%) and physical symptoms such as shaking and increased heartbeat (37.5%). Avoidance behaviors, including stiffness and avoiding the camera, were noted by 33.6% of students. Post-performance anxiety had the highest percentage (70.8%), showing that many students felt uneasy when reviewing their recorded videos.

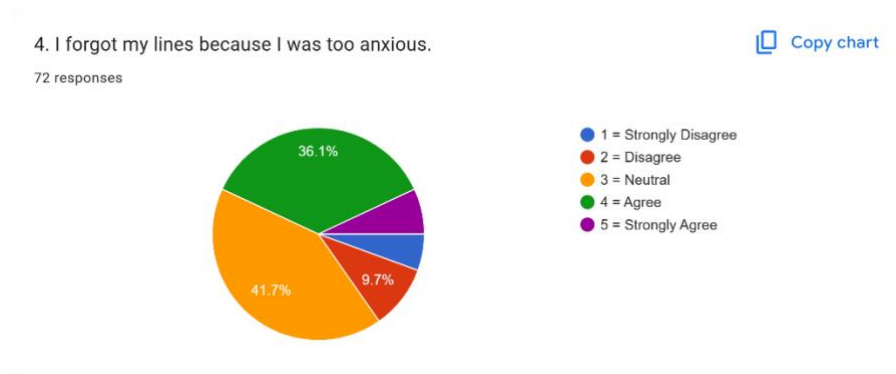


Figure 1. Students' Cognitive Disturbance During Performance

Figure 1 provides a visual representation of cognitive disturbance indicators, such as forgetting lines, pauses, and script reliance observed during performance. Observation and video analysis showed similar patterns, including hesitation, long pauses, limited eye contact, and rigid posture. Reflective statements also described line-forgetting and loss of focus during recording.

Factors Contributing to Speaking Anxiety

Table 2. Factors Contributing to Students' Speaking Anxiety

Contributing Factor	Agree + Strongly Agree (%)
Linguistic factors (grammar and pronunciation)	55.6
Fear of negative evaluation (peers and teacher)	42.0
Test-related anxiety	48.6

(scores and correction)	
Low self-confidence and comparison with others	34.7

As shown in Table 2, linguistic concerns were the most frequently reported contributing factor (55.6%), specifically fear of grammatical and pronunciation errors. Test-related anxiety, including concerns about scores and teacher correction, accounted for 48.6%. Fear of negative evaluation from peers and the teacher contributed 42.0%, while low self-confidence and comparison with others contributed 34.7%.

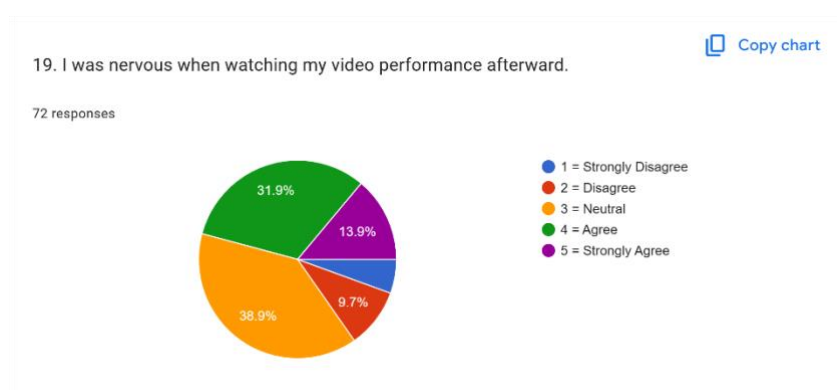


Figure 2. Students' anxiety after the speaking performance

Figure 2 shows that students continued to experience anxiety even after completing the drama performance. Many students reported feeling nervous and uncomfortable while watching their recorded videos, which heightened their awareness of mistakes and contributed to persistent post-performance anxiety.

Effects of Speaking Anxiety on Speaking Performance

Table 3. *Effects of Speaking Anxiety on Students' Speaking Performance*

Effect on Speaking Performance	Agree + Strongly Agree (%)
Reduced fluency	63.9
Loss of focus during speaking	34.7
Memory disturbance (forgetting lines)	36.1
Lower confidence in actual performance	72.2

Table 3 presents the reported effects of anxiety on performance. Lower confidence had the highest percentage (72.2%), followed by reduced fluency (63.9%) and memory disturbance (36.1%). Observations showed frequent pauses, hesitation, fillers, and inconsistent volume. Reflective essays also mentioned momentary loss of lines during recording.

Speaking Performance Assessment in Class XI-2 and XI-3

Table 4. Summary of Speaking Performance Assessment in Class XI-2 and XI-3

Aspect Assessed	Class XI-2	Class XI-3
Fluency	2.5 (Fair)	2.5 (Fair)
Pronunciation	2.5 (Fair)	2.5 (Fair)
Grammar	3.5 (Good)	3.5 (Good)
Vocabulary	3.0 (Good)	3.5 (Good)
Comprehension	3.5 (Good)	3.5 (Good)
Confidence	2.3 (Low-Moderate)	2.6 (Moderate)

Table 4 summarizes speaking assessment scores in both classes. Fluency and confidence received the lowest mean scores, while grammar, vocabulary, and comprehension were rated higher. The performance videos showed script dependence, unclear articulation, and limited interaction in both groups.

Anxiety Levels Across Drama Themes and Groups

Analysis across eight drama themes revealed varying anxiety levels within and between classes. In Class XI-2, several students showed severe anxiety characterized by frequent pauses, unclear pronunciation, long silences, and strong script dependence. Similar patterns were found in Class XI-3, where groups with higher anxiety performed less fluently despite adequate understanding of the storyline.

4. Discussion

1. Manifestations of Speaking Anxiety

The manifestations of speaking anxiety observed in this study align with recent empirical findings that EFL learners exhibit not only cognitive and emotional symptoms, but also physiological and behavioral reactions during oral tasks. Manifestations such as frequent pauses, avoidance of eye contact, and nervous body language are consistent with previous studies showing that learners often experience fear of negative evaluation, overthinking, and self-doubt during speaking performances (Xu, Zhang, Sukjairungwattana, & Wang, 2022.).

However, the present findings further demonstrate that these manifestations became more intense in performance-oriented tasks such as drama, where students not only speak but also act, maintain character expression, and manage peer attention. This suggests that drama amplifies the visibility of anxiety, making behavioral reactions more pronounced than in regular speaking activities.

2. Factors Contributing to Speaking Anxiety

The results revealed that linguistic concerns (fear of grammatical and pronunciation errors) and fear of negative evaluation were among the strongest contributing factors to speaking anxiety. This confirms findings from a recent study indicating that limited English skills, lack of preparation, and worry about peers' reactions significantly contribute to speaking anxiety among EFL learners (Diana, Renandya, & Dahliana, 2024). Similar factors were also reported in Indonesian EFL contexts, where fear of mistakes and self-confidence issues dominate learners' emotional barriers (Ajiza, Rahayu, Deswarni, & Rohani, 2024.).

A deeper look at the present data indicates that working memory load also played a role. Drama tasks require learners to memorize lines, recall vocabulary, monitor pronunciation, and coordinate movements. These simultaneous cognitive demands may exceed learners' processing capacity, thereby intensifying cognitive anxiety. Thus, anxiety emerges not only from linguistic limitations but also from the pressure of real-time cognitive processing required in drama performance.

3. Effects of Speaking Anxiety on Performance

The detrimental effects of speaking anxiety on performance observed in the results such as reduced fluency, decreased confidence, and verbal hesitation are consistent with contemporary research demonstrating that high anxiety levels are associated with decreased communicative competence and avoidance behaviors in EFL learners (Liu & Zhang, 2008).

Importantly, the dominance of cognitive anxiety in this study suggests that drama-based speaking requires more than linguistic competence—it demands strong cognitive control under evaluative pressure. When anxiety consumes working memory resources, learners struggle to construct sentences, maintain coherence, and express meaning effectively.

Additionally, the persistence of post-performance anxiety indicates that students continued to feel tense even after completing the task. The use of video recording heightened self-awareness and triggered more critical self-evaluation, making the anxiety cycle extend beyond the performance moment. This dimension is rarely highlighted in previous studies and adds a new layer to understanding anxiety in performance-based contexts.

4. Theoretical Integration

These findings resonate with the Foreign Language Anxiety framework (Horwitz et al., 1995), which identifies communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation as central components influencing learners' performance. The present study reinforces this framework by showing that anxiety affects not only emotional states but also cognitive processing, particularly during tasks that impose high memory load and performance pressure.

Moreover, this study demonstrates how drama functions as a double-edged pedagogy while it fosters engagement, creativity, and embodied learning, it also creates an evaluative atmosphere that may intensify anxiety, especially for learners with low self-efficacy or limited experience in performance activities.

Overall, this study offers several important contributions. It demonstrates that cognitive anxiety is the most prevalent form of anxiety during drama-based speaking tasks, largely due to the heavy demands placed on learners' working memory. It also brings attention to post-performance anxiety, a dimension that has received limited scholarly attention. Additionally, the findings show that drama intensifies both linguistic and cognitive pressures, underscoring the emotionally complex nature of performance-oriented learning.

The study further presents meaningful pedagogical implications. Teachers are encouraged to implement systematic scaffolding such as simplifying scripts, providing vocabulary support, offering guided rehearsal steps, and gradually increasing the level of performance exposure to help students manage cognitive demands and increase their speaking confidence. At the curriculum level, integrating anxiety-aware task sequencing and reflective activities may support students' emotional readiness and resilience in speaking courses.

Nonetheless, drama-based instruction presents several challenges. It requires substantial rehearsal time, group participation may be uneven, and learners with lower proficiency or limited performance experience may find the tasks overwhelming. Future studies could explore which scaffolding strategies are most effective in reducing anxiety, compare anxiety levels across various speaking task types, or examine the long-term impact of repeated drama activities on students' confidence and oral proficiency.

5. Conclusion

This study employed a mixed-methods convergent parallel design to investigate the multidimensional manifestations of English speaking anxiety during drama performances. The findings reveal that anxiety is a complex, situational construct encompassing emotional, cognitive, physical, and behavioral responses rather than a static trait. Quantitatively, lower confidence emerged as the most prevalent manifestation, affecting 72.2% of the cohort, followed closely by reduced fluency (63.9%) and memory disturbance (36.1%). These statistics

were mirrored in classroom observations, which documented frequent linguistic markers of anxiety, including prolonged pauses, hesitation, the overreliance on fillers, and episodes of rapid speech.

Qualitative insights from students' reflective essays and semi-structured interviews further reinforced these findings, showing that anxiety levels fluctuated noticeably between rehearsals and final performances. The intensity of these manifestations was mediated by factors such as linguistic readiness, familiarity with the stage, and the perceived judgment of the audience. The study also highlighted the dual role of the learning environment; while clear instructional scaffolding and teacher support fostered confidence, peer dynamics occasionally heightened stress when group responsibilities felt unbalanced.

Ultimately, these results suggest that while drama-based tasks are potent tools for language learning, their efficacy is contingent upon a supportive structure that addresses both the cognitive and emotional loads placed on students. Despite limitations regarding the sample size in East Jakarta and the short-term nature of the project, this research underscores the necessity for EFL practitioners to implement targeted strategies that mitigate fluency-related anxiety and bolster student self-efficacy in performance-based contexts.

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